

Plasticosis

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For my family, both chosen and blood.

Acknowledgements

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Rowan

For a second, Rowan was disoriented, as her eyes were caught by the blue-gray infinity of Lake Superior, blending almost seamlessly into the gray sky. The small metal platform she stood on was so small, and the lake so big, that looking out at it made her lose all sense of scale and perspective, and forget where her body was. A gust of wind tugged her off-balance, and a small gasp escaped her lips before she snapped her eyes back to the pipes in front of her, stabilizing herself. This was normal, all part of a day's work. But the feeling, the sudden sick pit in her stomach, like the ground had disappeared from under her, she would remember long after.

Rowan double-checked her metal lobster claws, clipped from her harness to the railing, to remind herself that she was safe, that she couldn't tumble down the tower to the distant ground even if she did fall off the platform. Then, in a fit of wishful thinking, she put her hands on the clear tube in front of her, leaned in, and imagined that she could see with her bare eyes the microplastics floating inside. She closed her eyes and breathed in, imagining that she could move the plastics with her mind, stick them to the sides of the clear tube in front of her, deliver truly clean water to the people in the town below.

With a deep breath, Rowan returned to her task, turning the knobs on the panel in front of her to retrieve a small sample of water in a vial with a metal claw. She

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collected her samples for the day, from both above and below their newest filter addition, switched her lobster claws to the descent railing, and began the long descent of the steep stairs. Another worker would take her samples to the old school building, where they kept, under lock and key, a few intact microscopes.

Unfortunately for Rowan and everybody else, microscopes were neither a perfect solution nor a perfect diagnostic tool. The microplastics that plagued the Earth's water were mostly too small to be seen in a typical microscope. The largest particles, however, were visible. Rowan and her team hoped that if they saw fewer of the largest particles in their post-treatment water, maybe there would also be fewer of the smaller ones. And maybe, just maybe, this cleaner water would keep people healthier.

Their newest addition to the water tower was a filter made of wool fibers. Unfortunately, they had no way to decontaminate any materials they wanted to use in the filtration system, since even their filtered water was not truly purified. Rowan was afraid the wool filter would only add more plastics than it removed. Wool is from sheep, Rowan thought, and sheep live in this plasticky world, drink the plasticky water, eat the plasticky grass, and roll in the plasticky mud. Sometimes their new additions did seem to add more contaminants, and sometimes they seemed to take some away. They all wished that they weren't working so *blindly*.

Ed, the water treatment boss, grumbled frequently about the scientific method. The entire premise of the

filtration plant was suspect, he said, because they couldn't really test it and see if it actually works. *What are you gonna do?* he would ask rhetorically, *give half the people water you know will make them sick, and half the people water that might be a little better, and see who dies faster?* No. They would give everyone their best attempts at clean water. Ed wanted to do all kinds of things that were impossible given the physical constraints, the lack of resources. But he still remembered before the Fall, when all things were possible.

It was late in the afternoon, and as Rowan reached the ground, the sun was blazing ripely on the dirty spring snow. The tower shone orange as well, though parts of it were too rusted to shine, and the letters that used to spell Two Harbors now spelled, faintly, wo Harl. In Rowan's darker moments, she thought of the town that way – fading away slowly until not even their name would be left behind.

To be fair, Two Harbors was a better place than most. It was no Enclave, but Rowan had gone to school until almost 16. The adults around Rowan couldn't help but compare their lives today to what it was like before the Fall, but Rowan hadn't known such a world. She would have to count herself lucky that she was born here, in this stubbornly surviving community.

Accompanied by those thoughts, Rowan wandered home. The path was muddy and frozen from the late spring cycles of thawing and freezing: *wet, dirty, and cold*, she

thought. *My favorite.* The patterns of many boots' worn soles were preserved in the thin ice. A frozen puddle's patterns caught Rowan's eye and she bent down to touch it, tracing the lines around the leaves that lay frozen just beneath the surface. It was the details like these that she would remember later, the insignificant minutiae of a day that would normally be forgotten, but that she played over and over, the last remnants of normalcy.

Her feet led her away from the path and up through the front yard of the large community house Rowan belonged to, along with a hodgepodge of friends and family. They often had extra people sleeping on the sofa cushions in the basement, supplies stocked on the porch, and meetings in the living room. Though cash no longer circulated much, they all worked, all did their part to keep the community fed, watered, and cared for. In the end, they usually ended up with enough.

Inside, an unusual number of the members of the house were together. They sat somberly in the living room, occupying the many mismatched couches and floor cushions. Rowan stopped in the doorway and anxiously scanned their faces. Some were crying. Others had pinched, pale faces, perhaps shocked. Rowan's mother rose quickly and came to meet her at the door, guiding Rowan gently by the elbow back out onto the porch.

"What's happening, Mom?" Rowan asked quietly, sitting on the front steps. Her mother settled down next to her and put an arm around her shoulders.

“Elko is sick with the plastics,” the older woman said. She was calm, wearily so. “She noticed blood in her stool, and when she went to Laura to ask about it, Laura pushed on her stomach and found lumps in there.” Laura had been a nurse when she was young in Minneapolis before the Fall. She was their resident healer, although she was painfully aware of how limited her help was without hospitals, pharmacies, tools, and truly clean water. Rowan didn’t need Laura to tell her how bad this diagnosis was.

The plastic water killed in many ways. Plastic in the blood filled organs, clogged arteries, shut down livers and kidneys, built up into solid tumors. It wouldn’t even leave brains alone, causing brain fog, confusion, forgetfulness, and sometimes robbed older people of their personality and memory entirely. The most common way it affected people, even people whose bodies were still coping well with the contaminants, was in their gut. Pain in the belly, difficulty digesting, sometimes a difficulty absorbing nutrients resulting in runty, oddly-shaped children. They often had swollen bellies and lumps, their organs clogged with plastic and unable to do their jobs correctly. Most people suffered in some way from the plastics. Having swollen guts and watery stools was normal now, but the old-timers said it hadn’t always been that way. Laura said bodies used to be stronger, guts better at digesting, and even brains sharper. But some people got really sick. When they started to have palpable lumps in their guts, that was fatal.

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Before the Fall, Laura said, there would've been tests to do: imaging, biopsies, smart people in white lab coats putting samples in dyes and waxes and petri dishes to figure out exactly what the problem was. There were so many treatments back then, radiation and chemo and surgery for cancer, dialysis or transplants for kidney and liver failure, and so many medications. The options now were limited. They managed to get antibiotics sometimes from the convoy raiders. They could take care of wounds and set broken bones. But the wreckage of microplastics accumulating in organs could not be fixed, not outside of an Enclave.

Rowan rested her head on her mother's shoulder. She felt like she should cry, knowing that Elko would probably die, but in the suddenness of the moment her body didn't seem to understand the reality that her brain could compute. Instead of crying, she felt a detached and cold sort of calm, like she was watching her thoughts from the outside. Elko was young and strong, privileged, like Rowan, in having grown up in a relatively well-off family in the Arrowhead. They were both 24, too young for the plastics to already have accumulated so much. Despite being surrounded by mortality, Rowan didn't think it made sense for Elko, of all people, to be sick. As if summoned by her thoughts, Elko stepped out onto the porch. Rowan's mother squeezed Rowan's shoulder and murmured something along the lines of "I'll give you some space," making her exit.

Elko held out her arms and Rowan stepped into them. They clutched each other, both still curiously tearless, until Rowan managed a small-voiced “Elko, I don’t want you to go.” Then their bodies trembled, their breaths caught, and they cried, wrapped up in each other in the dimming light and the deepening cold of evening.

James

James Kramer raced down the halls of the Yellowstone Institute of Medicine, arms awkwardly full of notebooks, a thermos, and a laptop, with his empty backpack flopping uselessly on his back. As usual, he was running late for labs. Why the YIM thought it was okay to allow a student to sign up for back-to-back classes on the far ends of campus from each other remained a mystery to James, but every Tuesday and Thursday he hustled as fast as his out-of-shape med student body would allow. He arrived at the door to the lab and steadied his breathing for a moment before stepping into view and heading to his seat. The students were already in small groups at their microscopes. James piled his affairs haphazardly on the side of the lab table and pulled up a stool alongside his lab partners.

“Hey,” Rachel said in greeting, somewhat absently.

“Hey,” James answered in kind. Nathan merely made a small sound in his throat and nodded his salutation.

“The slides for liver tissue with solution C don’t look good,” said Rachel. “We might need to make some new ones. It’s just hard to tell.” She squinted into the microscope. Their current project was, in most ways, retracing discoveries that had already been made. They were using lab-grown microplastic-contaminated organs to test various decontamination solutions.

Unfortunately, microplastics were largely chemically inert, so the types of chemical water treatment solutions

that cities used a generation ago would not be effective to precipitate out plastic particles. Attempts to destroy the plastic in the body with caustic chemicals usually destroyed the tissue as well. Doctors were left scrambling for novel solutions. They ended up finding a fungus that could break down plastic particulates without wreaking too much havoc on the body. A classic decontamination treatment involved three steps: injecting the fungus, *plastimurulus degruearia*, commonly referred to as DeGrue Fungus, into the patient's plastic masses in their organs. Once scans show that the plastic masses have mostly been destroyed, the DeGrue fungus would be killed with a powerful anti-fungal drug that *usually* did not permanently damage the patient. And finally, the patient's blood would be centrifuged through a type of dialysis to remove remaining plastic particulates.

James and the rest of the students diligently tested and retested these old discoveries, demonstrating which chemicals didn't work, which chemicals worked but killed the organ tissue, and which fungi were more promising than others. Fungi development remained a hot topic in the medical world – it would be great news for the world to find or breed a fungus like DeGrue Fungus that could eat plastics with fewer consequences for the body. Or, even better, a fungus that could safely be released into the wild to clean up the world's lakes and streams and oceans. Most of James's fellow students, he knew, hoped that their name would someday be more famous even than Dr. DeGrue's

name, that they would create the solution to all the world's problems.

James would never admit it to his father, but he did not dream of a Kramer Fungus – at least, not much. When he did, it was an idle dream, because James knew that he was not meant to spend his life in the lab, staring at data spreadsheets. He wanted the hands-on, the treating people who had left the Enclave, the decontaminating of lottery babies, the hope for the hopeless and all that. James knew full well the value of being an innovator, and fully hoped someone else would make the next breakthrough – but he was a people person. Perhaps if he didn't have quite the ambition his father would hope (*although, come on, I AM in medical school!* he thought petulantly), he had at least inherited his father's desire for connection, for approval.

Nathan, gloved and masked, was slicing tiny pieces off the solution C liver sample to make new slides. Rachel entered the results from solutions A and B, tapping intently at her keyboard. James slid behind the microscope and began working on solution D. When he got a clear and representative view, he captured the image and sent it to the computer to let the lab AI do the hard work of estimating how much particulate was in the frame. The time passed quickly, and James was in a rhythm, the beautiful meditative flow zone of thinking just hard enough to avoid a wandering mind. He was startled to realize it was the end of class, when Nathan and Rachel began packing up around him.

“Did you see that Main Street is closed?” Rachel asked, putting caps on the petri dishes. James shook his head no. “There’s a protest happening. You might want to go around on Ginko today.”

“Thanks.” James smoothed the ragged pages of his notebook and tucked it in his backpack. “What are they protesting?”

“Oh, the usual,” she replied. “Young softies who want to share our water with the outside.”

James stared at her. “It’s always wild to me,” he said. “I know that so many people believe that, but it’s like they’ve never even thought of the logistics! What do they think is gonna happen if we do that? They can’t possibly want Yellowstone to fall.”

“Well, you’ll have to get used to it,” Rachel said. “A lot of people think we should be sharing more. Your dad must be used to having this debate by now.”

James grimaced. He didn’t like when people brought up his connection. He just wanted to be James: regular, pretty-smart med student, good-natured, tall, and awkward-in-a-cute-way, (or so he’d been told, at least twice). He didn’t want to always have to be James Kramer, son of David Kramer, the senior Councilmember who led the Conservative faction of Yellowstone’s government.

“Yes,” James said to Rachel’s departing figure. “I imagine he is used to having this debate.”

Quiet Nathan looked up at him and smirked.

James stood on a concrete barrier, looking out at the crowd. His mop of golden-brown curls blew every which way with the wind, and he raked them back impatiently to look out at the crowd. He hadn't gone around to Ginko Street. He wanted to see the protest, read the signs, see the humanity in people he thought were advocating for something so stupid and shortsighted. The crowd was young and alternative, men with long hair and women with short hair. Though current fashion was austere and unornamented, some even wore earrings or makeup. Makeup had gone out of fashion a generation earlier, when people were first starting to reject every suspected culprit of pollution. Now, of course, the Enclave could make plenty of products they knew were safe, but fashioning oneself conservatively was still the default. The brightly-colored eyeshadows some wore in the crowd spoke of a rejection of caution as well as a defiance of the norm. Their makeup felt *dirty* to James, even though he knew it wasn't hurting them.

James read the signs. "WATER IS LIFE!" said one. "WATER FOR FOREIGNERS" said another. James liked that one, despite himself. Most Enclavers called the people outside the walls the Unclean, or if they were feeling polite, the Outsiders, but *Foreigners* felt more neutral, fairer to those people who certainly weren't trying to be contaminated. James had never heard it before, but he saw it on several other signs in the crowd.

James's gaze fixed on an angular young woman with black hair, black eyes, and a witchy vibe. Her sign said "THERE'S ENOUGH TO SHARE." She must have seen James watching her, or recognized a disagreement in the set of his mouth, because she pulled out of the moving trail of people to stop in front of his perch. She stared up at him, and he looked back at her, awaiting a question, but she seemed determined to wait for him to speak first.

"What?" he asked finally, then kicked himself mentally for saying something so dumb.

"You look upset," she said, with an utter lack of expression.

"I disagree with that," James said helplessly, pointing at her sign. He was taken aback by her abruptness and her spooky eyes, but did his best to gather his wits. "There's *not* enough. What do you really want? Do you want us to throw open the gates and let the Unclean in? Yellowstone would fall. And then there would be no charity for the Unclean. It wouldn't help them, only hurt us. There's not enough of *anything*, clean water or food or meds."

The spooky girl raised her eyebrows, skeptical and unimpressed. "Try harder. That's what I really want. I want you all to try harder." She stepped back into the ribbon of people and walked away. James watched her until she disappeared, but she never once looked back at him.

Try harder? he thought. Try harder about *what*? And what did she mean by *you all*? Had she recognized him?

Councilman Kramer would've dismissed it and moved on, but James wanted to understand. Her words echoed in his head as he walked home. *Try harder.*

Elko

“Elko,” Rowan said suddenly. Her name jolted Elko out of an absent reverie, connecting the cracks on the ceiling above her bed into constellations and maps and people, the same ones she’d been imagining since she was small. Elko did an awkward half-sit-up to look down at Rowan, who was lying with her head on Elko’s stomach.

“Yes?”

“What if we went to an Enclave to try to get treatment for you?” Rowan asked. “Not Cahokia, obviously. But one of the ones we’ve heard of that do charity for the outsiders, like Yellowstone.” They’d all heard tales of how Yellowstone Enclave made a great show of gifts to the outsiders, a strategy of appeasement rather than rule by fear. Yellowstone’s biggest publicity stunt was the Baby Lottery, in which they selected a few babies every year from the outside to be taken in, decontaminated, and raised in the Enclave. The idea didn’t appeal to everyone, but many families came from miles around for the hope of their child having a better and healthier future, even if they would never get to witness it. Elko figured it might all be fake. Cahokia, their closest Enclave, certainly had no charitable feelings toward outsiders. She thought Yellowstone might even just kill the babies once they got inside, but she never voiced that aloud. It was good for people to have hope.

Elko let her head fall back onto the pillow, staring back at the ceiling and petting Rowan's hair silently for a moment. "There's so many reasons that wouldn't work, Rowan."

"Try me. Start naming them."

Elko sighed. "Alright. One. They would never let me in. Two, how would we—"

"Wait!" Rowan interjected. "One at a time. They might let you in, though! Think of the Baby Lottery. We don't live near Yellowstone, so we don't know exactly what kinds of charity they have. Maybe they let grown-ups in sometimes too. Or maybe we can bribe someone. Or sneak in!"

Elko propped herself up again to give Rowan a long-suffering stare. "That's a whole lot of unknown," she said. "But I can't disprove your wild speculations. Okay, number two: how would we get there?"

"We'd walk, silly. *Duh*." That prompted Elko to sit up fully, dislodging Rowan, who was smiling impishly.

"Alright then, after you," Elko said, gesturing expansively at the doorway. She shook her head, laughed, pulled Rowan back into her arms.

Rowan closed her eyes in contentment, her face aglow despite the dim yellow light. "Glad it's settled then, we'll leave tomorrow."

"No!" Elko said disdainfully. "You did *not* win that argument! That was only two objections and you did not even answer them!"

“Only because they were silly questions,” Rowan replied. “Got any others?”

Elko was still for a moment. “Three,” she said. “I don’t think this is treatable. This isn’t like a simple decontamination like for babies or for Enclavers who leave the shield. They probably can’t do anything to get rid of these.” She pressed deeply into her abdomen between her hip bones, feeling the fibrous lumps she could now identify. “Rowan, they’re gonna grow, I’m gonna get sicker, and I’m gonna die. I don’t think it’s useful to go dreaming about heroic solutions that don’t exist.” Her voice cracked at the end, and she was crying-not-crying in the way they’d been doing so often, where they were too tired to cry, too tired *of* crying, but their breathing seemed to betray them.

“Elko, you don’t know any of that. What? Don’t look at me like that. You don’t! Seriously, we know that they have crazy technology in there. The stuff Laura tells us about isn’t even the end of it – they have even better technology in the Enclaves than we all did before the Fall. You can’t go making stuff like that up. Elko, what if they *can* heal you? You can’t walk away from that.”

Elko frowned. It sounded crazy, but there was something appealing in Rowan’s logic. Anything, to try. But no – she couldn’t possibly. It couldn’t work. And she certainly couldn’t take Rowan away from Two Harbors.

“Please? For me?” Rowan asked desperately.

Elko pressed Rowan's hands to her face. "You shouldn't go with me," she said. "They need you here for the water treatment."

"No they don't. I promise you, I'm not as important as I make myself out to be. They'll be fine! They have Ed who knows stuff, and Markey's got the big brains. I am *exactly* the person who should go with you."

Elko cocked her head. "Why?"

"Because I love you."

Elko smiled. She opened her mouth to find a rebuttal, but closed it again when none of them seemed appropriate. As the shadows outside the window grew longer, they turned the idea over, the crazy *but what if we did go*. The silences between thoughts grew longer until at last the two friends fell asleep together, nestled and warm

Rowan

Harmony House, and their whole Two Harbors community, naturally wouldn't let them go without a proper send-off. It was painful, weird, and awkward, just as it was loving and beautiful. Rowan felt both the good and the bad so acutely within herself, and thought that it felt like it was part of a theme. Everything about Elko was suddenly so acutely bad and good at the same time – so much love and so much grief. Rowan was so glad to be with her and to know her, and so sad that she wouldn't have years and years more with her.

She perched on the half-wall between the living room and the hallway, trying to be present but invisible. People lounged on the sofas and milled about, taking their turns in small groups. Elko circulated like royalty, people dropping their conversations to pay full attention to her when she arrived. *Like flowers turning toward the sun*, Rowan thought. Her gaze lingered on Elko's face, trying to memorize it and store it forever. The winter made Elko even paler than usual, and her straight dark hair made a stark contrast. In the summer, when freckles dotted her nose and cheeks and her hair turned muddy red-brown in the sun, she looked gentler, milder. Elko was quiet in groups but brilliant and intense alone, and as she moved about she spoke to people one at a time. Rowan saw the way her brown eyes fixed intently on their faces – the way

she drew people towards her by paying such good attention to them.

No one knew what to say. Even in Two Harbors, of course, people died from the plastics. But Elko was uncommonly young, and uncommonly loved. As Laura's assistant, she'd nursed many of them back to health. And for Elko, half nurse's assistant, half social worker, it didn't stop there – she helped people once they went home, too. She helped people with mobility problems get crutches or walkers, and helped build accessibility features into their homes. She would set up meal delivery for people still convalescing. Whatever people's needs were, she'd help figure out a way to meet them. She really listened when you spoke to her, and often people's problems seemed to be solved just by Elko's stopping by and talking with them – or they realized how to solve their own problems.

Next to her, Rowan felt awkward, clumsy, too loud, never knowing the right words to say. They both loved to solve problems, but Elko solved them by saying the right words, reading people, loving them hard, seeing their strengths and weaknesses. Rowan solved them with levers and diagrams and lists. *No, we both love lists*, she amended mentally. It's not like Elko was any slouch about logistics either. They just had different brains in some ways.

A hand on her shoulder interrupted Rowan's thoughts. It was Laura. Today her gray hair was in a messy bun on top of her head, and she wore soft, stained gray sweats, but somehow she always looked classy and poised to Rowan. "Trying to let us forget about you?" she inquired kindly.

Rowan shook her head. “You don’t need to say goodbye to me. I’ll come back. Elko... she might not see Two Harbors again.”

Laura frowned, a line appearing between her crinkly eyes. “Are you having doubts?”

Dammit, Laura, always straight to the point. No fooling her. Rowan thought a moment, then shrugged. “Of course,” she said simply. “I’m afraid I’m leading her to die in discomfort and uncertainty, instead of surrounded by her loved ones in a comfortable home. In fact, that’s almost certainly what’s going to happen.”

“But?” Laura prompted.

“But... I feel like we have to try. There must be a way to get her into the Enclave and get treatment. We just don’t know what it is yet. But even if the odds are low, I’d rather try. I don’t know if I could live with not having tried everything to keep her around.”

Laura wrapped her arms around her, saying nothing. Rowan didn’t know if it was an acceptance of her logic or not, but began to cry into Laura’s comforting shoulder.

Elko

Elko hugged so many crying people she couldn't keep count. Her own tears were used up for the moment, all gone, empty. She had cried so much, on her own, with Rowan, and with Laura. They had been the ones to hear her grappling with her mortality, with the unfairness, the fear, the uncertainty. And so in front of all these others who knew less, Elko didn't feel like she could be vulnerable. People she had known and loved her whole life suddenly felt distant. It didn't help that none of them knew what to say. Elko had seen them approach Rowan and ask about how to talk about it, but Rowan didn't really know either. She was doing a great job herself, but didn't know what the others should be saying. And so they said all kinds of silly things, like "I'm sure you're going to be okay," (she wasn't), "How are you doing?" (an unanswerable question), avoiding the subject altogether in favor of neutral things about the weather, or euphemistically talking about their voyage without mentioning its purpose: "Glad it's getting warmer if you're about to be crossing the plains."

But Elko loved them all so much, despite and even because they didn't know what to say, but tried anyway. She hugged them, comforted them, and told them, over and over, that it was okay that they didn't know what to say – even the perfect words wouldn't make it go away,

and it just meant so much that they were here to say goodbye.

Many of the people at Harmony that day pretended like they were going to see each other again, which was fine, but seemed like denial to Elko. The part of Elko's brain that thought about the future a lot seemed to not be working very well, and she was having trouble imagining all the next steps – from the immediate ones like packing and setting out towards Yellowstone, to the far away ones like trying to get into an unbreachable Enclave, like dying in an unknown land, or starving along the way. All those things were theoretical, concepts that she could imagine without being able to feel like they would happen to her, without being able to plan for them. But returning to Two Harbors was not a concept she could imagine at all. She had taken care of people dying of the plastics before. It was often less than a year between noticing their swollen abdomens and lumps and their death. Of course, sometimes it was two years, or even three. Rowan had been studying her mother's old road maps and had said it was about 1,000 miles to walk to Yellowstone. A hundred days of walking, if Elko stayed healthy and if they ran into no problems, which seemed unlikely. She couldn't imagine a scenario in which they could then walk 1,000 miles back to Two Harbors.

The door opened, and Amos came inside. He was a middle-aged man who had lost his wife Charlotte to the plastics last year. Elko had helped care for Charlotte until the very end. Elko excused herself from her present

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conversation, which had been on life-support anyway, and went to meet him at the door. He gave her a long, tight hug, as if he could squeeze all the plastics right out of her body and replace it with his own wiry strength.

“There’s nothing to say,” he said, his voice gravelly. “DAMN the plastics. Damn.”

Somehow, this was exactly the right thing to say, from a person who truly understood the immensity of loss, the fear of suffering and of death, the tragedy for Elko and for all those who loved her. She cried in Amos’s embrace, finally feeling less distant, feeling seen by Amos’s grief for Charlotte.

James

James dutifully came home every weekend. During the week he lived in a tiny room at the university and ate in the cafeteria, having neither the time nor inclination to cook for himself. Coming home made him feel like a teenager again, but it was nice to see his parents and his sister and be fed.

James's father had not yet taken off his Councilman David Kramer demeanor for the day. Despite it being the weekend, he had been on the phone all day. As he sat down at the dinner table, he let out a guttural sigh of frustration. James's mother Julia put her hands gently on his shoulders.

"No rest for the weary, hey? Thanks for making time for dinner," she said sympathetically.

David smiled up at her. "Thank you for making dinner! Sorry I had to work today. You're a darling." He rubbed his face, and the commanding Councilman who had been pacing around on the phone and gesturing assertively was gone, replaced by a tired family man.

Julia brought steaming dishes to the table. James and Olivia, his sister, jumped up and set the table. James's father served and passed the plates, and they all thanked Julia for the meal before eating. It was the same way it always had been, but now that he was older, James was acutely aware of how posed they all were. His father had always been an important and ambitious man, and

appearances matter. James and Olivia had been taught from a young age how to appear presentable and polite, the picture of an ideal family. Now that he lived in the dorms, James understood that not every family went through the same motions. His mother had been truly appalled one weekend when he came home wearing wrinkled clothing. *What will people think?* she had said. *The son of David Kramer, looking like this! We've got to get you an iron.* James insisted that he was a med student and therefore was expected to look rumpled and exhausted, but his mother apparently did not agree.

"What's wrong with Sawtooth, Dad?" Olivia asked. She had been half-listening to his phone calls all day as she did homework.

"They're having major problems," David said, shaking his head. "They've had Unclean rioting outside their walls for some time now, but it just escalated. The Unclean blockaded the roads and are refusing to let convoys in or out – holding the Sawtooth Enclave hostage."

Olivia let her jaw drop. "But why? They need the Enclaves just as much as we do!"

"Of course they do," David said. "And in a better world, they would realize that before they screw themselves over. But remember, honey, they aren't like us. They don't have any education out there, and their bodies and brains are weak and contaminated. They are just making decisions based on their emotions, and their emotions tell them that it isn't fair that the Enclaves have what they need."

James shook his head. “I was literally just reading about this for class, Dad. I see where you’re coming from – lots of studies suggest neurological impacts and lower IQ are a wide-spread symptom of the plastics. And yes, everyone out there is affected – but to differing degrees! Some people just have IBS and trouble absorbing nutrients. They are hungrier and have more nutrient deficiencies. Lots of people have small tumors that don’t affect them much. But I don’t think you can totally disregard what they want because many of them have neurological effects! Don’t you think you’d want more resource sharing from the Enclaves if you were in their shoes? It isn’t *fair*.”

“Of course it isn’t fair!” David said. “I wish things were different too. I wish we had figured out not to use plastics a century ago. I wish we had discovered a way to take it back out of the environment. I wish I wish I wish, but we can’t build the world on wishes.” He took a bite of the stew. “Mmm, Julia, you’ve outdone yourself. This is delicious!”

“So are you gonna do anything about Sawtooth?” Olivia asked. She was letting her soup get cold to focus on eating warm buttered bread. Despite her juvenile eating habits, there would be no changing the subject for her. She had the politics bone that James had always lacked.

“I feel that we have to break the barricade,” David said. “The Unclean say they have demands – they want Sawtooth to agree to share a certain amount of water and food with them per month. But this is extortion, and we

cannot capitulate. If we do, it will demonstrate that extortion is an effective strategy, and Unclean all across the Fallen lands will put the Enclaves under siege. It truly could be catastrophic for all of civilization.

“So I cannot see another way. Sawtooth *must* engage them militarily and break the blockade in a show of strength. And it is imperative that they win – so Yellowstone must help them. First we must make sure Sawtooth sees it the same way. I fear that they would rather negotiate with terrorists than risk the loss of life. And then we should negotiate support for them, get them to commit to a certain number of troops, we’ll commit another heavily armed force, I’ll see if other allies will send troops as well, and between us we could easily crush the protestors.”

James frowned at his plate. He hated when his father spoke so casually of harming others. He did see the reasoning behind it, though, and couldn’t think of a flaw in the argument. He just wished it wasn’t that way.

“Isn’t this just like, the exact same thing as the End Wars?” Olivia asked.

David nodded. “Conceptually, yes, but on a much smaller scale. I’m just surprised to see it coming back up now. I thought we had reached a kind of truce where we all understood it was better to be at peace than at war, and the Unclean know that they need the Enclaves and the goods they get from us. I’m hoping this will just be a brief moment of turmoil, and then they’ll settle down again.”

They were quiet for a few minutes then, and focused on eating, except for Olivia, who seemed lost in playing with her food. James couldn't help but think of the witchy young woman at the protest. *Try harder.*

"Dad? What would you say to someone who wanted us to try harder to share with the Unclean?" he asked. He'd almost said *Foreigners*, but figured that would start a whole separate debate.

"I feel like I spend my whole life answering that question," David said. "What's their plan? It's just not realistic. We don't have the resources to do that. I don't feel like it should be my job to disprove an idea that never had any evidence for it in the first place." He paused. "Above all, my sincere belief is that the best chance we have of saving them – and ourselves – is to keep the Enclaves strong, in the hopes that our scientific advances will be able to fix what's broken in the world. If the Enclaves fall, there is no hope."

"It's not a good enough sound bite," Olivia said. "That's like, more than one idea at a time. I see why it's hard to sell it."

"Emotions are a strong force in people's voting and decision-making," David agreed. "Fortunately, fear is stronger than compassion – which is why we have the majority on the Council right now. I'd rather not be the party that's motivated by fear, but our fears are entirely realistic and logical."

Olivia went into imaginary-campaign-ad mode, putting on her best radio voice and gesturing dramatically. "Do

Plasticosis

you want the Enclaves to Fall? No education. No more clean water. No more decontamination science and medicine. Let's share it all and bring these walls tumbling down! Vote Progressive!" She rolled her eyes. "So dumb! That's what they sound like."

David laughed, lines of tension easing from his brow. James observed this transformation a trifle jealously. It was always Olivia, and her sassy takes on politics, that seemed able to make their father laugh and breathe easier, though he might chide her for the over-simplicity. *Nuance comes with age*, he was fond of saying, ruffling Olivia's hair and telling her that she'd be an intimidating political force to reckon with when she's older.

James interned in the Yellowstone Decontamination Clinic. It was not the most prestigious internship, but it was exactly what James wanted to be doing: working with patients, not stuck in the lab doing the same experiments over and over. The majority of patients in the Decontamination Clinic were convoy drivers, lower-class citizens from inside the Enclave who had to venture outside it for work. They were typically not outside the walls long enough to develop accumulated tumors of plastic, so they often got just a dialysis blood filtration. James enjoyed talking to them and hearing their stories of the world outside the walls. They were hard men, men who bore battle scars and had been in many tangles with the convoy raiders. Some loved to brag about their adventures,

though the quality of storytelling varied wildly, and some things they said did not seem believable to James, despite his lack of experience outside Yellowstone. Others were more silent and stoic, and some had haunted eyes. But for each, James tried to connect with them, thank them for the important work they did, and give them the best care he could provide.

It was hard – they knew that James couldn't relate, didn't know anything about what their lives were like. Sometimes they told him so outright. Others liked him well enough, but like a friendly harmless puppy. For all the fact that James had more status and money, and a better job, he felt that they had the upper hand, precisely because he could never understand what they were living.

This day, however, was a welcome break from all that. This day was Baby Lottery Day! Once a year, Yellowstone offered a lottery to the Unclean outside its walls. Five babies would be selected out of the applicants, and they were taken into the Enclave, decontaminated, and adopted out to Enclave families. So much of James's work was hard, and a reminder of the sad conditions most people lived in, but this, this was hope! A chance for a baby who would've had a life of pain and suffering to have the best life possible on the inside of the Enclave.

James was covered in protective fabric, a head-to-toe outfit of gown, gloves, cap, mask, and goggles. Normally, working with the convoy drivers, he didn't have to be quite so covered up, but protocol required full PPE for Unclean babies. He stood anxiously in the door of the lab, waiting

for the delivery of their precious cargo. The lab was fully staffed today, all the doctors, techs, and interns billowing about like humanoid clouds.

At last, the carts appeared - two carts wheeled by similarly-gowned assistants who had collected the babies from the gate. And sure enough, three babies on one cart – all wailing – and two on the other, who still seemed relatively calm. The lab leapt into action. James hurried to his team lead, and began to take vitals on the tiniest little wrinkled person he'd ever seen.

After many hours in the clinic, James was finally liberated. He went through the decontamination shower and was toweling off in the locker room when he thought he heard *crying* coming from the next row over. *Strange*, he thought, *I know it was a long day of work, but such a joyful one!*

He put on his street clothes and peeked warily around the corner. It wasn't anyone who worked at the lab. James wasn't even sure how he could've gotten into the locker room without a staff key. It was a young man of Asian descent, short straight black hair in a smart cut, and wearing sharp street clothes. A discarded gown and mask lay at his feet in a pile. The man was crying, his face in one hand, oblivious to James's presence.

"Hey," James said gently. "What's wrong?"

He jumped, alarmed, but did not try to hide his tears. He shook his head. "I was at the wall. I had to take the

babies from their families. They're never going to see their kids again," he said, in between sobs.

James came and sat down next to him. "You did a good thing," he said. "Those babies are going to have a better life because they're here. The families *chose* this."

"I know," he said. "That's the worst part. Those families chose this. Their lives are so hard out there that they chose to give up their babies, instead of suffering through it together." He pounded his fist on the bench. "You should've seen them. It was awful."

James sat silently, not knowing what else to say. It *was* awful. He wished they could take in the whole family, and not just the baby. He wished that the world wasn't contaminated, and that there didn't need to be any Enclaves. But wishing didn't make it so.

"What's your name?" he asked instead.

"Calvin."

"James." He stuck out his hand to shake, then regretted it. They shook hands awkwardly, an out-of-place professional gesture in a strangely intimate moment.

"I'm sorry," James tried again. "I can imagine how hard that must have been to witness."

Calvin nodded. "I wonder what it's like for them, later. They'll never know how their kid is doing, if their new family is nice, if they're healthy, what they decide to do with their lives."

"And same for the kid," James agreed. "They'll never know how their family is doing outside the walls, or if they're still alive."

Calvin looked at him. "Have you met any Lottery Babies, once they've grown up?"

James frowned, puzzled. "Well, no, I guess I haven't." Come to think of it, that did seem odd.

"That's because we don't talk about it," Calvin said. "If I told you I was a Lottery Baby, you wouldn't be sitting next to me right now. I wouldn't get jobs, I wouldn't have friends. You'd all assume I wasn't as good as an Enclave-born citizen."

"*Are* you a Lottery Baby?" James asked, knowing that wasn't the point.

"Yes, I am," Calvin said, meeting his eyes. He seemed surprised to hear himself say it. "Today I realized that I shouldn't hide who I am. I don't know who my family is, out there, but I don't want to be ashamed of them."

"Your family wants the best possible future for you," James said. "They wouldn't want you to be ostracized. I'm sure they'd understand."

"There's only one way to make it more acceptable," Calvin said resolutely. "Someone has to start."

The next day, James was late for lab again, his bi-weekly run across campus leaving him sweaty and out-of-breath. He scooted onto his stool near Nathan and cracked open his lab notebook. Rachel was absent today, but that was okay. This week, they were testing dialysis filtration, to show the science behind the decontamination techniques James helped out with at his internship. He

expected this upcoming unit to be easier for him, with the background knowledge he had at work. The goal was to show how much plastic particulate the dialysis technique can remove from the blood.

“Did you work Baby Day?” Nathan asked.

James nodded.

“Well? How’d it go?” Nathan prompted.

“It was really good,” James said with a firm smile. “Hope and joy and babies and all that. And busy!”

Nathan raised his eyebrows. “You’re doing the forced politician smile,” he noted. “Do you not like babies?”

James sighed. He would be a lousy politician, if everyone could always read his emotions so clearly on his face. Even as a doctor he might have to learn to be less transparent. “No, I do like babies, and I was very excited to work Baby Day. I just have really been thinking about their families.”

“About their families? They go to nice families that want to adopt them, people who couldn’t have their own kids otherwise!”

“No, about their old families,” James said, looking down. “About how they’re never going to know their kid, and what the kid is going to grow up to be like. They’re giving up being together to give the baby a better shot – because the Fallen Lands are so bad that they give up on being together. I just... I don’t know, I think it would be so sad to give up a baby like that.”

James looked up to see how Nathan absorbed this unusual line of thinking. Nathan nodded, his eyebrows

raised, but didn't say anything. James sat for a moment longer, then stood up to get started making plastic and blood solutions for the dialysis testing. They worked in silence for the majority of the class period. While they waited for one of their samples to finish filtering, Nathan finally spoke again. "What do you think would be better for them?" he asked. "Do you think we should bring the parents in, too? Lottery a whole family?"

James thought about it. "Yeah, kinda. I don't really see a downside to that. Seems to me the baby should get to stay with its family if they want it, and adults should get a chance to live a long healthy life, too." He knew that there were plenty of objections. He could hear his father in the back of his mind, explaining that the adults wouldn't have the tools to succeed within the Enclave, that it would be traumatic for them to leave their world and their community, that the whole reason we accept only babies is because they won't remember the transition and will grow up fully acculturated. David Kramer would also surely say that if they accepted adults, they would have to accept fewer babies, and the babies gain way more lifespan than the adults do, so it's more bang for your buck. But James didn't think these difficulties were insurmountable. For one thing, why couldn't they just accept more people overall? Have volunteers to guide the newcomers through settling in at the Enclave? He knew he was following his heart, but he just felt like it should be possible to keep the families together.

“What would you do if someone brought you a patient at the lab who didn’t have an ID?” Nathan asked quietly. The noise of humming dialysis machines around them meant that his voice wouldn’t travel far, but James still looked behind him, alarmed that someone might overhear.

“An Unclean?” James asked. “You’re asking me what I’d do if someone brought me an Unclean to the lab?”

Nathan nodded. “It’s just the real-life consequences version of what you were saying. Just a hypothetical question, though.” He smirked, seemingly pleased at James’s discomfort.

James thought, but not for a long time. “I stand by what I said,” he said quietly. “I’d treat the patient. I think the hippocratic oath would require me to.”

“And would you report it?” Nathan asked.

“You’re asking me if someone *smuggled* in an Unclean, without knowledge of the Enclave or its Council, and asked me to illegally treat them and not say anything about it?” James asked. “Just to be clear about what the question is.” Nathan nodded.

James shook his head and laughed, defusing a bit of the tension of their conversation. “I guess I just hope I’m never put in that situation. But it sure wouldn’t do a lot of good to treat them and then report them.” He shrugged, smiled, and pivoted to a new topic. “You wanna get lunch after lab?”

They went to lunch, but Nathan didn’t let up on his strange hypothetical questions. Over pizza, Nathan pointed

out that if he treated a secret Unclean in the lab and didn't report it, that would mean that the Enclave's security had a breach, and it would remain open. If James reported it, it would have negative consequences for the Unclean patient, but the breach could be fixed.

James shook his head, frowning. "It's like the trolley problem," he said. "It's a dumb thing to argue about, because what is hypothetically best can be different than what feels morally right in the moment. So why ask these questions if we'll never be making these choices?"

"What feels morally right to you?" Nathan prodded.

James chewed absently, barely tasting his food. "I can't really see myself reporting someone without being really sure about it. But I guess I'd want to find out more. How did they get in? What kind of breach is it? Is it safe enough, or does it endanger the Enclave? See, again, this is why it's silly to debate. It's too situational. The answer will always be 'it depends.'"

"So you get to decide what counts as endangering the Enclave? That's a big job for one person," Nathan said. His eyes crinkled at the corners. He was teasing, but James was exasperated anyway.

"Only me because you won't leave it alone!" he retorted. "It would be you, if you were the one faced with these choices. Or any other doctor, if they were the one encountering this situation. But in reality, this is not going to happen to any of us! It was a fun thought experiment. Thanks for lunch – I have to head to the library." And with that, James gathered his books, wiped his oily fingers on

James

his pants, and looked down at the stains with regret. He nodded farewell to Nathan and headed out the door, his long legs bringing him on autopilot to his usual study spot.

Elena

“Dr. Kenjik? This is Garrett Dupont, Chief of YSDF. Do you have a minute?”

Elena Kenjik’s heart beat wildly, and her stomach dropped. But the voice over the phone was measured and polite. Surely if this was a real emergency, he would sound steelier, or more frazzled, or... something.

“Yes?” she quavered, cleared her throat, and tried again. “Yes, Chief Dupont, what is the matter?”

“We’ve received reports of a rumor about your lab circulating around the YIM. We are launching our investigation immediately, so I don’t yet know the scale of this rumor. I do not believe it to be a pressing danger, however, out of an abundance of caution, I would suggest putting a pause on your operations while we investigate... perhaps give your employees a few days off, and suggest that they keep their heads down.”

“Yes, of course,” Elena managed. It sounded like the beginning of a worst-case scenario to her. She drew in a shaky breath, and tried to order her thoughts. “What should I tell them? Should I apprise them of the rumor?”

The chief paused. “I don’t want to cause any alarm... but I think they’d best hear it from you, and you should tell them that we’re already investigating. I wouldn’t want them to hear it at school and assume they’re in danger. Remind them, of course, that their entire job is classified, and that the existence of this investigation is as well.”

They shouldn't need a reminder, Elena thought defensively. *But if someone's spilled the beans... maybe they do.* "Yessir," she said, and immediately regretted calling him sir. "Chief Dupont, do you have any idea what is being circulated in this rumor? Is it the truth?"

"We're just beginning to investigate, Dr. Kenjik. I'll keep you apprised of any new information as soon as we have any. My initial tip was quite vague. I assure you, I've been instructed to keep you in the loop. I know you've had bad experiences with doxxing in the past."

"An understatement, to say the least," said Elena uneasily.

"Yes," he agreed. "Keep your phone on you." The line went dead.

It was just after six o'clock, and the lab was empty, but for Elena. The main room with its long rows of tables and sinks and shelves full of labeled petri dishes and tubs and bottles was dark and quiet. Behind the lab were the three smaller rooms, Elena's office and the two adjoining it, her co-director's office and the staff lounge. Elena had the sudden impression of sitting in a pool of light, on display for any unfriendly eyes to see. The lab, normally a comfortable home, lurked about her like something out of a bad dream.

She shook her head, trying to clear this imagery, and punched her co-director's number into the phone. She had to start making calls to her employees, but it would be good to get on the same page with Prasad first, just in case. A busy signal. *Of course.* He must be on the line with

Chief Dupont. Elena quietly got up, went to the light switch, and turned it off. She sat back down in her chair in the dark, crossed her arms, and listened to the familiar electronic hum of the lab at night.

Call me, she texted Prasad, and waited, trying to press down the ugly lump of panic rising in her chest.

When the phone finally rang, she was so startled she almost fell out of her chair, though she'd been watching and waiting for it.

"Prasad? Did you talk to Dupont?"

"Yep. He said we should put a pause on things for a little bit while they investigate. You wanna call the A through M names, and I'll call N through Z?" Prasad said breezily.

His lack of alarm caught Elena off-guard as well. She opened and closed her mouth, speechless and, unusually, enraged.

"Elena? Are you there?"

"I'm here! I... aren't you..." *Deep breath, Elena.*
"Aren't you *concerned*?"

"Oh." He paused, recalculating. "Elena, I didn't realize... I'm sorry. I forgot that this would be a bad reminder to you. I don't think you have to worry. It's just the YSDF being cautious, to protect us. There's no mobs, nobody demanding our heads, probably just a few kids gossiping, and it'll blow over just as soon."

Elena tapped her forehead gently against her desk, hot tears streaming down her cheeks. She resented them, tears

that made her seem weak and silly. She tried to breathe deeply and swallow away the lump in her throat, not wanting Prasad to hear that she was crying.

“Elena?” he prompted gently.

“I’m not being silly,” she ground out between clenched teeth. “This is a real risk! We could lose everything. Rumors only grow. There could very well be mobs demanding our heads, and worse! They could shut down our lab – we could lose all of our progress. I haven’t even managed to copy our notes to anyone yet, due to the obstruction of the Council... everything we’ve discovered could vanish overnight, on the whims of people feeding off a rumor.”

“That’s always been true, Elena. And we do our best anyway. We don’t have control over this – let’s just let Dupont do his job, and we’ll do ours, yeah?” he said sensibly. “Where are you?” he added, concern warming his light tenor voice.

“In the office,” Elena responded, her voice small.

“I’ll be right there,” he promised. “We’ll make our calls together, and then I’ll walk you home, okay?”

She muttered assent and ended the call, feeling both cared for and condescended to at the same time.

Rowan

Five days into their journey, Rowan and Elko had begun to leave the Arrowhead. So far, they had walked through thinly populated areas of trees and lakes, as was typical of northern Minnesota. The dangers they faced were the dangers of their environment: cold, water, and plastics. Later, they would follow a more major highway, which was likely to offer more resources and more people they would meet along the way, which would help keep them supplied, but would come with its own dangers. They followed what had once been a county highway, that now no car would drive down. The pavement was crumbled and full of potholes, there were many trees down over the road, and saplings growing in the cracks. Still, for two people on foot, the road offered a feeling of safety, and it helped them know where they were going.

In the packs on their backs, they carried what they needed: sleeping bags, food, a small filter, a pot, a strike-a-light, a tarp. What they needed, the community provided. As they advised and selected gear, the elders had wryly remarked that before the Fall, some people used to go on wilderness journeys for fun. They called it backpacking. It was hard for Rowan to imagine – she knew that it had been different back then – lots of people had cars and could go wherever they wanted, so maybe it felt fun to make it harder on themselves sometimes. But out in the wilderness were the dangers of the plasticky

environment, as well as the human dangers of leaving the Arrowhead. Rowan and Elko had never left the Arrowhead, but they knew that other regions were poorer, and that with desperation comes violence.

Rowan looked up at a sound, more alert than afraid. They were both getting used to a new awareness of their surroundings, one they hadn't had to cultivate growing up in Two Harbors. She couldn't tell if she was hearing leaves rustling in the wind, an animal, or a stream. Elko saw Rowan's cocked head and guessed, "A stream?"

Soon enough her guess was confirmed: a slim trickle of water from the woods on their right that went through an ancient metal tunnel under the road. The road was deformed here, buckled inward where the tunnel ran under it. They had been almost out of water – had not seen a drop all morning. Rowan feared this would become more and more common outside the Arrowhead.

They set their packs down, and Elko scooped up water in a bowl to pour through the filter into their bottles. The filter was a standard clay-and-charcoal cylinder of the type that many households used. Two Harbors filtered water for the town, but most towns didn't – people filtered their own with a similar device, or drank their water unfiltered.

They sat on the side of the road, drinking and giving their feet a rest. They were both strong and even Elko still seemed healthy, but were not used to walking so far with so much on their backs. They knew where they were by counting road intersections and the occasional sign, where they still existed. Often the signs were on the ground,

twisted and rusted, and they had to push away leaves and muddy snow to read them. Rowan thought they had gone about eight miles a day, and hoped they would get faster as they got stronger – and that Elko would get stronger before she got weaker.

“We’re going to need more food soon,” said Elko. It had been unspoken until then, but Rowan was glad Elko wasn’t afraid to say it.

The silence stretched out. Rowan didn’t have a solution other than to hope they encountered a town soon.

“It’s crazy how little we know outside of Two Harbors,” Elko said. “We don’t even know where the towns are! It would’ve been so easy before the Fall. Everyone probably just knew where to find people. And stores! You could just look it up, back when everyone had technology and electricity. But even if we see a town on the map, we won’t know if it’s abandoned. And we won’t know if we’ll encounter a new one in the middle of nowhere.”

Rowan nodded. “I guess I’m just hoping we run into a town. I’m sorry that’s the best I’ve got.”

“Rowan, you don’t have to feel responsible for everything about this trip. We both know this is a near-impossible, foolhardy venture. I’m going to die! What does it matter if I starve instead? I’m just sorry that you would starve too.” The words were bitter, but Elko’s tone was matter-of-fact.

Nothing Elko had said was untrue, but Rowan felt the need to defuse the tension of her words. “Come on now!

We still have one more dinner and a bag of oatmeal. I don't think we're going to starve before we come across someone who can help us. It takes at least a week to starve!"

Elko smiled, and Rowan's chest felt warm at her weak cheer having produced a smile.

"Come on then," Elko said, rising and offering Rowan a hand up. "Let's get some miles in before our last dinner."

That afternoon, they found a rabbit in a snare on the road's edge. They debated at length what to do about it. Rowan thought they should stop right where they were, make a fire, and eat it. Elko thought this meant that people must be nearby, and they could surely find them and ask for help without jeopardizing their good relationship by stealing from them. Rowan said surely they would understand and forgive their need, and it would be silly to turn down any available food. She also did not think it was a guarantee that they'd be able to find whoever set the snare. They could be in any direction! Elko countered that they could bring the rabbit with them while they continued walking, and if they came across a village, they could offer the rabbit back to them. If they didn't meet anyone by tomorrow, they could eat it. Rowan argued that they didn't know how long the rabbit had been there and it might go bad by tomorrow. Elko capitulated, and they built a small fire on the crumbling pavement.

"Elko?" Rowan asked hesitantly, staring at the rabbit. "Do you know how to skin it?"

Elko rolled her eyes. “No, but how hard could it be?” Their community had plenty of hunters, trappers, and fishers to help feed them, but they were jobs neither of them had attempted.

“It’s all you then,” Rowan said, tossing her a pocketknife. Elko caught it deftly and knelt by the rabbit. She turned it over, considering her options. Finally she decided to start at the neck and cut down the center of its belly. The knife did not enter as easily as she had imagined it should, and she struggled to get a hole started.

“It feels so violent,” she said, her hand gripping the rabbit’s neck tightly as she struggled to rip the skin open.

“Now is not the moment for us to become vegetarians,” Rowan said drily. “Be careful not to puncture the intestines! I think that makes the meat bad.”

“Oh yeah,” Elko said, “I think you’re right. Maybe I should cut around the side of the belly by the legs?”

After much struggle, she cut a jagged teardrop-shaped opening from the neck around the belly. The skin stuck to the insides more than she had expected, but with her fingers and the knife she was able to scrape the cut-out piece off. She stared at the red shiny flesh beneath.

“I thought there was gonna be intestines right away in there,” she said. “Do you think I have to cut one more layer to get them out?”

Rowan shrugged. “I guess so.” Elko carefully made another cut where the rabbit’s ribs opened up, slipped the knife tip in, and dragged it down. Huge loops of gray intestine spilled out, startling her. She turned the rabbit

upside down and shook it, trying to empty the abdominal cavity. Intestines coiled onto the ground, but she had to reach in and scoop to get everything out.

"I feel like it should just come out now," Elko said, trying to pull the rabbit's hind legs out of its skin.

"Maybe you should have pulled the skin off first before the intestines," said Rowan thoughtfully, still watching intently.

"Well, you're just full of helpful information, aren't you!" Elko retorted. "Here, grab onto the skin and pull."

Rowan hesitated.

"What?" Elko demanded. "Are you feeling soft-hearted about this creature?"

"No, I just... it smells bad," Rowan admitted. "Sorry." And she came over, gripping the fur firmly above the ribcage and stepping away from Elko, who held the legs. The fur came off suddenly, and Rowan stumbled backward in surprise. They were left with a bloody, naked rabbit that still had fur on its head, all four feet, and its groin.

"This is harder than I thought it would be," Elko declared. She had blood all the way up her elbows, as well as a smear on her cheek. Her eyes were wide and her hair disheveled, and she held the poor abused rabbit at arm's length in front of her, head tilted quizzically. Rowan began to laugh. Once she started, she couldn't stop, and her glee made Elko laugh too. It bubbled up in them uncontrollably until they were breathless, and each time Rowan tried to catch her breath, squinting through giggles and tears at Elko, she started laughing again. The image was too

ridiculous – Elko was so sticky and uncertain, and the rabbit was so pitiful.

It wasn't until Elko's eyes went a different kind of wide, solemn and alarmed, staring at something behind her, that Rowan stopped laughing and whirled around. There, leaning against a tree on the other side of the road was a tall, gaunt figure dressed entirely in brown leather. Their arms were crossed and their pose casual, comfortable and still, as if they had been there watching for awhile.

"Is this yours?" Elko asked apologetically, holding out the rabbit.

The stranger raised an eyebrow. "Why yes," she said. Her voice was deep and husky but unmistakably female, surprising in such an androgynous frame.

"I'm so sorry," Elko said. "I can explain."

"There are some who'd kill you for stealing a rabbit," the stranger said matter-of-factly. "Especially in the spring. Slim pickings this time of year." She pushed herself away from her tree and approached. She was striking in every way – her walk was catlike, predatory, silent. Once standing on the road with them, it became clear that she was enormously tall and nothing but bones and sinew. Pale green eyes stood out starkly in her brown face, accented by mountainous cheekbones and thick black eyebrows. If she had hair, it was hidden under a green wool hat. The rest of her attire was leather, tall mukluks almost meeting a long tunic, and a short cape with the fur still on, facing inward. A brace of rabbits swung at her back, tied to a cross-body sling.

Rowan was utterly paralyzed, transfixed. She felt that they were in danger, but that they should not run away – this person could surely hunt them down if she wanted to. She had no idea what to do to improve this rocky start to their relationship. She couldn't even look at Elko for help, stuck staring at the otherworldly person before her.

"I've never seen anyone do such a poor job skinning game," the stranger continued. "I wasn't trying to interrupt – I was too curious what you were going to do next." She took the rabbit out of Elko's hands. "It's rude to stare, you know," she informed them. Rowan snapped her mouth shut and recovered control of her face, looking at the ground.

Elko bravely continued looking at her, and though her first attempt came out as a squeak, cleared her throat and began to explain. "We were desperate, and we didn't know when we'd find a village. I'm so sorry. We would love to make it up to you. We have trade goods and skills. Rowan can make and repair filters. We were hoping to trade for food with the first people we met."

"Traditionally," the stranger said, kneeling down with the rabbit in front of her, "one negotiates the price first. It is difficult to believe you intended to offer payment." She pulled a knife from where it hung on the front of her chest strap as she spoke, and made quick work of cleaning the rabbit. She cut away the groin fur and pulled a bit of leftover intestine out of its anus, broke off the feet at the joints, and cut away the head between vertebrae. Then she cut the meat off the bones, separating the leg meat and the

back meat and stacking them on the inside-out rabbit fur on the ground beside her. “You got a pot?” she asked.

As they cooked, and continued not to be executed for their crimes, Rowan calmed down. The hunter even gave them her name. KT. The emphasis on the second syllable made Rowan certain it was KT, and not Katie. They boiled the rabbit chunks with the bones too, per KT’s instructions. It adds nutrients to the broth, she’d explained.

“How close are we to your village?” Elko asked.

“We could be there in an hour or so,” KT replied.

Reassured that she wasn’t wasting the last of her drinking water too soon, Elko slowly poured the rest of her canteen over her filthy hands and arms. The blood had begun to cake in some spots and was gummy in others. “Thank god,” she said. “I was hoping I wouldn’t have to be sticky forever.”

KT shook her head. “What on earth are a couple of buffoons like you doing out here? You don’t know how to feed yourselves, you don’t know how to prepare game, and here you are brazenly stealing from a snare and sitting down to eat *right next to it* in the middle of the afternoon! Are you on a death mission? Did you fall right out of an Enclave? Were you born yesterday?”

Elko laughed. “When you put it that way, we do sound pretty dumb.” And so as they ate, Elko and Rowan explained in bits and pieces, taking turns and interrupting each other, who they were, where they were going, and why. KT listened intently, her still face hard to read, except

when Elko talked about her illness. Then KT's mouth twisted sympathetically, and she nodded along, the most encouraging expression she had made yet. Everyone had lost someone to the plastics.

"What about you then?" KT asked, when Elko's tale was done.

Rowan started. "Me?"

"Yeah, why are you here? You got the plastics too?"

"No," Rowan said. "I couldn't have possibly let Elko go alone – if she had even wanted to. Besides, it was my idea."

KT tilted her head, slightly puzzled. It seemed Rowan's explanation wasn't enough.

"You two a couple?" KT asked.

"What?" Rowan was genuinely surprised by the question. "No, just friends." KT smirked, but said nothing more on that front. Whether the smirk indicated disbelief, mockery, or was an all-purpose defensive strategy, Rowan had no idea.

The village was confusing to look at upon first glance, but Rowan soon realized it was just two different architectural strategies piled haphazardly next to each other: log cabins and wigwams. Two Harbors and many other cities and towns had existed before the Fall, and still used the large buildings that they could no longer build themselves. This village was clearly founded post-Fall, and might even be semi-nomadic. It was small, maybe just a few extended families all surviving together. People sat

by small fires doing various tasks: cleaning game, tanning hides, making arrows, cooking. Rowan was both embarrassed at her own childlike lack of bushcraft, and excited – even awestruck – at the amount of knowledge and skill these people possessed. They trailed behind KT, feeling awkward and out-of-place, as KT delivered her rabbits to two different relatives. Finally, KT brought them to a campfire where an old woman sat on a stump. She had leather cut-out pieces in front of her, and was poking a row of holes along the edge of one cut-out, deft and quick with her awl. *She's making mukluks*, Rowan realized. KT introduced them. The old woman's name was Anna, and she invited them to take a seat.

She asked them a little about themselves, about what they did for work, about what they were doing here. Rowan knew she was missing something, but didn't know what – Anna was clearly important, and so KT had brought them here... why, to be vetted?

Elko, fortunately, caught on to the unasked question of payment. “We would love to stay here for a few days and be resupplied for the next part of our journey,” she said. “I know that we may not have much to offer, and we are humbly grateful for anything you and the village might offer us. But we did bring some small trade goods. I don't know how much you get supplies from the convoy raiders over here, but we have some basic medicines and batteries. Rowan is also an expert at water filtration. We have some materials for filters, ways to improve water storage, and she can do repairs.”

Rowan pulled a packet out of her backpack and poured a few plugs of soil into her hand. “I have something special to offer as well, that you couldn’t get from the caravans. These are spore plugs for a mushroom that we think helps remove plastics. They came to us from some people out east who say they’ve been having good results with it. I can share what I know about them, how to use them and cultivate them.”

Anna smiled. Her eyes nearly disappeared into her wrinkled face when she did. “That warms my heart. Two young people like you, just trying to make the world a little better, and while you’re on your own challenging journey at that!” She laughed, looking at KT, who stood behind them. “KT, why the skeptical face? You don’t believe them? Surely you can see how sincere they are!”

KT did indeed look skeptical, one high arched eyebrow and two crossed arms speaking clearer than words. “You – *we* – don’t know them at all, Anna. They don’t know anything! These mushrooms probably won’t even do anything. I’m not saying we shouldn’t help them, Anna, but I wouldn’t be so quick to be impressed.”

Rowan wanted to stare at her shoes, but forced herself to stare at KT instead. KT didn’t look at all embarrassed about insulting them. Rowan, on the other hand, felt deeply embarrassed. Knowing things was the one thing she prided herself on, and it was humiliating to realize that, in KT’s world, Rowan didn’t know anything worthwhile.

“Come now!” Anna said sharply. “That is both rude and untrue. Just because they don’t know the things you

know doesn't mean that they know nothing! KT, with such an attitude, how will you learn from others?"

KT's chin jutted out in defiance, but surprisingly, she blushed. Rowan realized with a start that despite her confidence, she was, in fact, ashamed. "Sorry," KT muttered, and dipped her head both across the fire and towards Rowan and Elko, to show that she meant it to all three of them. "You are right."

Anna beamed. "Well then, it seems we can all help each other out! KT, be a dear and let them stay with you? And would you please introduce them to Naomi and Erika – I bet they would love to be in charge of the mushrooms."

The days in the village passed pleasantly. After their five days on the trail by themselves, Rowan took comfort in being surrounded by people going about the daily business of living. She taught Naomi and Erika everything she knew about the spore plugs, how to cultivate the mushrooms in the soil around the lake and remove the fruiting bodies once they had released their spores. The theory was that these mushrooms concentrate plastics in their fruiting bodies, and that by growing them and then removing them to an area away from the water, it could improve the water quality if cultivated in large enough numbers. The two women were funny, talkative, hard-working and difficult to tell apart. It felt almost like being home. Getting to know strangers felt like a new skill to both Rowan and Elko, as they had lived around the same people most of their lives. But these people were not

so different from the people of Two Harbors, despite the differences in their lifestyles.

Elko

Elko promptly got to work helping where she could, feeling less useful than Rowan but determined not to let that get in the way. Her hands were not skilled in the tasks she saw many others doing – she wouldn't be very helpful at sewing mukluks or preparing game. But she found those who needed help and did her best to provide it, helping elders move about and carry things, changing a few diapers, and watching after the handful of children who ran wildly around the village. Today, however, no one seemed to have a need for extra hands, and Elko wandered down a beaten path to the lake. She bobbed her head politely to a couple of old men fishing, and headed past them down the shore.

She had noticed early on how very few men there were in the village – out of sixty-odd people, she'd only seen a few old men and a few young boys. The disparity was even starker than in Two Harbors, which also had lost many of its men. Elko was curious how they had been lost, but was hesitant to ask. Early on in the Fall, a series of wars had claimed many who now would've been elders, had they survived. The End Wars had been a time of fear, even terror, when all the institutions people had trusted for so long were beginning to fail. Fear of scarcity led to hoarding of resources, which led to anarchic violence across the continent.

More recently, however, the drain of young able-bodied men was to the Convoy Raiders. They were militia-like bands that lay in wait for the convoys that shipped goods between Enclaves, then traded the goods back to the communities. Convoys were heavily armed and quite wary, and robbing them was never an easy task. Without the Convoy Raiders, though, so much would be lost. The supplies from the convoy were the things that made life in places like Two Harbors still so liveable. The cost in human life was steep, but not having goods from the Enclaves would be catastrophic. And so in every town, young men chose to go serve their time in the Convoy Raiders. In Two Harbors, they had fared relatively well in the End Wars, but had more recently started to lose more to the convoys. Still, the community in Two Harbors tried to be subtle about how many they sent to the convoy raiders. It was a delicate balance between having the goods they needed, and angering Cahokia, the nearest Enclave. Cahokia had destroyed Duluth when Duluth had refused to stop raiding them. Two Harbors supported the Convoy Raiders, and sent their men, but tried to remain as unassociated as possible.

Elko wondered whether the lack of men here was mostly to the convoys, or the fault of the End Wars as well. Such trauma left scars on a community, she felt, scars that seemed impossible to heal. She tried to imagine what the world would be like in the future, and wanted such a vision to be positive. Could it get better? Could smart, kind people like Rowan one day fix the water, heal the people,

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rebuild the government? Could people heal, over the generations, from the loss of all their fathers and brothers?

She shook her head, angry at herself that she couldn't believe in it. The plastics had only gotten worse over time, since the Fall thirty years ago. Even the Enclaves fell sometimes. It seemed only logical that one day the last Enclave would fall, and meanwhile, in the Fallen lands, people would only get sicker and hungrier and poorer. Yet more warfare and destruction and death. She kicked a rock into the lake and sat down, nestling into the roots of a tree. Death was always on her mind now, a constant companion. At this moment it felt like her death was intertwined with the whole world, that Elko had lived her short life through the limping last days of the world and that they would die together, she and it. The ending of all things.

But Elko knew that the world would go on happening, that as full of pain and death and suffering as it seemed, life always finds a way – even if it seems hardly worth living. Some days she felt a strong sense of missing out, like reading a book and being forced to stop before the last couple chapters. She'd give anything to know how it all would end. Whether there would be a surprise happy ending, or the suffering that she thought was far more likely.

Elko threw a series of small pebbles into the water, watching their ripples. She'd been becoming hyper-aware of the natural world around her. It was a way to stay present, and a way to appreciate each day as much as she could. She made sure to close her eyes and breathe in the

smell of plants, to touch soil, to admire dewdrops and spiderwebs. She'd always been an admirer of small wonders, but now it felt more important. She wanted to savor the moments, and be present in them. At the same time she feared the future and thought about it constantly – more about suffering than death, but certainly both were always on her mind. Elko knew that one day, she would have her last good day – one last day without pain, and likely she wouldn't know when it happened. It terrified her.

She had taken care of people who had died of the plastics, and knew how many different forms it could take. Pain, nausea, dizziness, diarrhea, vomiting, passing out? Or would it attack her brain, give her brain fog, dementia, hallucinations? Which ones would be her crosses to bear? And how long could she bear them? She knew that she was going to die, so suffering seemed pointless – why not just end it herself when it started to get bad? But then, some days are just bad, and sometimes Elko's despair felt so overwhelming she wanted to give up immediately. She felt that wasn't fair – wasn't fair especially to Rowan, who wanted so badly to give Elko a chance to live. Elko had to do her part. She had to try. But she was so very afraid.

A rustle of leaves startled her. It was Rowan, who nestled into the tree roots beside her. "Sorry," she said hesitantly. "I saw you walk away from the village." Elko had been crying silently, hot tears on her face but breathing calmly. She tried to smile at Rowan, who put her arms around her. "It's okay," Rowan said. "You're allowed to

cry.” Elko turned into Rowan’s shoulder and sobbed into it, holding her tight. These days whenever she hugged Rowan, Elko imagined pushing all of her strength into Rowan’s heart, so that she could go on when Elko wasn’t there anymore. Sometimes Elko felt like that would be the hardest part – not dying, but being the one left behind to keep living.

“It’s so much,” Rowan whispered. “I wish I could take some of it for you.”

Elko pulled away to look at her face. “You *do*,” she said.

Rowan shook her head, crying. “I can’t make it leave you alone. I can’t make it hurt less. I can’t give you more time. All I can do is be with you, and love you, and it’s still not enough.”

“I know,” Elko whispered, pulling Rowan close. “But it means everything to me that you’re here.”

Rowan

They spent four days in KT's village, which went by the name of Meadowlands. By the end, Rowan was anxious to get on their way. She knew that they couldn't spend four days resupplying and making friends for every five days that they walked. This would have to be an exception. But she had so enjoyed sharing her knowledge, and learning in turn from Naomi the basics of setting snares. Finally, Rowan and Elko returned to Anna's campfire to make sure their exchange had been fair, and ask for supplies for the road ahead. Anna thanked them for their visit and sent off a young relative to fill their packs with dried meat and last season's wild rice. To their surprise, when they returned to KT's wigwam for their packs, KT awaited them, with a pack of her own. They hadn't seen much of KT – she had clearly been out hunting and trapping every day. It takes all kinds to make a village, but it especially takes the KTs to feed everyone else. Her stand-off-ishness could be intimidating, and Rowan had assumed that KT didn't want much to do with them. At night, she had mainly listened to Rowan and Elko's banter, throwing in an occasional quip. But there she stood, arms crossed over her lanky frame, leaning – KT always leaned against something, seemingly permanently casual – against a small tree outside her door.

“KT! Are you coming with us?” Elko asked.

“Anna asked me to take you as far as Leech Lake,” KT said. “There’s a village there that will help you.”

“Leech Lake! Isn’t that far?” Rowan asked, trying to imagine the road map in her head.

“Five days or so,” KT said. “Ten days for you,” she added with a smirk.

Rowan was indignant, but Elko just laughed. “You’ll have to toughen us up then, KT. Five to ten days to show us what we should be doing before we’re left to our own devices!”

James

James stood at the front of the classroom, nervously staring down fifty first-year med students. Behind him, the title *Plasticosis 101* was projected cheerily in a blocky, childish font on the board. *Stupid font choice*, he thought with suddenly self-conscious regret. *Should have gone with something more basic*. This week, the senior med students rotated through presenting a series of lectures to the first-year students, giving the basics on whatever they'd specialized in for their internships. James shared his specialization with a handful of others, so they'd broken it up between them. Other students would cover the different stages of treatment; James would focus only on what was known about the disease.

His professor, sitting in the front row, arranged his papers in front of him and peered at James impatiently. "You may begin anytime."

"Oh," James began eloquently. He'd somehow thought they would introduce him, or ask the class to pay attention to him. At least the students weren't disruptive – they looked bored and half-asleep, but they wouldn't be talking over him. He cleared his throat.

"Plasticosis, colloquially known as the plastics, is still a relatively new disease, and there's a lot we don't yet understand about it." He flipped to the second slide, which showed a bullet-point list of the wide variety of impacted body systems. Gut health, including reduced ability to

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absorb nutrients, diarrhea, nausea, and vomiting, and weight loss. Brain health, including reduced IQ, early-onset dementia, hallucinations and personality disorders, loss of speech. Organ failure from plastic accumulation, most commonly kidney failure, liver failure, and respiratory problems from accumulation in the lungs.

“This non-comprehensive list of symptoms is so diverse, because plastics can accumulate anywhere in the body, and cause problems wherever they do so. In the medical world, plastic masses are called *plasticomas*. These masses often act similarly to cancer, in that they affect the organs they’re located in by getting in the way of the organ doing whatever it normally does, physically blocking or impeding its regular function. Microplastics have mild self-adherent qualities, so once a solid mass has begun to form, other plastic circulating in the blood has a tendency to stick to it, and the mass grows.” Next slide. It showed a table, with *chronic vs. acute plasticosis* as its heading.

“However, as we well know, plasticomas are not the only manifestation of plasticosis. Plastics have an impact on the body even when they are not forming masses, especially resulting in these more nebulous gut and brain health indicators. Lots of dispersed plastic bits in the brain can be just as detrimental as a mass, though the effects are often slower – again, chronic rather than acute. All people outside of an Enclave can be considered to have at least mild chronic plasticosis – studies show that the average Outsider has significantly decreased brain and gut health,

compared to Enclavers. They suffer from shorter lifespans, lower IQ, and much higher base rates of inflammation.” He cleared his throat, feeling weirdly guilty about this dry and straight-forward characterization, but had to remind himself that it was all true.

“It is important to remember,” he added spontaneously, veering from his script, “that these are merely averages. There will, of course, be some Outsiders who are intelligent, able-bodied, and long-lived, just as there will be some who will die very young, or have severe chronic plasticosis their whole lives. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to study whether their lifestyle choices affect the number of people affected, for example, whether the use of common hand-filters for water has any beneficial effect. Though some efforts have been undertaken to study such things, it is difficult to protect the researchers out in the field. Additionally, lifestyle studies have always been difficult because they rely on people accurately reporting what they do – what they eat, how often they use or don’t use the filter, where they get their water from, etc. Therefore, lifestyle factors of Outsiders remain as mysterious to the scientific community as nutrition.”

He clicked to the next slide, hoping to remind himself where he was supposed to be going in this lecture. He wasn’t sure why he had felt the need to emphasize this part about averages, except that it had bothered him the other day when his father assumed all Outsiders were stupid. Not that James had any particular emotional reason to defend the Outsiders, just that his father’s interpretation

was *wrong* and *unscientific*, and James didn't want these med students to walk away with the same idea. A hand waved from the audience. He called on the young man, uncertainly.

"What do Outsiders know about the plastics? I mean, what is common knowledge? What practices, if any, do they use to try to avoid getting sick?"

James stared at his questioner in surprise. *I should've asked them to hold questions til the end*, he thought ruefully. "Hm," he said. "Interesting questions. I am not sure, but at a guess, the correct answer is that it's highly variable. From what I've read, the Outsiders vary widely in cultural practices, including how much knowledge their communities have retained from before the Fall. We also don't study them much, given the difficulties of protecting medical researchers out in the field."

A girl raised her hand. Apprehensively, James called on her too.

"What role do the Enclaves have in treating Outsiders? Do we ever do it? If not, why not?"

Another student chimed in, without raising his hand. "Would it be feasible to give Outsiders meds to treat their conditions?"

Woah. What was this, suddenly another pro-Outsider protest? James cleared his throat. "We do not treat Outsiders, except during the Baby Lottery. Of course, we can only hope that one day the Enclaves will develop the technology to treat people en masse, or better yet, rid the environment of microplastics to prevent future disease. But

today's treatment options are not practical for delivering to all the sick people beyond the walls. We can only hope that by protecting our Enclave and investing heavily in medical R&D, that we can be a bigger help to Outsiders in the future."

He swallowed. It was a little cumbersome, and wouldn't make a good news clip, but was the exact sort of thing Councilman Kramer would have said. Maybe James had more of a political bone than he thought. He felt profoundly uneasy, however. These questions had veered from the medical to the political. What was the Enclave's role in all this? Jesus. Had the questions been planted ahead of time, just to give him a hard time?

A soft chime sounded from the professor's desk. "Time's up," he said, looking profoundly disinterested. James hadn't even finished his slides. He gathered up his things and left straight out the back door, not staying to watch the next presentation. To his surprise, he found that he was shaking.

Elena

Elena and Prasad were ushered in the back way to Garrett Dupont's office. Not until they saw Dupont himself did Elena pull down the scarf she wore over her face. Prasad had covered his face for the block leading up to YSDF headquarters, but removed it past the first door – unlike Elena, perhaps feeling that he was in good hands as soon as he was in a government building.

“Dr. Kenjik, Dr. Patel, welcome,” Dupont said, shaking their hands. For a police chief, his affect was practically warm, though his uniform and trimmed silver hair gave off a military crispness. It was well-known that while Dupont was technically the head of all YSDF activities, military, intelligence, and police, Dupont focused on intelligence and internal affairs, delegating control of military operations to General Blackwell.

Dupont gestured them to the leather seats in front of his desk. Like everything else about the man, his desk was tidy – unnervingly so, Elena thought, for surely he was in charge of a million things, and ought to have piles of paperwork spread about in all corners. “Water? Tea? Coffee?” he offered, and they shook their heads, wanting to get straight to the news.

“Actually, some water would be great,” Elena said suddenly. He smiled and gestured to an orderly, who brought her a glass and slipped out of the room. Prasad eyed her sideways, unsure if she was okay and trying

desperately to read the signs, with all the emotional fluency a research scientist could muster. She met his gaze squarely with the best confident smile she had.

Dupont templed his fingers together and rested his elbows on his desk. “The investigation, happily, was shorter than I anticipated, and should be completely wrapped up today or tomorrow. Let us begin with the damages. Five people, that we know of, have heard this rumor – five is manageable.” Dupont went on to describe receiving a tip from a professor at the YIM, who’d been asked by a student if it was true that there was a secret lab developing a fungus for general plastic breakdown. The professor genuinely wasn’t sure, but if there was a secret lab, thought that the YSDF might like to know that people were talking about it. The student had heard it from a friend, who in turn had had it from another friend, who was shamelessly bragging about his employment at said secret government lab.

“Who was it?” Elena interrupted, unable to help herself. Secrecy was a big deal to her, and she had told the techs over and over that they weren’t to share anything about their job. If the best and brightest that her lab employed couldn’t keep their damn mouths shut...

“Austin Moretti. Are you familiar?”

“Of course,” Elena said. “Our lab is small – we know them all. God *damn* it, Austin!” Beside her, Prasad made a patting gesture with his hand, as if to say, cool it! *I can have a tantrum in front of Dupont if I damn well please*, Elena glowered at him, but subsided.

“Your frustration is entirely understandable, Dr. Kenjik,” Dupont said, unruffled. “I was actually hoping you’d participate in the next phase of our talks with Mr. Moretti.”

Taken aback, visions of waterboarding flashed briefly but wildly through Elena’s mind. “Next phase?” she asked uncertainly.

“Yes. He knows that he did a Bad Thing,” the chief said, his fingers softly drumming on his desk. “But I think part of the problem may be a lack of understanding of *why* the thing he did was so bad. I do not mean to imply any mismanagement of your personnel, Doctors, but it is worth remembering that your employees are young, and do not have the same memories of events that are but history to them” – he indicated the two of them with an open hand – “let alone vivid personal experience...” – he nodded at Elena. “In other words, Mr. Moretti does not realize the potential consequences of his actions. I hesitate to ask you this, Dr. Kenjik. But I think it would be very powerful if you would explain to Mr. Moretti a little bit about your story, whatever you’re comfortable sharing. Not only would that help him understand, but it would also help us all be on the same side.

“You see,” he continued. “There is the problem of what to do next – how to discipline Mr. Moretti, and what to do with the others who have heard this rumor. If you fire Moretti, he will likely feel a grievance against you, and the lab, and may decide to retaliate by further spreading this rumor. He’s already proven himself to be a young man of

poor judgment. But keeping him on in a position with access to confidential information, when he's compromised the security of a top-secret lab, is clearly untenable. It would behoove us to come to understand that we are all on the same side, here, for Moretti to feel no grievance about the situation. We could encourage him to voluntarily resign his post, or offer to transfer him to a different lab. With the understanding, of course, that he doesn't *deserve* such good treatment from us, but that he will get it in return for his cooperation, and his silence."

Elena and Prasad nodded. Elena felt faintly indignant that Dupont was presuming to make decisions about what to do with Austin, when hiring and firing for the lab was clearly her and Prasad's responsibility, but his points all made perfect sense.

"Can I be the good cop?" Prasad said brightly, his mouth quirking.

No Prasad, you're not allowed to think this is fun!

"I'll be the only cop, the good one and the bad one," Dupont responded drily. "Dr. Kenjik will be an important personal testimonial, and you can be intimidating wallpaper. The quiet kind."

Prasad looked indignant that his humor had not been taken in kind. Elena figured most top cops had about the sense of humor of a bag of flour, and Prasad might learn that in time.

Dupont took them down the hall to a room with one-way glass. Behind the glass sat Austin, fidgeting uncomfortably at an empty table in a steel box of a room. He was remarkably pale beneath his olive Italian complexion, and as they watched, he rubbed anxiously at his forehead, pulled at his dark curls, and folded and unfolded his hands.

“Almost makes you feel sorry for him,” Prasad murmured.

“No it doesn’t,” Elena snapped. “He’s feeling anxious? Good. So am I.” Prasad smiled ruefully at her in acknowledgement of a fair point.

“Are you ready?” Dupont asked. “I’ll begin, and guide the conversation as necessary. Follow my lead. Remember that we’re not just trying to scare the boy. We’re trying to scare him, get him on our side, make him feel guilty, and cut a deal.”

Elena nodded. “Let’s get it over with.”

They filed in after Dupont. Elena studied Austin’s face as emotions played across it. He jumped when the door opened, and upon seeing Elena and Prasad, looked momentarily relieved at seeing familiar figures. Then the color drained from his face, as he remembered that these were his bosses, and that he’d broken his word to them. Elena schooled her own features, striving for blankness, or perhaps rigid solemnity. She did have plenty of sympathy for Austin, despite her words, but also a healthy fury.

“Austin Moretti,” Chief Dupont began. Austin tried to sit up straighter, arrange himself with more dignity. “I

brought Doctors Kenjik and Patel here, not to hear your testimony, but to impress upon you the gravity of the situation you've created. It struck me that you are very young, and perhaps a little historical review would be helpful." At this, Austin's heavy eyebrows drew together quizzically. Elena supposed she would be puzzled, too, if she began to get a lecture on history from the chief of the YSDF.

"What do you know about the *Plastivorium* bacteria developed in the First Enclave a decade ago?"

"Um, it didn't work?" Austin answered, unsure what the point was. When Dupont waited, he went on, his words coming easier as he talked. "It was much hyped as a solution to all the world's problems, at the time. In one of the final phases of testing they realized it was no good. Some of the byproducts created in its breakdown of some kinds of plastics made fish unable to reproduce, I think? It supposedly would've collapsed the whole ecosystem, or something. I don't know the specifics. Anyway, they decided not to release it. Everyone was really mad about it and it was a whole scandal, because it was so close to being released, and because the First Enclave didn't consult anybody else about it – they were going to make that decision for the whole world, to put this dangerous thing out into the environment. And they would've been wrong to do so."

Chief Dupont nodded. "That's basically right," he said. Elena couldn't help thinking, *wait, no! Almost right, yes, leaving out the disappearance of the researchers and their*

data in the aftermath! And it wasn't their fault – scientists can't only create solutions that have no problems. We have to come up with all the solutions, and test them appropriately. The system worked – they found out about it in the final testing! ...Yes, it was perhaps a little close for comfort... but they did catch it.

She realized they were looking at her, and she replayed the last bit of conversation in her head. Dupont had asked if she'd like to take the story from there. She cleared her throat.

“Six years ago, I was working in a lab much like this one, in a different Enclave.” She thought about whether or not to name the Enclave, couldn't decide if it mattered, but thought she'd err on the side of caution, eliminating identifying details. “I already believed that fungi could provide the cure we needed, and the world had started to agree with me following the discovery of the DeGrue fungus. The Enclave had head-hunted a few of the top fungal researchers in the country for the project. I was its assistant director.

“It was... very different, in some ways, than what we're doing now. For one thing, the Enclave believed that it should publicize its work, that by advertising its dedication to discovering a cure, it would gain powerful allies among the Enclaves, justify the existence of its walls to the Outsiders, and even be protected, to some extent, from potential warfare. So the lab, and its goals, were not secret. That turned out to be a mistake. The Enclave had really misjudged how strong people's feelings about the

Plastivorium incident were, and that those feelings weren't dying down four years after the fact. Culture in many Enclaves was becoming more and more conservative with regards to environmental modification. People felt like it was wrong to even look for a solution, because they assumed any organism we would develop to release and clean up the plastics would cause more problems than it solved. A cynical outlook, and a fatalistic one. But you can't blame them for feeling that way, I suppose." Except that she *did* blame them for being blinded by their feelings of doom and unable to look for hope, but that was beside the point.

"We, the researchers, started to be the targets of an organized campaign of harassment and intimidation meant to discourage such research from taking place. At first it was just people with signs outside our workplace, but it became so much worse. We were stalked, harassed, sent death threats. The Enclave started taking it more seriously and protecting us only after one of our students was killed. But they were under enormous political pressure from their own people and from other Enclaves to discontinue the program.

"I was very afraid. I didn't believe that the Enclave's government would protect us, once it decided to discontinue the research." Dupont's head jerked, and Elena realized that wasn't the tack he wanted her story to take. *Oh Dupont, but it'll be tricky to tell this story without blaming the government too much.* "I saw how ugly the hatred was, and I didn't think the people attacking us

would stop even if the lab stopped its activities. What's more, I didn't think we *should* stop. We were on the cusp of a breakthrough – the breakthrough that allowed our YIM lab to be as far as we are in the process today.

“I went to my supervisor, the director of the lab, and told him that we should get out – said we should take our notes and run, try to get to a new Enclave and ask for asylum. There, we could continue our research in secret. He thought that it was too soon for such drastic measures. He promised me that the gov – that we'd have protection, that we'd be safe.” Her voice caught in her throat, reliving that conversation. The last time she'd seen him in person.

“I made a copy of all our notes.” Elena's fingers brushed the outside of her pants pockets, where two lumps assured her that the data keys were still there, where she always carried them. One current copy of all the YIM lab's work, and one from her old lab – the same data she had run to Yellowstone with. “And I started to make arrangements to leave.”

She cleared her throat, the thick memories starting to form a lump that made her voice quaver. “The day I left, I had gone down to the truck yard to bribe a Convoy driver into taking me and my family away. It was a workday, so everyone else was at the lab when it was attacked. Dr. Na... my director called me, told me to run and hide. Asked if I had the notes.” *Good girl*, he had said, when she told him yes. *Now GO, and don't look back.*

“I don't know what happened to them,” she said. “It wasn't in the news that day, as we waited in hiding in the

truck yard, and of course I haven't been back. I don't know if it was civilians of the Enclave..." or *the Enclave's military*, she didn't say, leaving her sentence unfinished. Dupont narrowed his eyes at her in warning.

"I got out, with my husband – then-husband – and our teenage daughter. We rode with the Convoy to Yellowstone, and took asylum here. Yellowstone already had a well-developed fungal medicine program and was willing to carry on the hunt for a plastic removal solution, but knowing the risks of public opinion, we decided it must happen in utmost secrecy.

"I really believe in this, Austin." She leaned forward, capturing his gaze from where it lingered shamefully on the table top. "*Not* looking for a solution would be stupid, criminal, really. Despite the public's distrust of our research, we can be careful. We can get it right, and heal the world. But not if they destroy us before we get there."

Austin nodded, and said nothing. Smart boy. Elena wondered what he was thinking, if he was thinking *ohshootIdidn'tknow!* Or if he doubted it, *yesSorrythathappenedtoyoubutYellowstone'speoplewouldn'tdothat*, or if he trusted the government to protect them the way sweet, naïve, *dead* Dr. Nakamura had. Elena still boiled with the untold part of the story. She knew the Enclave's leadership had responded to the incident by pretending the fungal research lab had recklessly exceeded their mandate to work on a solution, that the government hadn't given their approval for the most recent phases of testing. They'd cast the researchers as rogue agents,

sacrificial goats to prevent public opinion from souring on their leadership. And, presumably, that meant the researchers hadn't been protected, although she had never found out what had happened to the rest of them. Dr. Nakamura's death during the attack had made the news before Elena's truck left the Enclave, and the rest of the researchers had simply been reported as detained pending investigation.

Elena had been at the YIM for over five years now, and her lack of trust in the Enclave's government hadn't faded a bit. She had been trying for years to get in contact with other labs to send out copies of her research in case anything bad happened to her here. She'd petitioned the Council for permission, emphasizing scientific cooperation and advancing the research rather than her own fears. It had been denied, repeatedly, for security reasons. She'd explained her own fears, privately, to Councilman Kramer, but he was unmoved, said that her fears were valid, and so the best course of action was for as few people to know about the lab as possible. That sharing their research would only heighten the risk they bore. And, she knew, the Councilman was also counting up the political and financial benefits of Yellowstone being the Enclave that Saved the World. Why risk a potential monopoly on heroism?

Elena had then spent countless hours coming up with other, extralegal ways to communicate with other Enclaves, but the potential consequences of getting caught always stopped her. If the lab's work were halted because

of her criminal actions, she'd have been the cause of the very thing she was trying to avoid. But she had an escape plan, and promised herself that if the tide started to turn against her again, she'd be out at the first sign of trouble. Waiting and seeing what happened certainly didn't turn out well for Dr. Nakamura.

Dupont had taken over, and his crisp words and Austin's halting ones floated over her, tugging like currents. Dupont was negotiating so skillfully, Austin couldn't have realized he was negotiating. He thought he was being reamed out, then given some compassion, then offered a generous deal. He agreed to be demoted and transferred to another lab – back to being a dishwasher, essentially. But for the low, low price of his vow of silence, no legal course of action would be pursued.

When they finally exited the building, Elena was surprised that it was nearly dark out. In the windowless rooms, she hadn't realized how much time had passed, between talking, signing endless forms, and adding their testimony to the investigation report. Beyond the dome, the sky was still orange to the west, shading to a deep and regal blue to the east.

"I thought that went rather well," Prasad said. "I can tell Austin really regretted what he did. If Dupont is half so skillful with the other rumor-mongers, it'll be well-contained."

"I sure hope so," Elena murmured.

Prasad hesitated. "I didn't mean to belittle your feelings about it, earlier," he said earnestly. "You have every reason to be afraid. And I respect your judgment."

She smiled up at him. "Thanks, Prasad. That means a lot."

"Do you want to come over for dinner? Mina's always glad to see you. And it's late, I'm sure dinner is already ready and waiting."

Elena smiled. She did love to see Mina and their two adorable small children. It hurt in a kind of delicious way, a way that made her miss when her daughter was small, and when she used to come home to a family instead of an empty studio. But feeling that she had a lot to think about tonight, she declined, thinking instead about a glass of wine and the luxury of being alone.

With a sincere reminder to call if she needed anything, Prasad strode off to his waiting golden bubble of familial bliss. Elena watched his lanky frame disappear into the evening before climbing the stairs to her dark apartment. Her dishes from this morning were still on the table, and she swept them into the sink. Opening the fridge, she found a serving of leftover soup, and decided that and an apple and some cheese would be sufficient for a late dinner. She poured herself the awaited glass of wine, and settled into the armchair by the window with her cobbled-together meal.

Thinking about her flight from the Tahoe Enclave inevitably made her feel bitter, a feeling she hated, and tried to redirect into other feelings. But it was thanks to her

that her family had gotten out, so it felt extra unfair that Noah had left her, claiming that she wasn't dedicated enough to her family. The year after they'd arrived in Yellowstone had been a hard period of readjustment. Elena had thrown herself into her work in the new lab, feeling like she owed it to Dr. Nakamura and the others to continue working for the dream they'd all shared. She had always been driven, but feeling like she might be the one person on the planet with the right information and the right training to actually arrive at a solution really upped the stakes. In her mind, she was doing this for all of humanity, but especially for their daughter Cass, and for all the other young people who had to live in this mess. It was the most family-focused way she knew how to be.

Noah's response to crisis and uncertainty had been nearly the opposite. He'd decided that they couldn't – that *Elena* couldn't – possibly be responsible for the fate of the world, when the world was clearly out to get them. His priorities were reoriented inwards. He wanted to spend his time with the family, as much time as possible, and even going to work seemed to become less about the good he could do as a doctor, and more about earning money to make sure that Cass had good opportunities. Elena's long hours at the lab were, apparently, deeply wounding to him, and showed him, so he claimed, that Elena didn't care about her family. He was focused, he kept saying, on "what really matters." Elena, of course, felt that she *was* focused on what really mattered.

They were not skilled at fighting. They'd never fought before, and didn't seem to know how to do it. How crushing, that the first time they fought was world-ending for them. They limped on for a little while, trying to repair the damages, but in the end it was less painful to separate. Elena still didn't think Noah was a bad person, but in love and in fear, they had destroyed the tenderest parts of each other. Cass, finishing college now, rarely reached out, nursing her own hurts about it. Elena knew how painful it was to have your whole world implode at such a formative age. Elena had been in her twenties during the Fall, the long accelerating slide into chaos that defined the rest of her life.

As traumatic as it was to remember their flight from Tahoe, it was the messy fallout that was most troubling. That, despite their best intentions, dealing with their trauma drove them apart rather than together. Noah had been her best friend, ally, life partner. She still missed him, despite and alongside her anger. She saw him from time to time, of course – the YIM was not so big that she could avoid it – although, ensconced in her basement lab, she usually only saw her coworkers.

Though she'd come home to be in her own thoughts, she was suddenly tired of where those thoughts had led her. She turned on the TV to scan the news for any mention of the rumors the YSDF was suppressing, and settled deeper into the armchair with a mutter and a scowl.

Elko

Elko felt like she'd been walking through a dreamscape ever since they had left Two Harbors. She had never been away from Two Harbors, and the new conditions came at the same time as Elko's knowledge of her own impending expiration date. (Her lips twisted wryly at the thought of expiring, like moldy bread.) The days were full, full of walking and all the tasks of daily life that take so much longer away from home – cooking, cleaning, acquiring food, setting up camp each night and taking it down again in the morning. Elko was tired, they both were tired, but Elko in particular felt like she was floating along in a cloud of uncertainty. She was performing the motions of living; she ate and slept and talked and walked like a living person. She had blisters and healed from them, like a living person. But to be condemned to death – she thought sometimes that she was just a future-dead-person who happened to still be walking around. What difference did any of it make? What difference did it make if she made it a hundred miles or a thousand miles, if she was just going to die? Even about her own comfort, she felt equivocal – sometimes putting in the work to make her sleeping spot comfortable, free of rocks underneath and with a folded shirt for a pillow, seemed silly. What difference did it make if she was comfortable or uncomfortable, happy or sad? She was just going to die.

Plasticosis

She knew that her detachment was understandable. She knew that she was going through something traumatic, and that she was doing it alone – yes, Rowan was very sad, and would grieve her death for a long time after Elko wasn't around to feel any kind of way about it at all. But in some things, she was alone, and felt it acutely.

One day, as they walked, Elko imagined a hundred different ways to die. In the morning, she thought about what it would've been like to die in Two Harbors. In the end, she decided it would've been horrible to watch the people she loved watch her die. Their grief, and Elko's lack of ability to do anything about it, hurt just to think about. Better that Elko was on the road. She had seen people die of the plastics before, and knew that it could be long and painful. It manifested in so many different ways; Elko didn't know what awaited her, but she knew that it would be painful. Sometimes she wondered if it would be better to get hit by a convoy truck sooner, and avoid all the suffering that awaited her. Or maybe she could choose to go a less violent way – eating a Destroying Angel mushroom, or buying some pain pills from the Convoy Raiders and taking too many of them. Then she could carry them with her and decide whenever she wanted to be done. She could walk off into the forest and die alone, nestled at the base of a tree. She'd leave a note for Rowan not to come after her so that she wouldn't have to find Elko's body.

She didn't have a lot of hope, but some days it was there – a faint glimmer, at least. Some days, she said to

herself *but what if! What if they will take me into the Enclave and fix me. Maybe it is possible. Maybe they'll have compassion. Maybe they'll do it for their own egos, or to prove their newest medical technology. Maybe we can bribe them.* She thought it was unlikely, but she knew that stepping in front of a truck today would bring her slim chances of success down to zero. Logically, it seemed worth hanging on. Emotionally, she was terrified, and didn't want to suffer needlessly.

Maybe they would get as far as the Enclave. Maybe they wouldn't agree to treat her, but maybe Elko could make a difference with the very act of having walked all that way. She knew there were often activists by the Enclaves who pushed for resource sharing, who protested, who tried to get in. Maybe Elko could lead the charge. She pictured herself atop a hand-made ladder with a megaphone, with hundreds of people around her. They were in front of the gate of the Enclave. Elko didn't know what that would look like, but imagined it as an old-fashioned castle's parapet, with all the Enclavers lined up above them, solemn-faced, listening. Elko preached to them about what it was like outside the walls, about how it was their duty to share the water, share the technology, share their uncontaminated food. She spoke for the activists and the Enclavers both, trying to convince everyone that there was a future to believe in. *I'm dying of the plastics*, Elko said in her daydream. *This is no life to live, hear me out!* But the Enclaver citizens turned away, and their soldiers began to fire on the crowd. Elko, the

spokesperson, was one of the first people shot down. She tumbled from the ladder, and hit the ground, hard. She tasted blood in her mouth. Looking up, her vision blurred, she saw the crowd of people break through the wall into the Enclave. She smiled to herself, knowing that she had played the perfect role. She had died because someone had to, but it wasn't for nothing, and now the people had water, and food, and life.

Elko drifted into imagining other ways to die. It was easy, out here, to be afraid of the forest. There were so many unfamiliar sounds in the trees that spooked her. She didn't even know what animals they should be afraid of. How nice it would be, she thought, to get to have a heroic death! What if a mountain lion attacked them? Elko, as the one who already had to die, would throw herself at it, wrestle with it fearlessly, confident in her choice. She'd yell at Rowan and KT to get away, and when they wouldn't, she'd yell it again, more sternly. They would listen then, snapped back to reality by the seriousness of her voice and the desperate circumstances. They'd run, and Elko, having distracted the mountain lion long enough, would die of her mauling peacefully under the setting sun. In her mind's eye, music swelled dramatically upon this scene, a crescendo of strings as she drew her last breath.

Or perhaps it would be people. More likely, now that she thought about it. Each rustle she heard in the trees could well be someone dangerous. A stray Convoy Raider, desperate and armed. Or a convoy driver, ousted from his truck by raiders, furious, afraid, and also armed. Elko

decided it would be the convoy driver, because he made a less sympathetic villain, and tried to picture what an Enclaver even looked like. Probably like the rest of them, but taller and better fed. Her imaginary Enclave truck driver jumped out at them from the bushes, already shooting. Elko unhesitatingly launched herself at him, grabbing for his hand with the pistol in it. Their bodies collided and hit the cold earth beneath them. A shot rang out. Elko looked down and saw red spreading from her belly. She smiled. *Death was already mine*, she said to the driver. *What belongs to me shall come to me*. She pitched forward at him and knocked him over again, ripped the gun from his hands with newfound strength, and shot him in the face. Then, she lay down in bloody moss. In her mind's eye, Rowan came to her and stroked her face, whispering loving words and crying, until she died.

That vision led to another, more similar to Elko's earlier idea of dying alone with her mushrooms or pain pills. But she liked the vision she'd had of getting to die with Rowan by her side. Maybe she could have that. Maybe it would be okay to explain to Rowan that she didn't want to suffer anymore, to ask Rowan to come with her. Maybe Rowan would understand. Elko could eat the mushroom in a setting of her choice - yes, definitely on green, cushy moss, under a white pine, with open sky beyond. She'd be wrapped up warm in blankets. They'd thank each other for everything, share all the last words they needed to share, and then Elko would eat her poison. Rowan would promise her, *I'll be here until the very end*,

and would hold her hands, pet her hair, tell her over and over again how much she's loved, until the world, the mossy tree, and Rowan, would fade to black. Elko could usually picture her own death without too much emotion, and did so just about every day, but her mental image of Rowan crying as she lay dying in the moss was too much. Tears flowed from her eyes, and a small sound came out of her throat, surprising her.

Rowan looked back at her. She came to a sudden stop, seeing Elko's tears, and held out her arms. Elko walked into them and they stood for awhile. Elko cried until Rowan cried too, which made Elko stop crying and try to comfort Rowan. Rowan called her out on it and they laughed together at the ridiculousness of everything, of life and death and crying and walking on a long crumbling highway through the wilderness.

"Where's KT?" Elko said finally. "We should keep going."

A long shadow detached itself from a tree up ahead. It was nearly twilight, and KT's still posture and brown and green leathers helped her blend in. Elko felt awkward and embarrassed at KT's presence – she had thought that their guide had gone up ahead. But when KT approached them, her face was solemn, without its usual sardonic expression. She looked like she had seen something sacred, and was, herself, unsure how to proceed. She opened her mouth, and then closed it again.

"What?" Rowan asked.

“You two are such grace,” KT blurted. “You love so fiercely. Unapologetically. I’ve never met anyone quite like you.” With that, embarrassed, she turned and led the way, carrying on their journey up the darkening road.

Rowan

They arrived at Leech Lake in the afternoon on the 7th day. Rowan felt that they had done well, that despite KT's occasional mockery, that they had impressed her with their quick learning, and if not with their stamina, at least with their emotional fortitude to continue anyway. They had also taken a lot of breaks, for KT's idea of how much they needed to know to survive in the woods was expansive. They learned to name the plants they walked past, and what properties they had for food and medicine. Elko already knew some of these and was good at it, but Rowan struggled to learn to recognize them. KT would say, "what's this one?" and Elko would look expectantly at Rowan, hopefully, as she already knew the answer. Rowan would look it up and down, notice the short needles, and venture a nervous guess. "Balsam fir?" KT looked exasperated, while Elko looked encouraging and said, "No, this one's black spruce. Remember how the bark is all dark and scaly?" Rowan muttered that it didn't matter, since you don't eat them anyway, but was glad that at least Elko seemed to be on top of recognizing their slow green plant friends.

KT refused to accept that anything didn't matter. She said that you should know and be aware of everything around you, and that the benefits are there. "You'll start to notice why it matters once you notice what everything is," she said. "You'll know what to look for – when I see

kinnikinnick and reindeer lichen in the summer, I look for blueberries. When I see dead deciduous trees, I look for mushrooms. It's all related. You have to notice everything. And you have to notice everything *so hard* that you know when something isn't right – when the forest is too quiet, or when something just feels off. It'll save your life."

She grinned, hearing a loud chattering call in the forest. "For example, tell me, what kind of bird is that?" She had been quizzing them on bird calls, another exercise whose usefulness Rowan frankly doubted. "Chickadee?" Rowan guessed. It often seemed to be the right answer, if only because there were so many.

KT laughed uproariously. "It's a red squirrel."

Rowan frowned, feeling both tricked and shamed, and shot an evil glance at Elko when Elko laughed too. Elko looked at her, seeming to say with her eyes a gentle *get over yourself and let her have this one*. Rowan just felt like she was trying to learn a language she didn't speak just by watching someone else speak it. She knew that the pieces fit together for KT, but they didn't – yet – fit together for Rowan.

But other things KT had taught them, Rowan could only be grateful for. She had refused to teach them anything about her bow, saying that would take too much time, and had instead gifted them a roll of wire and shown them how to make snares. Rowan had been shown the basics back in Meadowlands, and enjoyed meditatively twisting wire circles. The "imagine you're a bunny" part of the instructions Rowan didn't quite understand, but it

seemed KT had a sense for where rabbits would run in the forest. Then, of course, they learned how to clean it, a process that remained sticky and distasteful, but much easier than the first time Rowan and Elko had tried it.

It had been at night around small campfires that KT's abundant instruction tapered off, and that Rowan felt that they were getting to know each other, perhaps even becoming friends. KT was guarded and prickly, sometimes outright mean, but she seemed to enjoy their company. She asked a lot of questions about Two Harbors, as she didn't understand how their community operated in a way that didn't teach or require everyone to have the wilderness skills that KT considered to be normal life skills. KT asked about their jobs, their community, their agricultural systems, and their relationship to the Convoy Raiders. KT would answer questions about her community and her job within it, and often dodge more personal questions with humor and misdirection. KT's presence had at first put Rowan on edge – her sharp tongue and her judgment of their incompetence made Rowan feel defensive. By now, Rowan didn't exactly feel at ease with her either, but had grown less wary. Sometimes they laughed together, and that was a medicine that healed many small affronts. And KT had moments, especially when she was in control as their teacher of wilderness skills, where she was kind, generous, and encouraging – as if she'd forgotten, in a moment of comfort, to be so prickly.

As they neared Leech Lake, KT explained to them that a Native nation lived on the shores of the enormous lake, a

group of Ojibwe people. Meadowlands, KT's community, owed much to them. Thirty-odd years ago, just after the Fall, some elders of what would eventually be Meadowlands had visited their friends of Leech Lake and begged them to share their knowledge of how to live off the land. The Leech Lake Ojibwe had cradled this centuries-old knowledge through the long 19th and 20th centuries in which White settlers had attempted to beat their knowledge and language and culture out of them and assimilate them into White society. Much had been lost, but much remained. And once the Fall began, the people of Leech Lake were glad to remember how to harvest wild rice, tap maple sugar, trap, fish, and hunt. The elders of Meadowlands had lived with them for a year thereafter, and then had gone off to relieve their generous hosts of the burden of mouths and find some unoccupied land for their own community. Hence Meadowlands was born, and from it, KT's knowledge of the forest. Though Two Harbors had hunters and foragers as well, Elko and Rowan's jobs hadn't mingled much with them, so they hadn't absorbed those skills. Rowan suspected that their knowledge was less holistic than KT's – KT seemed to breathe in information from the forest, and used their surroundings to lead them to food and water, to predict the weather, and to navigate.

KT had gone to visit and trade with Leech Lake a few times, and was clearly fond of the people there, both personally and because of their status as the theological and pedagogical ancestors of her community. Rowan

wondered if KT might be part Ojibwe, herself. Her green eyes would be unusual for a Native, but her skin was dark for a White person, and her tall cheekbones and thick dark hair could be a sign of Native blood. KT hadn't said how old she was either, or anything about her parents, but Rowan suspected she was a bit older than Rowan and Elko's 24 years. She could be a child conceived in the year of the Meadowlands-Leech Lake cohabitation.

"Do they speak English?" Rowan had asked.

KT raised her eyebrows. "Of course they do, silly," she said. "They trade with the convoy raiders and with surrounding communities too. They aren't totally isolated – and they had regular jobs and stuff before the Fall, they all spoke English."

"I meant, do they also speak Ojibwe?" Rowan amended, although truthfully she hadn't known if they would speak English, though it seemed obvious in retrospect.

"Yeah, many of them do. It had almost died out before the Fall – there were only a few elders then who still spoke it fluently. But they all felt that it was important to keep it, so the adults tried hard to learn, and encouraged the kids to speak it and pick it up from the elders. Now those elders are gone, and it's the young adults and their kids who speak it fluently, and their parents, the elders, who are left behind. But they speak both. You'll see – they really switch back and forth a lot."

A creek announced itself with a soft burbling. The last few water sources they'd passed had been ponds of

questionable quality and they had not refilled, so they were all glad to hear the sound of running water. They had left crumbling highway 200-W for a well-traveled foot path that KT said would bring them right to the Leech Lake settlement, and the creek ran right through it, though a few large stones offered a path to step across the water. KT stopped abruptly, and Rowan almost ran into her.

“What?” she asked, peering around KT. KT shushed her, and continued to stand still, listening. Rowan tried to listen too, but heard only the trickle of the creek and the wind in the trees.

KT finally said quietly, “I don’t know what, but something is wrong,” and stepped aside. Rowan and Elko both gasped. Half in the creek, piled up on the inside bank of a little turn, was a pile of plastic trash. Old, falling apart, surely toxic plastic bags, what looked like a formerly blue synthetic sweatshirt, and even a couple plastic bottles. They stood in silence, staring at the mess, unsure how to react. Rowan’s heart pounded, telling her *run away, run away*.

Forty years ago, people had started to discover that plastics were a problem. They knew that people were getting sick. They knew that plastic was in everyone’s blood, everyone’s water, everyone’s food. And so began a purge, people trying to remove plastic from their environments wherever they could. Back then, there were state and federal governments, so the state of Minnesota, and the federal government of the United States, had a plan to support the transition to a non-plastic-based society.

Plasticosis

They created huge underground landfills for the compacted plastics, lined with stone to prevent them from leaking further into the groundwater. Back then there were lots of trucks and fuel, trucks that drove around collecting plastic, distributing new tools and clothing and dishes and all kinds of things, made out of wood, stone, cotton and natural fibers. It was a huge task, and the government wasn't up to it.

Plastic wasn't the only thing happening, of course. The history was sketchy to Rowan and Elko, much more real to their parents' generation, but the gist of it was a battle between the federal government and the states that tore the nation apart. An autocratic president had taken over, causing one coalition of states to pass a flurry of legislation to strengthen their own power, essentially secession in all but name. When four years later a progressive candidate won back the presidency, the opposing coalition of states followed suit, declaring themselves all kinds of new powers and independence from D.C. The discovery that plastics were making everyone ill was the cherry on top of an already-brewing collapse and civil war. People's fear bred yet deeper problems: bank runs soon caused the greatest market collapse of all time, a dubious achievement that finally dwarfed Black Tuesday of the Great Depression.

People were desperate, afraid, violent. They fought over the new resources, fought over access to water, and thus, the Fall began. Trust eroded, so did institutions, and the government itself. This history, all children learned

from their parents and their communities, and from school if they had school. The adults who had known the time before the Fall seemed to think it of utmost importance to explain the way things used to be, how good it was before, as if in hopes that speaking of it could bring it back in the future. Elko and Rowan had never known a time before the Fall, and to them, this was the new reality of the world. They didn't think those good times were ever going to come back.

In any case, those early days had gotten rid of a lot of plastic trash. It was rare, now, to see plastic sitting in water like this, because everyone knew that was terrible for drinking, terrible for your health. And it would certainly seem odd if the Leech Lake Ojibwe allowed plastic to sit in a creek near their home like this. Plastic did sometimes show up out of nowhere, washed downstream from who-knows-where by high waters, but a community like the Ojibwe would surely have removed it quickly.

"Should we... take it out?" Elko asked nervously. "Like, pull it out with a stick?"

KT hesitated, then nodded her assent. "I wish we had gloves and masks and stuff, but I guess that'll have to do."

Elko grabbed a long sturdy stick and stuck it into the pile, trying to rake it up onshore away from the water. The plastic bags disintegrated on impact, crumbling into tiny pieces that washed downstream. Rowan watched, horrified, unable to do anything to stop them.

KT grabbed another stick. "I think it's unavoidable," she said. "They're just going to disintegrate, whether it's

now or later. It's better to just get this out as best we can." She and Elko bent to the task together, fishing with their sticks to pull the sweatshirt and bottles up onto the bank.

"We don't have anywhere to put it," Rowan said helplessly. "This isn't actually better – when it rains and the creek floods, it'll just go back in. Even if we drag it further back into the forest, it'll end up in the water eventually."

KT's face was grim. "You're right," she said. "But this is the best we can do. I'd rather take it out and make the water better for a month until it floods than do nothing. Seeing all this sitting here, I couldn't just leave it." Rowan thought of the fat flakes of plastic from the old bags that had floated downstream and thought that they had probably only made it worse, even in the short term, but said nothing.

"Be on alert," KT said. "I am afraid of what we will find – something must have happened to the Ojibwe."

They continued to follow the path, and were as quiet as they could be, though Rowan was sure that her stealth did not measure up to KT's standards. KT beckoned them off the path when it became wider and more beaten down, and drifted through the forest, stopping often to listen. Eventually the forest cleared out in front of them. KT whispered to Elko and Rowan to get down and hide, though the scrub was thin as it was still spring. They watched apprehensively as KT wormed her way up to the edge of the forest.

She turned and waved them up. They tried to copy her movements, keeping low and moving slowly so as not to make too many sounds breaking through the brush.

“There’s one dwelling just there,” KT whispered, pointing to a cabin, barely more than a shack in front of them. “It’s far enough from the others. I think we should go in. Even if someone were to shout, I don’t think the others would hear unless they walked past.”

“*That’s* your plan?” Rowan asked incredulously. She almost forgot to whisper. “Just... go in, and see what’s up? You don’t know what’s in there! They could all be dead of a disease and you’ll find only rotting bodies. They could’ve all been killed and we’ll find their murderers. They could still be here and you’ll get killed, surprising them, if they don’t recognize you!”

KT smiled grimly. “You got a better plan?”

Rowan thought for a moment, but felt out of her element. Surely if she had more time, she could come up with a better one, but the problem was, she just wasn’t quick enough on her feet for this lifestyle. She missed the slower problem-solving days of the water treatment plant in Two Harbors.

KT took her silent pause for a no. “Stay behind me and cover my back,” she instructed. “Hold your knives at the ready, and try to look intimidating. Let me do the talking.” And before Rowan could argue, KT ran in a crouch for the door of the shack, and Elko and Rowan found themselves following on her heels. Rowan didn’t know whether she

was unwilling to leave KT unprotected, or simply afraid to be left alone without their guide.

By the time Rowan came in the door on Elko's heels, KT already sat on top of a stocky White man, her knife at his throat. Rowan regretted having missed that takedown, having only heard a thump and a soft grunt. They were in a sparsely furnished living room with a lit woodstove that provided dim light and heat.

"Don't cry out," KT warned, "or I won't hesitate to cut your throat and run." The man paled. "Understand?" KT snarled, leaning her face close to his. He nodded. "Where are the Leech Lake Ojibwe? Who are you, and what have you done with them?" she demanded.

"We didn't do nothin!" the man said quickly. "I swear it! They left, they went north. We just moved in after they were already gone. We ain't no criminals. Just tryin' to live, like everybody else."

KT frowned. "I find that to be an unlikely story," she said coldly.

"I swear it!" the man repeated. "We're just a coupla families from Bemidji. We used to trade with the Indians. They told us they were headed north. They talked about a big lake up north that they thought might be cleaner. The fish around here were making them sick, and they couldn't eat them anymore. And the beaver. There are fewer deer now, too. It was just getting too hard, and they decided to go. There were..." he hesitated, "some fights breakin' out in Bemidji, so we thought we'd be better off leavin' town, coming out here. The Ojibwe seemed to do well enough

out here, and aren't as many, so we thought we could make it work. We are just usin' what they left behind, I swear."

KT looked at Elko and Rowan, and Rowan realized with surprise that she was seeking their opinion.

"Could be," Elko said. "A plausible story."

"I would be surprised if they left voluntarily," KT said. "They'd been here since before Minnesota was even a state. But if they were being threatened, say, if Bemidji was raiding them for supplies or something..." she glared balefully at her captive.

He shook his head. "I ain't never do nothin'," he whispered pitifully, closing his eyes and turning his head as if expecting to be struck.

KT sighed. "Well, I guess this is a mystery for later. You might be lying to me, and if I ever discover that you and your people killed them, I'll come back and kill you. That's a promise." The man cringed, if it was possible, even more, looking like he wished he could disappear into the floor. "Can your people resupply us?" KT continued, abruptly changing course. "We're traveling west and need some more food staples. We have some goods and labor to trade." The man's eyes widened, and he looked up at her, truly astonished and speechless. Rowan almost laughed, and sympathized with his whiplash.

"Well?" KT prompted. She still sat on his chest, and though her knife was not right next to his throat anymore, it hadn't been put away either.

"I guess so," he said finally, perhaps feeling that a refusal was impossible. "Carry on into the village and see.

Plasticosis

It depends on what you got. We're barely making it ourselves."

"Oh no," KT said, standing up and hauling him up by the front of his shirt. "You're gonna walk in there with us, to make sure they don't shoot us. Remember, we're friends now – you gotta look more comfortable than that."

Elko tried to smother a laugh at that, letting out a snort. It did much to relieve the tension – even their hostage looked relieved.

To their astonishment, the people currently inhabiting the Leech Lake settlement seemed to care little about contamination. The first sign was that they didn't want to trade for filters. Filters break, and in many places were a trade good so commonly desired that they could be used almost as currency. Instead, the people accepted with joy some of Rowan's stock of batteries. Despite their poverty, it appeared they had some devices that required them – perhaps 2-way radios, or flashlights. Many devices had become useless since the failure of the electrical grid, so anything that had a plug before the Fall had long since become trash or reconfigured to work on batteries. No one was making new devices, but some of the old ones lasted a very long time if you took care of them. Elko and Rowan's Harmony House had had a cherished CD player that had been reconfigured for batteries, so they could play music for special occasions. Thinking of their house music

collection, Rowan smiled, and felt that she understood the excitement hidden in the eyes of their new trade partners.

They met with the people in a grassy flat area in the middle of the village, a place that felt sort of like a town square or a gathering place. As was customary for trading, some gifts of food and water were expected and normal to ensure good relationships and smooth over any tensions. First they brought out some wild rice cakes, which were quite good and sweet. But then they were brought cups of water – *plastic* cups of water. A woman came up holding cups and a pitcher, poured water into the first cup and tried to pass it to Elko. Elko froze, unsure what to do, and not wanting to touch the cup.

“For you, hun,” the woman prompted, holding it out insistently.

Elko hesitated. “Um... it’s plastic,” she managed uncertainly.

The woman laughed. “Oh! I heard people from some places avoid it. How funny. It’s a myth, you know. This hard kind of plastic –” she tapped the cup illustratively, “-- is not the kind that makes you sick. A lot of people think that, but it’s not so. It’s only plastic in clothes and PFAS in pipes and skillets and stuff that makes the water bad.”

At this, Rowan was incredulous. “How could you possibly think that?” she said scornfully. “I used to work in water treatment, and I went to school until I was 16! We can’t possibly know what kinds of plastic make us sick and which ones don’t, because the plastic is already everywhere. That’s a variable we can’t isolate!” Rowan

was well aware that their community's teaching – to never touch any kind of plastic – might be excessively cautious, but the fact was that they didn't have the tools to tell what was harmful and what wasn't, so an abundance of caution wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

The woman looked affronted. "Oh, pardon me, I didn't know we had a big science lady over here," she said mockingly. Rowan blushed, angry.

Gentle Elko, always trying to diffuse tensions, said, "I'd love to hear why hard plastics are okay. We'd never heard that before."

While the woman explained her reasoning, KT caught Rowan's eye and pointed to their packs. At first Rowan didn't understand, but then KT tapped the empty canteen in its side pocket, and Rowan understood. They didn't have much choice – they needed water, and they would probably have to get it from here anyway. They could filter it, of course, but they knew the filters had their limitations. Even with a filter, they always tried to start from the best source possible. Drinking this water, even filtered, felt like poisoning themselves.

Rowan fetched the filter from her pack, and waited until the woman finished talking at Elko. "Do you mind?" she asked. "We'd happily accept your water, but I would like to filter it. I could filter some for you all, too, if you'd like."

The woman waved her hand dismissively of the offer, but seemed to not mind the appearance of their filter. Rowan stared at the plastic pitcher, unsure what to do.

Normally, she used a bowl or a cup to scoop water into the top of her filter, and let the cleaned water run out the bottom into the canteen. The top of the pitcher was too narrow to allow for scooping, and she didn't want to pick it up and pour it. She had been taught to never, ever touch plastic if she could help it, and even knowing that this one time probably wouldn't matter, it was a hard taboo to break.

Elko took a deep breath and grabbed the pitcher, pouring it into the filter Rowan held. She met Rowan's eyes. She had a set smile on her face, but her eyes were grim. It made Rowan feel terrible inside when she looked like that – when she knew that Elko was thinking about her own death, and trying to act normal. Elko had grabbed the pitcher to spare Rowan the contact. Which, Rowan could not deny, was only practical, given the circumstances, but it didn't make her feel any better. They finished filling their canteens in an awkward silence.

“To all of our health,” Elko said once everyone had water, raising her canteen in a toast. “And to our fruitful trading.” Everyone raised their plastic glasses, and Elko, KT, and Rowan raised their canteens and drank.

The rest of their resupply went quickly. They did not want to linger, and their hosts clearly did not trust them either. They came away with refills of water, some wild rice, dry pasta, jerky, and dried fruit. It wasn't enough to live on for a week on its own, but with the supplement of trapping, it should tide them over. Rowan reminded herself that they'd be on their own for trapping, after KT turned

back home. She hoped their lessons had been enough, but felt anxious that they wouldn't have KT's expertise or enough dry goods to fall back on if they failed. She had forgotten about KT's impending departure while they traded, and wondered belatedly if they would get to keep all the goods, or if KT would need some for her journey back to Meadowlands.

After some stilted goodbyes, they turned to leave, heading westward out of the village. This was not the way they had come, and as they left, they walked past a strange contraption. A giant blue tarp hung loosely in between two houses. It had a hole in the middle, and a large barrel under the hole. Rowan thought it looked like a rainwater collection system, but headed over to take a closer look.

"Jeeeesus," she said. "The tarp is plastic too." She pointed out where the tarp was worn along the edges, had little bits of plastic coming off it, and probably being washed straight down into the barrel every time it rained. "Do you think this is what they're drinking?"

KT nodded solemnly. "Yeah, I do. I bet this is what *we're* drinking now, too."

Elko swore softly. They were silent until they reached the edge of the village and headed back out on the path. They walked in silence for a long while, all shaken by the encounter and trying to reorient themselves.

"KT, do you want to camp with us one more night before you head back?" Elko asked. "I know we were hoping to stay with your friends tonight."

KT didn't answer for a long moment, and Rowan thought that maybe she was going to say no, and was all ready to feel hurt about it. But at last she said "Listen, Elko, Rowan. It's dangerous out here. Trust me, I know, and I've seen a lot of the shit that happens. I thought your mission to Yellowstone was a fool's errand at first – and I kind of still do. But now I've started to teach you, and I care about you, and I don't think you should go on your own. You don't know enough, yet. I... I don't know if you'd rather be alone together, but I think you need me if you have any hope of making it."

"Are you offering to come with us?" Elko asked.

"I am," KT said. "At least for now, until you know more. I'm sorry if you don't want me to come, but it would be foolish of you to turn down a guide like me."

Elko and Rowan shared a glance. "Are you kidding me?" Elko said. "We'd be so happy if you came with us! And so grateful! It was too big a favor, I didn't dare ask if you would come with us!"

Odd, Rowan thought, *that she assumed we might not want her with us. We're clearly much better off with her.* Rowan's anxiety at being left alone without their guide abated, her fears of not finding food and of the other dangers around them. And yet – she was still wary in KT's presence, and in some way resented the intrusion on her precious, limited time with Elko. Steeling herself for more of KT's unpredictable company, sometimes soft and sometimes sharp, was a different kind of anxiety. Rowan hoped it would get easier.

James

James startled up from a sound sleep, unsure what had woken him. He had dreamed, he thought for a moment, of people surrounding him – of men in black clothes and masks.

“Get up,” one of them said, and James’s body recoiled back into his headboard with a bang. He was not dreaming. He got up, slowly, his hands raised to show that he had no intention of fighting.

The lights were still off, but he could see well enough. There were four of them, all men he thought, and they were very well-covered – unidentifiable. He did not see any weapons, but he didn’t have one either. He wasn’t an athlete in any way and expected he would lose a sprint or a fistfight. His first instinct had been to comply, and he decided that was the right choice.

“Come,” the man who had first spoken said, and turned towards the doorway. Two men moved to flank James, and the last moved to walk behind him. He walked in the middle of the pack out the door of his dorm room. They closed it behind them, and James wondered how they had gotten in. He was sure he’d locked it. He was marched down the hall, down the stairs, and out through the lobby. There was normally a security officer in the lobby at night, and on the stairs James had prepared himself to cry out for help, but the lobby was empty and dark. He craned his head to look at the security camera. He saw the blinking

red light, but couldn't see the lens in the dimness to see if it was covered.

They walked for a ways, and James had time to think. It was obvious to him that this kidnapping was about his father, and political intrigue of the Council. It was less obvious to him why, or what they wanted. Plenty of people wanted his father unseated from his position of influence. What would they gain by kidnapping his son? Or murdering him? Wouldn't that only provoke public sympathy for Councilman Kramer? So maybe they weren't planning on keeping him or killing him. Did they think he had information? But if James were to share any information with them, and then went to the police, any future usage of that information would surely reveal the perpetrator. Seemed like a bad strategy.

They were headed towards the hospital and clinics, strangely. The path James walked, every single day – it felt surreal to be going through the same motions as if he were still just in a bad stress dream about failing exams (and having scary men in black clothing beat him up for it?). He was not, he reminded himself, dreaming. He wondered again whether he was going to die, unnerved by not being able to figure out the motives of his assailants.

Perhaps, he wondered, they were going to try to stage a scandal that would hurt his father. Kill James with opioids and make it look like an overdose? Like he was stealing from work? Stage a suicide? Or perhaps make it look like James had tampered with grades, or experiments, or medical records, and then leave him alive – a live,

dishonored son, less sympathetic than a corpse. James wasn't sure whether that was better or worse.

They entered the building, right through the front door. James was impressed, once again, at the confidence of these men. Either they were incredibly stupid, or they had control over every security system between his dorm room and... wherever they were going. Once again, their footsteps traced a familiar path, until at last they entered the Decontamination Clinic. At his back, the door clanged shut, and someone turned the lights on. The bright white hospital lighting hurt, and for a moment James could see nothing at all. Fear overtook him then, a wave of adrenaline and nausea, convinced that he was going to be struck down in his moment of blindness. But then, blinking, he could see a little, and none of the men around him had moved.

There was, however, an addition to the party. Sitting on a cot before him was a small, middle-aged woman. Her features were white, but her skin was deeply tanned, with premature sunspots and wrinkles around her eyes. Her hair was gray, streaked with dark brown. She looked up at James, intently searching his gaze. He stared back, suddenly self-conscious, aware that he was wearing a stained cotton T-shirt and pajama pants, and that his feet were bare. But she didn't seem to be looking at what he was wearing. Her gaze was so piercing, James wanted desperately to look away, but felt like he couldn't.

"Hello," she said finally, in a hoarse voice. She cleared her throat. "My name is Jan. I have a family, I have a job, I

have hopes and dreams in life, and I'm really hoping you'll see me as the whole person that I am. Because I am sick with the plastics, and you, James, are my only hope."

In his confusion, James could only continue to stare, while his brain caught up. This *wasn't* a political ploy about his father. *Or was it? Shouldn't count it out yet*, he thought.

"You want me to... decontaminate you?" he ventured hesitantly. She nodded.

Why am I your only hope? he thought. *All you gotta do is come during regular business hours... Oh! She's not a citizen. She's Unclean – a Foreigner –* he corrected himself, but then amended – *well, still Unclean though. That's why she's here.*

How odd that he hadn't known immediately that she was a Foreigner. There were the obvious signs – she was weathered, leathery almost, as if she'd lived a lot of her life outside. But so did many poorer citizens of the Enclave – the farmers and the Convoy workers, for two. James supposed he hadn't really ever seen Foreigners before, but he'd always assumed he would recognize them on sight, that they'd look, well, dirtier? Sicker? Different-er? Or maybe she wasn't a Foreigner. She could be a citizen of Yellowstone who had gone out unauthorized, to do... well, something. Black market trading? James couldn't think of many reasons an Enclaver would leave for the dangerous, plasticky wilderness.

Jan reached out slowly, as if trying not to alarm him, and grasped his hand. She pulled it closer to her, and

James, uncomprehending, had to step forward. She put his hand on her belly and pushed in, until he felt the tumors within. He recoiled instinctively, but she caught his hand again. This time, she just held it. James imagined plastics crawling their way into his skin from her hand, but didn't move.

"James," she said. He wondered how she knew his name. "You like your patients, don't you. You empathize with them. That's good, for a doctor. A lot of them lose that empathy, and a lot of them don't start with much. You can imagine being in your patients' shoes, can't you?"

James nodded numbly. He stared at their clasped hands, having managed finally to unglue his gaze from her face.

"You can imagine being me," she added softly. He could. He could imagine it all too well. Feeling unwell. Pushing on his stomach one day and discovering plastic tumors. If she was a Foreigner, then she would've known there was nothing to be done. She would wait around helplessly to die, getting sicker and sicker. She had a family, she had said. Having children would make it so much worse. He was young and healthy, and it would feel like the biggest tragedy to die, but even worse if he had young kids. Horrible to subject them to watching their dad sicken and die, and then be fatherless – motherless, he corrected himself, kicking himself out of his imagining it was him, and focusing back on Jan.

"I'm not a doctor," James told her. "I'm not certified to do the procedures you need. What's more, you need more

than just blood filtration. You actually need three procedures, which means you'd need to come back two more times." He hesitated, looking around at the silent, black-clad men around them. "It seems like that might be an issue – this must have been a major effort to get you in here."

One of them – James thought it was the one who had spoken before – stepped forward. "Don't worry about that, James, that's our job. We'll make it happen. Your job is to do the procedures."

"Who is she to you?" James whispered. It was odd, he felt, that so many people would organize to take care of this one Unclean, when there were thousands of Unclean in the Fallen lands – maybe hundreds of thousands – who would die of the plastics.

"No more questions," he said gruffly. Jan made a sound of protest and began to speak, but he cut her off. "Nothing that endangers us, Jan. He already knows too much, and we don't know if we can trust him."

"I am loved," Jan said, finally. "Just like you are, by your family and friends. Isn't that enough?"

James acquiesced. "I'm still not a doctor," he said.

"But you can do it, can't you?" Jan asked. For the first time, he saw a hint of uncertainty in her face. Her eyes plead for him to answer affirmatively.

"I would be kicked out of school. I would lose everything – my future career," he answered, although at this point he knew his protests were growing weaker. What was his career, next to a life? He was already rehearsing

the steps, preparing to begin administering the DeGrue treatment. He couldn't possibly turn her away.

"You would be a whole lot worse than kicked out of school," the man snorted. "What we are doing is extremely illegal, and you are aiding and abetting. Which is why you must keep silent at all costs, for your own good." He gestured to the men around him, threateningly. "Among other reasons."

"Do I have a choice?" James asked. "If I said no, what would happen then?"

Jan and Head Honcho Man exchanged glances. James wondered if they disagreed. But Jan was the one who answered. "Yes," she said. "Helping us should be a free choice. We'd have to come to an arrangement about your silence. But yes, you could choose to walk right back out that door and to your bed."

"If we couldn't come to an arrangement about your silence," the man added darkly, "you would disappear." He paused. "Your body, that is."

"Yes, I understood the first two times, thank you," James said drily. Now that Jan was a person to him, he was beginning to lose the edge of fear. His hands still trembled, but at least his voice sounded more confident now. "I don't have my work badge, or my keys. Can you get me into the supply closet, and the cold room?"

A brilliant smile burst from Jan's face, and she gave a little "whoop!" and stood up and hugged James. He stiffened, at first, and she flinched away from his flinch, but then he remembered he would have to decontaminate

himself anyway, and he gave her a conservative return squeeze around the shoulders.

He got to work. The men were willing to help, to hold things and fetch things. They needed very specific instructions, and had clearly never done this before, but James couldn't fault them for not being lab techs. He started with imaging, to see where the plastics had accumulated, and to determine the dosing. Each plastic mass would have some DeGrue fungus injected into it, a larger dose for a larger mass and a smaller dose for the smaller ones.

Working at the Decontamination Clinic, James had only seen this entire procedure done a few times. The vast majority of patients were Convoy workers who had been outside for a couple weeks, and just needed dialysis to filter out particulates, but had no masses. They did always check incoming Convoy workers for masses, so James was practiced at imaging, but most had none. Over time, though, Convoy workers could develop masses. It was uncommon, because being a Convoyer was dangerous work – they were more likely to die in a raid than they were to work long enough to develop masses. But when they did, masses were treatable, and even if the Enclave couldn't protect them from death outside its walls, they could protect them from the plastics once they came home.

Once, an entire group of Convoyers had stumbled back after months in the wilderness. A raid gone horribly wrong. The survivors of the crew had abandoned their trucks entirely to the Unclean raiders and set out on foot to

get home. They had passed themselves off as regular Unclean to people they encountered, somehow managed to feed themselves, and showed up back at Yellowstone looking bedraggled and much the worse for wear. It was the Convoy story of the year, and the men, once decontaminated, were celebrated as heroes. Out of the 20-odd men, three of them had small masses beginning to form – much smaller than Jan's. That had been James's first and second full DeGrue procedures, but merely as an assistant. He was grateful for the experience, otherwise he truly wouldn't be able to help Jan – not with only book learning about it.

The images showed plastic accumulation in the liver – the largest mass was low in the liver under the ribs, where Jan had pressed his hand – and in the lungs, which was common. Lungs and livers both filter the blood. James was relieved that the masses in the lungs were small and diffuse. Injecting DeGrue fungus into those masses was difficult. It often meant managing a pneumothorax, if you had to puncture the lung. Even worse, in James's opinion, was if the masses were not accessible from the outside. Then, doctors used a bronchoscopy – a scope down the throat and into the lungs. James wasn't qualified for an intubation or a bronchoscopy in the slightest, nor did he have an anesthesiologist to sedate his patient. Instead, with these tiny nodules, James could nebulize some DeGrue fungus and have her breathe it in, coat the walls of the lungs with anti-plastic fungus, and hope that the treatment was enough. It did seem like a *lot* of tiny nodules. James

had never seen a case like that one before, and wasn't sure about the dosing, but figured he should use the maximum amount in the nebulizer.

He began with the liver mass. Once he had calculated its volume and the appropriate dosage, he asked Jan to lie very still and breathe slowly. He took a few deep breaths himself, trying to still his hands, and, with the ultrasound wand in one hand and the needle in the other, went questing for the mass. He saw on the screen when the needle hit it, and *felt* it in his hand, suddenly encountering a different texture. He depressed the syringe and wiggled the needle around, trying to disperse the fungal fluid. Distantly, he heard Jan make a small noise, and one of the men nearby bent down and took her hand. He pulled the needle out, and both he and Jan sighed in relief.

"How was that?" James asked. "Are you doing okay?"

She nodded. "Yeah, I was going to ask you the same thing. How *was* that? Did it go okay?"

He smiled. "It went well, I think. Sorry you didn't kidnap an actual doctor with more experience. But I watched it go in. DeGrue will do its job." Jan breathed in relief. "Not so fast!" James said. "We still have the nebulizer to go tonight. But it won't hurt."

At the end of the night, James was escorted back to his dorm by just two of the black-clad men. He felt that was silly, as they had ensured his silence by involving him in their crime, but was grateful anyway that his guard was more casual than how he had arrived. He lay down on his

bed. It was nearly five. He wasn't sure whether to sleep and get up for class, whether to let himself sleep into the day, or to not sleep at all. His brain, fatigued of decision making, seemed to be flapping around uselessly in circles. Over and over again he thought of how it had felt when the needle in his hand had pierced the plastic mass. He thought of how Jan had gratefully pressed his hand at the end of the night, the look on her face as she thanked him. He thought of all the consequences, not truly knowing what they were, but imagining a trial, jail, public shame, disgrace from his family. Worse, yet, if helping Jan somehow served to widen a leak to the outside world, letting in scores of Unclean and bringing the gates of Yellowstone down. Then, James would be at fault for the worst crime he could imagine – the fall of one of the few bastions of civilization, the suffering of all of Yellowstone's citizens. The snuffing out of Yellowstone's scientific progress and of one Enclave's hope for decontaminating the world.

He looked down at his hands. They were shaking uncontrollably now. He was thankful they had not done this during the night's procedure. His heart pounded, and he was sweating. He admitted to himself that he was not going to sleep just then, and got to his feet to look at himself in the small mirror hung by the door. He looked awful – haggard, maybe crazed, even, with huge wild eyes and a rather gray complexion. James curled up on the floor, feeling that it was more appropriate for his misery

James

and guilt than the bed, and let his conflicting feelings wash over him until he dozed off into fitful nightmares.

Elko

Elko was used to life coming in seasons. She had the soul of an artist, and like many artists, sometimes her heart had bitter winters. At times she embraced the winters, and wallowed in the way she felt, and wrote poetry about the futility of trying to live on this poisoned planet, and about how humans make themselves suffer. Sometimes, the winters were too long and dark, and she yearned for her heart to turn towards spring and remember why she existed. She would work herself into purpose, working to erase other people's pain until her own receded for a time. Certainly, realizing that she was sick and leaving Two Harbors was a winter of the heart, one of the bleakest Elko had ever known. Although strangely, it wasn't *the* bleakest. In a way, it felt as though alarm bells had always been ringing in Elko's head – the alarm bells that said *hey! The world has ended! And somehow we are still living in it, stuck in a hellish, unending dystopia!* These alarm bells had clashed with Elko's perception of her privilege, to live in Two Harbors, to have a good community, to have her own health. She felt that she should be happy, or at least grateful. Being sick, in a way, was a validation of her alarm bells. The small voice in her head seemed to be saying, *yes, this makes sense. Of course you are dying – didn't you always know that?*

This had been a wild winter of the heart, and would continue to be. But one thing Elko always forgot is how

much the actual seasons of the Earth affected her seasons of the heart. As they walked, late spring had blossomed abruptly into early summer. The days were long, the sunlight so ripe, and flowers and leaves had exploded along their path. The forest was becoming dense and green, and it glowed in dappled light all the many hours they walked. Elko and Rowan were grateful that the nights were warmer, and that the last of the wet spring snows seemed to be behind them. KT rejoiced in finding more and more growing things to eat, and her excitement was contagious. The morels had come and gone quickly, and the fiddleheads were mostly too big and tough, but they found wild asparagus and onion, dandelions, early oyster mushrooms, and at one point an enormous chicken of the woods that was only a little infested – certainly not enough bugs in it to deter KT. They continued to eat rabbit and squirrel, and a few times KT fed them eggs, guiltily stolen from unattended nests.

In the blooming of the world, Elko felt her own heart unfold from where it had sat, curled in a cold fetal position in her chest. She still felt fear and despair. When she woke in the morning, remembering where she was and why she was there made her reel. Nausea, disbelief, crushing belief, and then a tight spiral of thoughts of pain and death and pain and death. But as the days went on, she felt lighter. KT and Rowan made her laugh. The sun on her face made her smile, and she delighted in the unfurling of leaves and the newly alive smells of earth, the birdsong and the white-tailed deer with their clumsy fawns. Surrounded by

new life, Elko thought often about how very many creatures have ever lived and died, and how many more would live and die in the future. She thought about how little it mattered to the birds and the stars and the trees that Elko would die, and how new sprouts would sprout and new eggs would hatch just the same after she was gone. It made it easier, to think that it didn't matter if she lived or died, not in the grand scheme of things anyway.

A far away rumble interrupted Elko's thoughts. *Thunderstorm or truck?* she thought, casting a glance at the sky, whose thin white clouds were presently unthreatening.

"Let's get off the road," KT said, and Elko and Rowan followed her. To Elko's surprise, KT did not disappear into the trees, but instead crouched low in tangled brush in a ditch barely off the road.

"Why here?" Rowan asked, echoing Elko's surprise, but obediently settling down beside KT.

"If we get a convoy going slow enough, we can jump on and catch a ride," KT said. Elko looked at her abruptly, not sure if she was joking or serious. KT's face was serious, but she grinned toothily when she saw their reactions. "Don't tell me you wanted to *walk* all the way to Yellowstone?"

Rowan's mouth had fallen open, comically. She sputtered, "wh... what? how? no! no?"

"Shhh." KT placed a finger over Rowan's lips, clearly enjoying Rowan's flustered frustration. Elko didn't miss the high spots of color that reddened Rowan's cheeks at

KT's touch. "They're almost here, so listen up," KT continued. "If they're going fast, we'll let it go. But if they're going slow, we'll look for a place to grab on. The roads are so terrible that they're often going slow enough to board. The best case scenario is that we grab the end of the last truck in the convoy, so that no one sees us. Don't be in view of any of the windows or mirrors, they'll shoot you if you do. We could also roll under and grab onto the undercarriage, but if you miss, you have to stay in the middle of the road between the tires and stay flat, and hope they don't see you and try to run you over."

"KT, this is insane," Rowan said angrily. "We're here to try to save a life, not get us all killed!"

KT grinned her predatory grin again. "Get ready!" The rumbling was indeed louder, and soon the front end of a truck came into view down the long, straight highway. Elko made herself smaller in the ditch, but peered out through a hole in the branches. The truck looked like it was going slow, and Elko looked at KT for instruction, but KT remained tense and still, as if undecided. The truck passed them faster than Elko thought it was going. It was so loud, and the air that buffeted them as it passed startled Elko. She had only ever seen trucks a couple times, and never from this distance.

"They're going too fast for grabbing on underneath," KT said in their ears, barely loud enough to be heard over the rumble of semis. "Let's wait for the last truck."

The trucks passed. Halfway through the convoy, Elko wished she had thought to count them all. She couldn't see

much into the cabins, but a couple times saw men with guns in the passenger windows. *Five, six, seven...* she counted, realizing it was almost the end of the convoy. Maybe 15 or 20 trucks in total.

“We’re gonna run,” KT said loudly, grabbing their arms and starting to stand out of her crouch. The nose of the last truck was passing them. “NOW!” KT yelled, dragging them up with her and running up onto the road beside the truck. They ran alongside it for a moment, losing ground to it, until it passed them. There was a chaotic moment of everything happening at once: KT yelling at them to grab something, Elko grabbing a metal bracket and half jumping, half being pulled onto the small metal step. Looking behind and seeing Rowan for a moment, eyes wide, afraid she wasn’t going to make it. And then somehow, a heroic leap, Rowan throwing herself at the truck and grasping for a loop of webbing, KT reaching out and grabbing her, and between the two of them, there she was, on the back of the truck, clutching the webbing and KT’s arm. KT was spidered out between the side of the door and holding onto the front of Rowan’s shirt. Elko’s heart was racing and the wind was so loud. Rowan yelled, a belated panicked sound at her close call, and then closed her eyes and faced towards the truck door, resting her forehead against it and trying to control her breathing.

Elko was wondering what was going to happen next – surely they couldn’t hold on forever? Her arms were already feeling tired and shaky – when KT yelled “Are you

ready? We have to go!” and pointed with one hand up to the roof of the truck. Elko and Rowan nodded, unsure what that meant but not wanting to stay where they were. KT began to climb up the back door of the truck, using the metal brackets around the frame and jamming the leather toes of her boots into the crevice where the door met the sidewall. A dangling loop from her backpack got caught for a moment on a metal bar and almost pulled her off, but she managed to step down and untangle herself, and continued on, cool and composed. She disappeared over the roof of the truck. Rowan looked at Elko grimly, and went next. She didn’t make it look easy, but finally she disappeared over the roof as well.

Elko took a deep breath. She hated heights. Rowan at least had practice climbing – she had worked at the water treatment plant and climbed it at least twice a week. She looked down at the ground, rushing past her at a seemingly furious pace. She looked up, and saw Rowan’s head over the top, watching her. “You got this!” Rowan shouted.

Elko began to climb. She chose to shove her feet in the same brackets she used for her hands, feeling it was more secure than the slippery metal crevice of the doorframe. Her hands were sweaty and she didn’t know if she had the strength in her arms to pull herself up by them. Miraculously, they kept holding her weight, and when she arrived at the rooftop, four helpful hands grabbed her by the armpits and by her backpack and hauled her up to join them.

In a pile at the top of the truck, the wind was still strong and their position felt precarious, but at least their arms could have a break from fighting gravity.

“What’s the long-term plan here?” Rowan yelled above the wind. “Is this it?” she gestured around them.

KT shook her head and pointed down to the truck below them. “We’re gonna live down there for awhile,” she said, “but I’m gonna need a minute to get it open!”

Rowan and Elko certainly couldn’t do anything but obey, given the circumstances, and they lay flat on the roof of the truck clutching the roof and each other. KT sat by a line where two metal plates joined each other and were riveted together, and pounded a thin metal tool from her belt into the crack between the plates, prying to pop the rivet out. The first one was stubborn, and took multiple tools and quite a bit of cursing, but the rivets nearby popped out more easily, and soon KT pried up a section of roof plate large enough for them to slip inside. KT stuck her head down into the truck and looked around, then beckoned them over.

“One of you first!” she yelled. Elko didn’t know what her plan was exactly, but trusted KT’s instruction. She peeked into the hole and couldn’t see a lot, but could see that there were large packages a short distance beneath her – she would not fall far. She wormed in feet first and dropped a few feet to land on the barrels. Rowan came in after her.

“It’s dark in here,” Rowan said nervously. It was finally quiet enough not to yell.

“I have a candle,” Elko said, and rummaged blindly in her backpack until she came up with a candle and a match. It wasn’t much light to see by, but they scrambled around on the cargo, holding it close to see what they were sharing a truck with. A few boxes, but mostly huge barrels. They didn’t see any labels, but they were all covered with symbols indicating dangerous chemicals – flammable! health risk! explosive!

“Put it out!” Rowan squeaked. Elko blew out the candle, feeling panicked, and then, when nothing exploded, chagrined.

“Whoops,” Rowan’s voice said from the darkness beside her.

“Yeah,” Elko concurred. “Let’s just not mention this one to KT, shall we?”

“Not mention what to KT?” KT said, exasperated, dropping down from the hole above them.

“Nothing,” Elko and Rowan chorused innocently.

“I have a perfect light for this occasion,” Rowan said, to divert KT. “I never use it because I want to save the batteries, but this’ll be great.” Soon, the space was lit by a sturdy ancient flashlight, unearthed from the depths of Rowan’s pack.

KT showed them that she had left a rope trailing down from the hole in the roof to help them get out quickly, and advised them to get on top anytime the truck stopped, so that they wouldn’t be discovered. They discussed the nature of the chemical barrels around them, though in the end no one had a good idea as to what they were. They

agreed not to have any fire in the truck, and figured they could hide out for two days with the cold food and water they carried in their packs if they rationed it before needing to abandon ship.

“It’s a shame we didn’t get a food truck,” KT said, crossing her arms. “Or weapons, or literally *anything* else. This is lame!”

“Only you would jump onto a moving truck and declare it lame,” Rowan said. She still wasn’t over KT’s reckless decision to take such a risk, especially without consulting the group ahead of time. She had confided in Elko before that she kept feeling like KT made decisions and moved at a speed she simply couldn’t keep up with.

“It’s not like I haven’t done this before,” KT said, leaning back against a barrel. “Where would you be without my great leadership, anyway?” Elko swore she would have tossed her hair pridefully, if she had been the hair-tossing type, but instead she propped one leg up in a lazy, confident, taking-up-space pose and stared off into the distant ceiling-hole.

“Tell us about it,” Elko said softly. “We don’t have anything else to do for the next two days, so how about storytime?”

KT was quiet, considering. Finally, she said “I haven’t told this story before – and I don’t know if I’m any good at telling stories.”

“Oh, you’ll do great,” Elko said, closing her eyes. “We’ll be a good audience, I promise.”

“Once upon a time,” KT began, a bit self-consciously, “I joined the Convoy Raiders.”

“Wait what?” Rowan exclaimed, sitting up. She’d never heard of a woman in the Convoy Raiders before. It made sense, now that she thought about it, but Rowan was shocked nonetheless.

“Rowan, shush!” Elko said indignantly. “I said we’d be a good audience!”

“Yeah, but that was extremely *not casual!*” Rowan said. “Don’t you think she could’ve said that *anytime* in the last month we’ve been getting to know each other?”

“Be cool Rowan! If you’re weird about it she might not tell us at all!”

“Okay okay, sorry KT, I’m listening.”

“Like I was saying,” KT said, still self-conscious, “I was in the Convoy Raiders. I joined when I was young and stupid, and loved adrenaline, and thought it would be cool.” Rowan opened her mouth, and Elko kicked her leg gently to prevent her from commenting on KT’s lack of maturing in the adrenaline department. “It turns out, joining the Convoy Raiders is a terrible thing to do to yourself. As everyone else but me realized. Of course, I still think it’s valuable – our communities need what we steal from the Convoys. But I wish there was a better way.” She shook her head, went quiet for a long moment. “As you know, a lot of people die doing that. It’s something that I still don’t know how to talk about. Not talking about it feels like ignoring that it happened. But I

don't have the right words to make all the people who died... people and not just corpses." She cleared her throat.

"Raids go wrong a lot. The best ones, sometimes you can cut a truck open while it's driving, throw some goods out into the woods, and bail with the drivers none the wiser. Sometimes you get fired at before you ever make it onto the trucks, and then you just abandon the mission. The worst raids happen when everyone is aware of what's happening and there's heavy fire on both sides. Whenever the Convoy stops, it gets real bloody.

"Sometimes, Convoy Raiders do that on purpose. I hate it. But it can be highly effective. Sometimes they make a roadblock and ambush the whole Convoy, and just try to kill all the drivers and guards before they can kill us. That way we can steal everything in the trucks including the weapons, plus siphon the fuel out for generators and strip the trucks for parts. Sometimes we'd make these little hand grenades and throw them into the truck cabins – but of course you gotta try not to burn down the supplies you need, or light the whole truck on fire."

She paused. Elko and Rowan were dead silent, riveted. "You wanna hear about one time I drove one of these trucks?" They both whispered enthusiastic assent, as if afraid if they talked too loud she'd change her mind.

"One day, we were on a raid, and at first it was the good kind. We had cut our way into a few of the trucks and found some great supplies, medical goods, seeds, batteries, fuel, the whole nine yards. I don't know what happened exactly or how we got found out, but the truck I was in

screeched to a halt. Me and the two boys I was with, we scrambled out onto the roof, but the co-pilot was standing up on the side door ready to fire right at us – like they knew we were gonna come out on the roof. These assholes were experienced. I heard a shot and thought I was dead. I fell to the roof of the truck and touched my head and my hand came away all bloody.” She touched the back of her head in illustration. “I looked behind me. I saw that one of the boys was dead, and the other was alive, staring at me with these big saucer eyes. Behind us I could see that everyone else was in a bad way, too. Somehow the whole Convoy had realized at once what was happening, and they all stopped and were just swarming with guns.

“I had a pistol. I crawled on my belly up the truck until I was over the cabin. I tucked my feet in good so I could pull myself back up and just flopped my upper body down and shot the driver and the co-pilot. I saw other men with guns coming out of some of the other trucks, and they were running down the line, firing at our people. I hopped down off the roof and into the seat, pushed this dead guy out of the way, and started to drive. I tried to run over as many of the guardsmen as I could. They all started to follow me to try to shoot me down and get me out of the truck, so I pulled around the trucks in the front and took off down the road. Pretty soon I had another truck coming after me. I had never driven before, obviously, so I was a bit outclassed. The truck eventually pulled up next to me and forced me off the road. I crashed down a hill into some trees and escaped out of the wreckage before they caught

up. The other guy who was on top of the truck – he'd been shot by that point, too.

“When I made my way back to the rendezvous point, they had almost given up on me. They had already checked the road and dragged the bodies into the woods. There were a few more unaccounted for, and we waited another half day for them. Ten of our crew of fifty were dead, and more wounded. Not a good day. But it turned out that it was good I had driven the truck away – it distracted the guards and some of them followed me, and that was the critical break to allow the others to escape with their lives.

“I had always had a chip on my shoulder, you know, being the only woman. I always had something to prove – had to be bigger and tougher and meaner than the men. But they were boys, really, looking back on it.” Her mouth quirked to the side, a sardonic frown. “So many boys, marching out to die in the raids, because... because there's nothing else to be done.

“After that I didn't feel like I had anything to prove anymore. I got to hear this story told many times as if it was heroic, as if *I* were a hero. But I didn't feel like one. I did what my body told me to do to survive. I wasn't even thinking about creating a diversion to save those men, I was trying to flee for my own life, in that truck. Which is shameful, I guess. Or just being an animal, you know? Just trying to survive, the basest instinct there is.

“I know it was useful, being in the raids, and I know our communities need those things, but at what cost? How many sons and brothers and fathers have to die for us to

have, you know, batteries?" She waved at the flashlight. "They were all people to me."

"So I came back home. Not right away, I went on a few more raids, but I couldn't do it anymore. There was so much death, and I didn't even want to kill the guardsmen. I mean, eff them, but they're a person to somebody too. Not me, but to some kid inside the Enclave, they're gonna be real sad to never see their Pops again, you know?"

"At home, people more or less left it alone. They knew what had happened, people talk, and other people come home from the raids too. Everyone has their own nightmares to bear. But I was allowed to just hunt and trap and keep watch, mostly. It's been a lot easier than the raids."

KT trailed off. Rowan and Elko left the silence for a moment, unsure whether KT was done. Finally Elko said "Damn, KT. I'm sorry that you're back here now. This can't be good memories."

KT grinned crookedly. "Oh, well, I can't stand being bored either. Gotta spice things up once in awhile, you know? Besides, we'll be fine. Almost every single time I've been in a Convoy truck it's been fine! Well, usually, at least."

"So reassuring," Rowan said, then added more sincerely, "KT, you sell yourself short. You're an incredible storyteller. Thank you for sharing with us, seriously." She reached out and squeezed KT's hand.

James

James felt crazy. No matter how he looked at it, it just didn't make sense. Why had they selected him, not even a doctor, and the son of the conservative head of Yellowstone government? Surely that made him more likely to give them away. And they had sought him out, specifically. It *must* be for a reason, and it must be connected to Councilman Kramer, but it didn't add up.

He raked his fingers through his already disheveled hair, tugging at it in frustration. He lay fully clothed on top of his bed, having abandoned the floor after a few hours of sleep. He stared at the ceiling, thinking so hard he thought his brain would melt. *I'm not cut out for this*, he thought. *I'm not sneaky enough to understand intrigue*. Plus, he liked to process things verbally. He wasn't even good at secrets – he was too trusting, and too excited about sharing. But he couldn't tell anyone about this. If he did, he'd be incriminating himself – and if whoever he talked to kept his secret, they'd be implicated in his high crimes.

He couldn't shake the feeling, however, that Nathan had been a part of this. It was too strange of a coincidence that Nathan had interrogated him about his ethics, and given him hypotheticals about treating outsiders. Nathan didn't work in the Decontamination Clinic, so he couldn't have easily helped them himself. He wondered if Nathan did other things for them. He interned in pharmacy; maybe he was giving them medications, or treating other ailments.

Maybe this was a regular nighttime business, he realized. Jan might not be an isolated incident. They did seem awfully confident, practiced, even.

James considered this possibility. Would that mean that he was about to be conscripted into this regularly? How would he be able to keep up with work and school and family, maintaining appearances and continuing to succeed? Nathan seemed to be doing fine. But James couldn't know for sure that Nathan was also doing this at night, or how often, or if he was even involved at all.

Could James back out? Maybe, he thought, if he went to the authorities and told them that he had done what he had done under duress. If he gave up the others, and let the authorities tail him to catch them all, he would likely be granted clemency. Still would be a major news story though. Still would impact his life forever.

He thought about how confident the men had been, walking right past security cameras, seemingly perfectly comfortable breaking into the dorms and the clinic building. How deep did this go? How many people were involved? If he tipped off the police, would James be made to quietly disappear before they could catch anyone else? If these outsiders had people everywhere, why? Why would Enclavers help them, at risk to their own wellbeing, at risk to the continued existence of their society?

Or, he reflected, was that the same question as asking why James himself was helping? A mix of compassion for them and fear for himself. He admitted to himself that while he was exploring his options, he didn't really think

he could give them up. Even though that sounded crazy. That sounded like treason against his Enclave.

How big of a breach is this really? James wondered. Is this normal? Is there always some amount of smuggling people or goods in and out, or are all the Enclaves actually totally secure? How did the breach even happen? The walls were still intact. Could they be coming in and out with the Convoys? Would reporting this breach even solve the problem? Is the breach actually a problem? Most importantly, is the water supply safe? Is Yellowstone Lake secure from contamination?

James sighed, rolled over on his stomach, and looked at the clock. It was time for work, and he felt he had achieved nothing but raising more questions. He itched to write them down almost as much as he itched to talk it through with someone, but didn't want to create more evidence. He groaned loudly, his one allowed outward expression of turmoil, counted to three, and stood up to go pretend that everything was normal.

Elena

Elena took a moment to smooth and straighten her clothes and hair in the staff bathroom. She mentally thanked her lucky stars for the invention of the lab coat for limiting the rest of the outfit assemblage challenge to appropriate blouse and trousers. *Good thing they don't judge scientists by how we look*, she thought ruefully, examining unforgivingly her dumpy frame and the invasion of gray in her dark hair. *I hope.*

Leaving the staff lounge, she passed through the lab itself. On this Friday morning it bustled with activity. Gloved and goggled lab techs syringed spores into petri dishes of variously contaminated substances. Shelves around them were covered in similar dishes, a tall one across the back wall labeled with many different kinds of PFAS, and a shorter shelf that divided the room in half labeled with different sizes of inert plastic particulates. A row of lab-coated researchers stared into their computer screens at a long table, absorbed in spreadsheets and reports. There was a quiet *rightness*, Elena thought smugly, an air of competence and the aroma of fruitful discovery. She hoped Councilman Kramer would feel it, too.

She cleared her throat. "Just a reminder," she announced to the room. "The tour will begin shortly. You all are doing a great job. Keep looking smart!"

They indulged her with a short laugh that rumbled around the room. Pleased, Elena exited and closed the door

behind her while she waited in the hallway. The plaque on the door read “Infectious Diseases: Keep Out,” though this lab had, in fact, never been used for infectious disease research. A palm scanner by the door allowed only those with proper clearance to enter. The lab’s location in the basement meant that few people even walked down this way.

She heard Prasad’s laugh echo down the hallway, and indistinct pleasant chatter, before he and the Councilman rounded the corner.

“Ah,” Kramer said cheerfully. “Elena! Good to see you again.”

Elena smiled at him, though the casual use of her first-name grated on her. She refrained from correcting him to Dr. Kenjik, reminding herself firmly that they were allies. Kramer had stonewalled her firmly on all of her attempts to get in touch with labs at other Enclaves, and she didn’t trust him as far as she could throw him. But here he was, charmingly acting like they were long-time friends.

“David,” she said warmly, shaking his hand, though she was unsure if she was supposed to first-name him back. “Welcome! I’m so glad you could join us today to see our progress.”

“I’m sure I’ll have nothing but good things to report back to the Health and Environment Committee,” Kramer assured them. “Prasad’s been telling me you’ve been making big strides.” Elena frowned at Prasad, for saying

anything outside the lab, and Kramer added smoothly, “Nothing of substance, of course. Shall we go in?”

Elena palmed the lock, which buzzed invitingly and opened with a click. Kramer had been to the lab before, as the ranking member of the committee responsible for their existence and funding, so was already vaguely familiar with the layout. She re-introduced him to a few of their top researchers to talk about what they were working on, and pointed out the shelves of petri dishes, where she explained that they had moved on from testing the fungus against common types of plastics to testing it against the rarer forms.

“But I’m sure what you’re really excited to see is the terrestrial simulation,” Elena said proudly. She opened the side door of the lab, accessing another short hallway. Despite her desire to head immediately to the greenhouse, she thought she’d better start with the other doors, lest they be underwhelming after the greenhouse tour. Behind the first door were many cages of mice.

“As I’m sure you know,” Prasad explained, “mice are valued in science research of all kinds because they are easy to take care of, and because you can see long-term effects more quickly in short-lived animals. Even generational effects – with standard lab mice, we can get three generations a year. That’s very helpful for spotting any harms that are slower to accumulate. In people, of course, we tend to have only a generation every 30 years or so – it’s much slower to do science that way.” He smiled as he talked, his words and affect conveying the sense that

he knew Kramer knew all these things, but was just reviewing them to be thorough. His easy-going confidence in his pupils was one of the things that made Prasad such a great teacher, and still, after five years, Elena took note of these things so that she could emulate him.

“Most of our simulations are done on computers,” Prasad went on. “For the simple reason that we can do so many more of them that way. We have very sophisticated models that can test, over and over again, what happens in this or that environment, at higher or lower temperatures, with varying moisture contents, etc. We can also examine specific circumstances of things that could go wrong, modeling, for example, all the different forms this fungus might take with mutations. We’ve genetically modified it to have a fail-safe where it can’t mutate much without losing its ability to reproduce, but we’re still forecasting what could happen if that mechanism were to fail for some reason. All that to say, our models are giving us a high level of confidence in the fungus we’ve developed. We don’t foresee any problems with it. It seems overwhelmingly likely to me that if we released the fungus today, we’d have a cure, with no ill effects.”

They opened the other doors, showing Kramer a variety of other experiments on living creatures, before finally advancing to the showstopper. They opened the door on an enclosed viewing platform to an enormous greenhouse, lush and moist, with jungle trees and dripping vines. Bromeliads proliferated brightly across the ground. Elena silently pointed out a sloth that dozed in the fork of a

nearby tree. Tiny yellow birds flitted around in the canopy. Plastic trash was strewn about the forest, old grocery bags, disposable bottles, PVC pipes, and other, less recognizable items littering the floor, and some stuck in tree branches. Small puffball mushrooms grew on the plastic and surrounding soil, ranging in size from marbles to golf balls. Where the mushrooms grew, the plastic around it was clearly decomposing, as if it were melting toward the puffballs.

“We assume that our computer models are probably flawed in some way we cannot foresee,” Elena said in a hushed voice. “And it would be foolhardy to rely only on computer simulations. Fortunately, despite the constraints of our space, we’ve been able to test the fungus in real life in a variety of environments. We want to make sure that the fungus is effective and non-harmful not just in the lands around Yellowstone, but also in the tundra, the deserts, the jungles; in droughts and floods, in cold snaps and in heat waves.

“We have constraints, of course. Time and space are at a premium. These organisms are all genetically modified to accelerate their life cycles. They grow, reproduce, and age much faster than they naturally would. Some of them were also modified to be physically smaller,” she gestured to the half-size trees, “because they’re *really big* in real life.”

Kramer shifted uncomfortably, and Elena was reminded that people got skittish about this much

unnatural meddling. *Oh well*, she thought. *Come on, you're known for being a bloody-minded pragmatist. Get over it.*

"Does the fungus grow in water?" Kramer asked. *Oops*, Elena thought. *I thought he already knew that.*

"No," Elena admitted. "It will not leach microplastics out of the rivers or lakes or oceans in any sort of timely fashion, nor will it break down plastic trash in bodies of water. It does improve the quality of water that's directly cycling through the ecosystem where it's growing – the water in the soil and plants around it. As much as we like to think of this as a cure, this is really only the first step – but a necessary first step. It *will* improve people's lives on its own, and make our food safer and our forests healthier. But the next steps for science would be figuring out how to filter microplastics from colossal amounts of water, beginning with our freshwater but potentially including the oceans. And the development of an organism that could break down plastic trash in water, potentially with our X1LP fungus as a starting point. But this must come first, because without getting rid of the huge amounts of plastic laying around, filtering out microplastics from the water would be a Sisyphean task."

"It'll still be a huge step," Kramer said, a smile lagging behind his disappointment. "You know," Kramer went on, changing tack, "I've been wondering why you all still call it the X1LP fungus. It doesn't exactly roll off the tongue like the DeGrue fungus does. Don't you think it ought to be the Kenjik-Patel fungus? Your names will certainly deserve to go down in history."

Elena winced. “I personally have had enough public scrutiny for a lifetime. Besides, so many people’s work has gone into this, it would be ungrateful for any one – or two – of us to claim the credit.” *Nakamura fungus, is what I’d like to name it*, she thought despite herself. *And I’m sure no one would let me, least of all David Kramer. You can’t name it for a supposedly renegade scientist, vilified by his Enclave for endangering the world.*

KT

They took turns keeping watch and dozing. They had all slept poorly through the night, so continued this quiet arrangement through the morning. It was KT's turn, and she was jumpy. She had instructed the others during their turns to be suspicious of all noises, and to wake her if there were any changes, but it turned out that trucks make a lot of sounds when they drive on roads that have barely been maintained in 30 years. So to KT's chagrin, she completely failed to notice when there actually was a change, until the muzzle of a gun pointed down at her from the hole in the roof.

"Hands up and don't move!" came a man's voice, harsh and tight. KT put her hands up above her head. "I said *don't move!*"

Rowan sat bolt upright, awakened, grasping for any weapon near her. Her hand connected with the metal flashlight, and she gripped it like a club.

"*Don't move!*" the man yelled.

"*Don't shoot!*" KT yelled back. "We're not Enclavers! I'm a Raider too!"

The truck began to slow and veer back and forth. "Shit," KT said. "Not good."

Their attacker looked behind him, and someone else from the roof yelled "Let's go!" He got up to leave, and two shots rang out. KT scrambled for the roof.

"Wait, no, KT!" Rowan hissed. Elko grabbed her arm.

“Let her go, Rowan, she knows what to do! Let’s hide!” And Elko dragged her into a corner surrounded by flammable barrels, pulling a cardboard box partially over their cubby to shield them from view.

KT emerged into the sunlight, eyes watering fiercely. She kept her body flat against the roof. The raider’s body was still on the roof as well. She crawled towards it, intent on taking his gun. This entire hitchhiking adventure had been ill-advised without a gun, but it seemed a necessity now. She pulled the gun out, and on second thought, removed the belt and holster as well, raising her body briefly to secure it around herself. More gunfire echoed around her, and she pressed herself back down against the roof. A desire to peek over the edge and see what was happening warred with the primal instinct to stay low, out-of-sight and out of the line of fire.

KT heard windows shattering, then a roar of an explosion up ahead. She raised her head just enough to see the fire starting. The raiders had grenaded a truck up ahead, and their truck was heading right for it, brakes screeching. “The barrels!” KT said, and swore, remembering the flammable contents beneath her. “ROWAN! ELKO! You have to get up here!” she yelled, prying the flap of metal further open. “There are grenades out here!”

Rowan and Elko scrambled to obey. Rowan hesitated, torn between getting out faster and abandoning their stuff, and decided they wouldn’t get very far without it. She

tossed two backpacks up through the hole to KT, and climbed up with the third.

On top of the roof, KT was sweating and wild-eyed. “We can’t go down yet,” she said. “There’s still gunfire. But I don’t want to wait for the truck to explode either. But be ready to jump.”

Rowan nodded grimly. “Any tips?”

“Feet first, but curl up and roll,” KT said. “Tuck your head and protect your neck!” KT scooted to the edge of the truck, holding the gun in front of her nervously. The truck, which had slowed, slammed on the brakes and turned sharply, and the three of them grabbed whatever they could grab to stay on top. A fast staccato of gunfire ripped through the air. KT peeked over and saw the copilot firing out of the window at the Raiders, who were running toward the truck. She had a perfect shot at the back of the copilot’s head. She took it. The man dropped, and KT saw as if in slow motion a Molotov cocktail sailing through the air toward the passenger’s side window.

“JUMP!” She screamed, and pushed herself off the top of the truck as far out as she could. Rowan and Elko landed near her. “Let’s go!” KT said, forcing herself to her feet. Her ankle throbbed and the wind was knocked out of her, but otherwise she felt okay. Elko looked momentarily stunned, but Rowan was already hauling her to her feet. Behind them, the truck was already beginning to burn.

“Don’t move!” KT froze, and slowly turned her head to look. A Raider stood nearby, pointing a pistol at them.

KT's mind whirred, calculating. Her own hands were empty; she must have dropped the gun in the jump.

"We don't have anything you want," KT said, her voice low. "We were just stowing away for a ride. I'm a Raider too. You don't want to mess with us. You'll want to just be letting us go, and we'll head right out of your way."

"I think we'll be the judge of what we want to do," he said coldly. "And, *you're* not a Raider and you shouldn't pretend to be one. Now come with me quiet-like and we won't have any problems."

He gestured with the pistol ahead of him, back down the line of trucks away from the fire – a direction they were happy enough to take. He brought them to a clearing in the forest off the road, what KT assumed was their rendez-vous point. There were already a few people back from the raid, sitting against trees. They looked alarmed – KT could certainly understand why. In her time of being a Raider, they had never taken captives. Why would they? The Enclavers were useless to them – it was the goods they carried that were valuable.

"Where'd you get these scruffy-looking women?" one of them drawled, finally. KT would've spat at him if she wasn't at gunpoint. She couldn't stand when men tried to hide their fear by being demeaning.

"Why, you scared?" she said instead, mockingly. "When I raided, we weren't scared of scruffy-looking women *or* regular ones."

The Raider who had brought them there took two quick steps toward her and smacked her cheek with the

pistol, whipping her head to the side. She gasped, speechless with pain.

“Don’t touch her!” Elko said. “Haven’t you heard of her? KT, of... of the Meadowlands?” She waited for a reaction and when there wasn’t one, pressed on. “She’s like a hero to you guys! We’re on the same side!”

The man with the pistol paused, uncertain if he was being conned or not. Elko just had a way of seeming so very sincere. “Sit down there,” he said, waving them to their places. “We’re going to wait awhile.”

They waited. The man sat across from them with his gun, and they stared at each other. Rowan fidgeted. KT sat leaning against a tree, her long legs sprawled in a way that she hoped demonstrated her comfort and confidence. She would’ve pulled her hat down over her eyes and pretended to doze, but she wanted to observe more than she wanted to act in charge.

Elko asked them for water after awhile, and they obliged grudgingly. She thanked them, looking them in the eyes with a sincere smile. KT didn’t know what kind of black magic Elko had that she could make people like her and believe her like that, but KT certainly wasn’t going to argue with any advantage they could get. KT studied Elko’s face in the dappled forest sunlight, wondering what it was about her that drew people to her like moths to flame. It was a warm day, and in the heat of their exertion Elko’s face was still ruddy. Her dark freckles stood out on pink, sweaty cheeks. It made her face look rounder than usual, and her dark brown hair shone with reddish

highlights in the sun. The combination made her look sweaty and childish. Maybe that was why she was so believable. Then again, maybe it wasn't her looks – there was something about her presence that made people take pause, something older and grander than a round freckled face and big brown eyes.

KT turned her gaze to Rowan. Rowan had been looking at her looking at Elko, and looked away, embarrassed. It made KT smile. As she continued to gaze at Rowan and Rowan continued to look studiously away, color rose in Rowan's cheeks. KT would've chuckled at her discomfort and teased her for it, had they not been in an active hostage situation. So instead she just kept looking, the best she could do at teasing in the moment. KT thought if only Rowan were taller, she would've looked like a viking, with her golden skin and dirty blond hair in braids, and her smoothly muscled arms. But a lot of people looked like that in Minnesota – KT mused that maybe it was actual viking blood making all these blond and fair-skinned people. Rowan had achieved a passable tan during their weeks of walking, though at least some of it was likely just dirt. Her clothes certainly had seen better days, stained and torn and muddy.

The arrival of another small group of Raiders finally shifted KT's gaze off her uncomfortable friend. One stood out immediately as their leader – he was speaking animatedly as they walked up, and the others crowded around him to hear. He was nothing special to look at, medium-sized with brown hair and brown eyes, a little

heavy-set, but the body language of his cohort showed deference and respect. He broke off mid-sentence when he saw the three strangers, and stared around. "What's going on here?" he said lightly.

Elko and their hostage-taker started to speak at the same time, but Elko politely said "excuse me!" and kept talking, shocking the boy into silence. "There appears to have been a misunderstanding," Elko said smoothly, smiling her winning smile at the leader. "We were hitching a ride on the Convoy and got somewhat caught in the crossfire. Please allow us to introduce ourselves. I am Elko, and this is Rowan, both from Two Harbors. This here is KT from the Meadowlands, who has been graciously serving as our guide. She served in the Convoy Raiders not long ago. I don't know how long you've been serving, sir, but you may have heard of her...?"

"I heard tell of a woman serving in the Convoy Raiders a couple of years ago," he said, giving KT a once-over. "They said she was the best of the best. A sharp shooter, and even drove away with a truck once. But who knows if what they say is true. And even if it is, I doubt you're her. What are the chances!" His voice was still light, as if he were joking with them, but no longer seemed unthreatening – more like uncaring, as if their fate was inconsequential to him. Which it likely was. "Edric, Damien, see what's in their bags. Take anything valuable, but leave them their food and essentials." Two of the posse broke from the group and grabbed their packs. The leader turned back to Elko, as their self-appointed spokesperson.

“We’ll turn you loose after.” His tone now was business-like and unapologetic.

They watched their items get rifled through and pilfered. Rowan and Elko’s stash of trade goods, their extra filters and batteries, were taken, although they left the mushroom plugs, presumably not knowing what they were. Fortunately, the rest of their packs were just their essentials – food, water, bedrolls, dishes, and clothes, and none of that was taken. KT watched anxiously as they opened her pack, hoping they wouldn’t take her knives or her bow and arrows. They did lay them out separately and called the boss over – named Fox, apparently – but he said they should leave her her survival tools.

“Which way are you going?” Fox asked.

“West and then south,” KT answered. “Towards Yellowstone.”

Fox looked at them sharply. “What’s your business there?”

“None of yours,” KT said, with a raised eyebrow.

“Hm. Funny business happening over at the Enclave. But you must know all about it, if that’s really where you’re going.” Fox knelt down to be on a level with her and leaned in, his face threateningly close to hers. His voice low, but loud enough for the quiet audience to hear, he said, “One of my men is going to tail you and make damn sure you’re headed where you say, and if you turn around intending to find our camp, he’ll shoot you. And if you try to lose him, he’ll shoot you too. So play nice, get up, and get going.”

KT had picked out a potential escape route when they first entered the clearing. She wanted to rejoin the road eventually, as bushwhacking through the forest was agonizingly slow, but they certainly didn't want to run into the Convoy again. They would head west, parallel to the road until safely past the trucks, when they could rejoin it. It was midafternoon, and the sun would be mostly south and a little west. So without hesitation, KT grabbed her pack and headed out of the clearing with the sun on her left through an opening in the trees. Elko and Rowan followed shortly on her heels. She did not look back.

"You're almost to Billings!" Fox called after them, before they were out of sight. "And I'd go around, if I were you."

KT supposed he really couldn't make up his mind what he believed about them. The last-minute warning was nice – even if it cost him nothing to provide it, it showed that he thought they might be on the same side. The cryptic comment about Yellowstone did not clarify anything for KT. He assumed they were a part of some funny business at the Enclave – *in* the Enclave, or *outside* the Enclave? Why did he assume they knew about it? And, if he did make that assumption, why warn them about Billings? They'd surely know about Billings if they were locals. Unless he was just having doubts about his initial theory.

Once well away from the Raiders, Elko caught up to her long strides. "I'm sorry for trying to use your past to get us out of there," she said. "That was foolish of me, and it didn't help."

KT smiled. "It was a good try. I thought it might work – they really almost believed you. In fact, I think they just didn't know what to believe about us. Maybe Fox believed it, in the end, but either way they were just operating out of fear and self-preservation."

"You're not mad?" Elko asked, looking up at her.

"Mad? Why would I be mad?"

"You seemed reluctant to share your story, and said that you hated being seen as a hero, and there I was trying to sell you as a hero to get them to let us free."

"Oh." KT waved her hand dismissively. "No no, let's be practical. Whatever works, you know? Or almost works, as the case may be." She grinned and reached out to muss Elko's hair affectionately. "Look at you, worrying about people's feelings while we flee from a burning truck, gunfire, and scared people threatening us and stealing our stuff!"

Elko laughed. "I couldn't stop if I tried!"

Rowan

That night, though they had long since rejoined the road, they camped further away from it than usual, and made a small fire just long enough to cook dinner. In the past, they had sometimes left it smoldering all night, helpful for both warmth and keeping the mosquitoes at bay, but tonight they preferred to not have any smoke advertise their presence.

Rowan pulled out their stack of maps. "I don't even know where we are," she admitted. "After the truck ride, we could be anywhere, for all I know!"

KT smiled. "It is disorienting. We're off the edge of the map for me too," she said, tapping her head to indicate her mental map. "But let's have a look."

They opened their maps and lined them up with each other, Wyoming-Montana-North Dakota-Minnesota. People still referred to the old states by name, though now it was nothing more than a geographic indicator. But these maps, of course, were from back when states meant something more than just a region. Rowan started from the beginning, putting her finger on the map at Two Harbors. She traced their route on 200-W past the Meadowlands, Leech Lake, onto 34-W past Detroit Lakes, onto 10-W, and then hesitated questioningly.

"We were almost at Fargo when we got on the Convoy," KT said helpfully, tapping the map. She took over tracing their route, showing them how the truck had

carried them effortlessly through all of North Dakota and much of Montana on 94-W.

Elko's jaw dropped, comically. "We spent a month walking, and then the truck took us here in just 24 hours?" She shook her head. "Man, we should really get ourselves a truck."

KT laughed. "You know, some people still have cars. They might have a hard time getting fuel for them, but they keep them running with elbow grease and stolen parts and duct tape. I was hoping we might run into one on our way and steal it." She wagged her eyebrows mischievously, which always made Rowan's heart speed up, though she wasn't sure if it was the general effect of KT's face or the prospect of getting up to more dangerous activities.

KT bent closer to the map. "Good news," she said. "We're already at the Yellowstone River." She pointed it out to them, a sinuous blue line that paralleled the highway. "We can follow it for pretty much the remainder of our journey." It wound along I-90 until they would turn south with it at highway 89. Only at the very end, right before the lake, would they have a choice whether to follow the river to the west along a more minor road, or highway 89 to the east.

Elko brightened. "We'll have water access the whole time!" She turned to Rowan. "And it's flowing out of Yellowstone Lake, right? So in theory it's pretty clean?"

"We can't assume that," Rowan said cautiously, "as it could be going through any type of pollution between

there and here. But it seems like a reasonable guess. So where *is* the river?"

"Somewhere north of the road," KT shrugged. "We don't know exactly where we are –" she indicated the road east of Billings, vaguely – "but the river lies to the north of the road the whole way. I think we should just continue to follow the road and we'll see the river when we see it. It's never too far away."

"How will we know when to leave the road to go around Billings?" Rowan asked.

"Oh, I imagine we'll see road signs," KT said. "And if not, I reckon we'll know anyway. We'll just keep our eyes peeled."

That night, Rowan's exhaustion did not prevent her from sleeping uneasily. So much had happened in such a short time, and they were always just moving right along to the next danger, the next exhausting trek. Behind her eyes, images replayed of trucks burning, of guns pointed at her and her friends, at Fox's menacing face. She remembered abruptly that Fox had sent someone to tail them, and spent the rest of the night jerking awake in terror at every small sound in the forest.

Morning came too soon, but it was when early light started to creep into camp and the birds started to sing that Rowan finally felt at ease enough to fall asleep soundly. When she awoke again, it was warm and bright, and she thrashed out of her sweaty sleeping bag, disoriented by her sleep-in. Elko was reorganizing her pack, items folded and stacked around her, her sleeping bag already tightly rolled.

KT was nowhere to be seen, but her bag was packed and leaning against a tree.

“Good morning!” Elko said cheerfully. “How’d you sleep?”

“Terribly,” Rowan groaned. “I thought every rustle was Fox’s man come to murder us in our sleep.”

“Oh,” Elko frowned. “I forgot about him.”

“Good for you,” Rowan said drily. “Where’s KT?”

“Off hunting and scouting. We’re almost out of food.”

“Thank god for KT.” Rowan stood up and stretched. Her body felt much abused by their recent hijinks, probably especially from jumping off the truck, but also from running and hiking and sleeping on the hard ground. Looking around, she noticed for the first time how much different the landscape around them had become. It was drier than Minnesota, and there were many plants she didn’t recognize. They were scrubbier and grayer, less juicy and green than the ones in the land of 10,000 lakes. Even the air felt different, and the smells of the forest were foreign. They were a long way from home, she reflected. She wondered if KT felt out of her element, if no longer knowing every plant in the forest made her feel blind.

It wasn’t long before KT came sauntering back into camp. She seemed especially pleased with herself, and made Elko and Rowan close their eyes and hold out their hands. After making them promise not to drop or squish it, she placed into each cupped palm a chicken egg. Elko and Rowan gaped.

“Are there... chickens out here?” Rowan asked stupidly.

“Not wild ones, silly!” KT said gleefully. “I found a farmhouse!” She pulled out the rest of her treasures from the leather bag slung on her back. One chicken, its neck wrung, feathers still attached. One bundle of rhubarb, a few dirty radishes, a handful of strawberries tied into a bandana, and an already-wilted handful of chives and oregano.

“Wow, real food!” Rowan exclaimed.

“Is rabbit meat not real?” KT teased.

Elko frowned. “KT, did you steal these?”

“Of course I did. We don’t even have anything to trade anymore! We have to eat!”

“KT, I feel like we can look after ourselves without it. Plus, stealing food from a family for a dying person seems extra unethical,” Elko said matter-of-factly.

“You deserve to eat!” KT said.

“So do they.”

“So do we,” Rowan muttered, looking hungrily at the chicken.

KT sighed, disappointed that her exciting gift was so poorly received. “I think it’s natural that everyone protects their own. I’ll hunt and forage and steal for my people, and they’ll hunt and forage and steal for theirs. That doesn’t make any of us evil – it’s not bad to have friends and loved ones.”

“So it’s okay to steal from them because you don’t know them?” Elko retorted.

KT shrugged. “Yes?”

“Hm. I disagree. But, what’s done is done. What should we do with all this bounty?”

In the end, they ate the eggs and made porridge with the rhubarb and strawberries. They kept the chicken, radishes, and herbs, and the whole day the promise of it lifted their weary feet.

Elko

After breakfast, Elko excused herself, and fled into the woods. Her digestive system wasn't working the way it should, and often now after a meal, it came right back out one end or the other. Her stomach cramped painfully, and she stopped running to frantically scuff the earth with her heel, digging a shallow hole. She pulled out a rock, and satisfied enough with the depression left behind, squatted over it just in time. This morning was a "both ends" type of morning.

Wiping at her mouth, she thought drily that at least this sort of thing was easier to manage in the woods than at home. In the woods, you can throw up wherever you need to. She dug a hole for the vomit too, even knowing that coyotes would likely dig it up anyway. She started to walk back, but stopped. She lay on the ground for a few minutes, knees tucked up against her belly. At first she intended to just take a moment to be sad for the wasted food. She was sad that it was wasted, sad that it was stolen from someone who could've digested it better, and especially sad that she was still so hungry. Then, she felt like she had to gather her strength for the day's walk.

She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. She felt panicky – unable to keep herself properly fed, and they were still so very many miles away from Yellowstone. Curiously, the only thing that was any comfort was reminding herself that she was dead anyway. Despite the

occasional moments when she dared to hope, she didn't actually think that Yellowstone would save her. Every day, she contemplated her expiration date.

The world is big, Elko thought. I am small. I am an animal like all the other animals. We all live, suffer, and die. Some of us live longer, and some live shorter, but we all die. And the world keeps turning, and new babies are born, and they live and die, and in the end, it never will have mattered at all that I died too soon.

Elko knew this sounded morose, that anyone listening would've insisted to her that she mattered, but this was what felt comforting. Her death not mattering, in the grand scheme of things, made it feel like it was okay to die, despite the entire vast not-okay-ness of it all.

And so dying before she got to Yellowstone, therefore, should also be okay. But somehow, it was making her panic.

"Elko?" KT said softly, trying not to startle her.

Elko thrashed upright.

"Holy shit," she said, holding her hand over her racing heart. "You scared me."

KT sat down next to her, and took Elko's small white hand in her two long brown ones. She looked at Elko expectantly.

Elko blushed, embarrassed that she had been caught lying in the fetal position in despair on the forest floor. "I'm fine," she said. "Despite how it may appear, —"

"No you're not," KT said, definitively but kindly. "I know that you go into the woods after many meals and are

gone for a long time. I'm your guide, and I want to get you where you're going, so it's gonna be important that we're honest with each other. Are you throwing up?"

Elko nodded.

"Diarrhea?" Elko nodded again.

"In pain?" A reluctant nod. Elko pointed to her lower right side, where an aching pain had become, at times, a stabbing one.

Gently, KT prodded Elko for more information, and Elko told her about the crumbling infrastructure of her body. She thought at first that it might have been mild food poisoning, but it had been happening for a week now. Not every meal, but many. Elko had seen this before, on other patients whose plastic tumors were in their gut. They often had a hard time absorbing nutrients, processing their food. Sometimes, they starved to death despite being able to eat. Other times, they just stopped eating – their bodies knew it was time. Sometimes they died of dehydration, if they lost too much water in their stool or their vomit.

In a different context, Elko could've recited these facts, and her own symptoms, in a dry and steady-voiced report. But KT's discerning gaze would pierce any armor, and the warm pressure of her hands left no way for Elko to pretend it was okay and fine. The second her voice wavered, she couldn't recover, and delivered the rest of her cold report in a cracked voice.

KT didn't have medical training, but they had all seen people die of the plastics. They talked together in low voices about what to do, how to keep Elko hydrated, the

strategies for keeping her stomach calm – small and frequent meals, simple foods, more plants. KT was concerned about their pace, but Elko reassured her that she'd been able to keep up so far. Still, they both knew that if it kept up, trouble absorbing food would stop Elko from walking very far.

Though their voices were calm, Elko's panic rose up again in the back of her throat. She felt a pressing urgency to hurry up and get where they were going before she got worse, but they were already going as fast as they could – as fast as Elko could, anyway. What they really needed was another truck to catch.

They walked back, prepared to start the day's walk. Rowan's face, when they returned together, betrayed to Elko a mixture of concern and jealousy, but she did not ask why they had been gone. Rowan was distant, almost cold, at first on their trek, but Elko and KT both made an effort to engage her in conversation and their warmth soon melted her distance.

James

James was in the cafeteria, sleepily eating oatmeal with too much sugar in it and coffee with not enough coffee in it, when his phone began to buzz incessantly. He opened it to a series of texts from friends that made no sense, asking about his father and if he was doing okay and whether or not it was true.

James had only to open the *Yellowstone Journal* news app to see what the inquiries were about. “David Kramer: Smuggled Salmon Scandal” the front page pronounced grimly. Just under the headline was a poorly-lit photograph of his father at a nicely laid table, with a person on either side of him whose faces weren’t visible. He was looking away, seemingly unaware of the camera. He held a rocks glass, and before him was a plate of salmon, its pinkish flesh betraying it even in the dim light, and asparagus.

James scrolled. The next photograph looked like it was from the same event – similar lighting, and his father wearing the same blue button-down shirt. In this one, he held a cigar a few inches from his lips. The smoke wreathed up over one side of his face. He looked relaxed, like he was having a good time. James didn’t need the rest of the article to tell him why this was a scandal, but he kept reading anyway.

Fish weren’t a part of an Enclaver’s diet. They’re too good at bioaccumulating plastic, and the civil engineers who managed Yellowstone’s precious water resources

didn't want fish to mess up their filtration systems anyway. But salmon in particular was damning. Farmed salmon didn't exist anymore, and wild-caught salmon could only be found in limited quantities beyond the walls of the Enclaves. It was a good that couldn't be acquired through legal means. Likewise, the cigar. Cigars and cigarettes weren't for sale within the pollution-cautious Enclave. This deluxe and illicit meal his father had apparently partaken in could mean a few different things, all of them bad. Most likely he had either bought it from smugglers, or it was a gift – bribery for some political favor. Either one implicated him in endangering the security of the Enclave. Either one could also spell corruption.

James hurried through the rest of the article, which laid out essentially the same analysis that had flashed through his mind. Not answering any of the texts, he put his phone away, poured the rest of the lukewarm coffee down his throat, and left the cafeteria with long strides that did not invite anyone to stop him for a chat.

He burst through the door of his childhood home a brisk 20 minute walk later. His mother rose with a gasp, and upon seeing him, she rushed to give him a hug and entreat him to be quiet because his father was on the phone. James could see perfectly well through the windows of the study that his father was on the phone, but wasn't feeling terribly patient. He peeled his mother's hands off and opened the door to the study, leaning on the doorframe and staring pointedly at the worn-looking councilman before him.

David Kramer sighed, wrapped up the phone call with apologetic noises, and hung up. "Good morning, James," he said, drawing his tattered dignity around him. "What can I do for you?"

"Is it true?" James asked. "This isn't a fake, is it?"

"Would it matter if it were?" David replied, a bit sadly. "A fake could cause just as much scandal, I think." He gripped James's forearm and looked him in the eyes, seriously. "I am sorry that you have to deal with this. I'm sure you would much rather be an anonymous med student with anonymous parents."

James didn't dare pull away, but he stiffened. He didn't want his father to be a compassionate father at that moment, merely an honest politician. "You didn't answer my question."

"Wouldn't you rather have deniability about knowing anything?" David said.

It was a good point. That would be better. But already, his father's refusals to answer made it clear that the salmon was not a fake. "Were you endangering the security of Yellowstone?" James whispered tightly. "Do you know where it came from?"

"I don't believe I endangered us," David said. "But that's enough. Your questions won't help either of us."

"I need to know!" James yelled. He had never yelled at his father before, or anyone else that he could remember. His eyes were full of tears somehow, and his voice cracked. "How could you? How could you eat a salmon without knowing exactly how it got to your plate? How

many holes in our walls are there, then, if all our politicians are eating salmon one night and claiming we have the best security in the world the next? Who's to say what else is coming in?" He leaned in closer. "It's one thing for YOU to decide to accept the risk of eating a fish from the outside. It's another to accept all that risk for the rest of us."

"Don't lecture me, son," David said gravely. "Believe me, I know."

"If you know, then why did this *happen*?" James continued, unable to drop it.

"Son! Sit down." David guided James to an armchair and pushed him lightly into it. "This is very common," he said gently. "I'm not going to defend it, but I will tell you that every bigwig in this Enclave or the next has secret dinners of forbidden things from the Outside. It's how the business gets done. It's just my shitty luck that someone got a photo of me." He took a deep breath. "Did you read the other news today?"

"No," James said nervously.

"Yesterday, the Council voted yes on two bills – one to send troops to Sawtooth, and another to bulk up YSDF recruitment and allot funds for a larger standing army." The Yellowstone Security and Defense Force, the YSDF, acted as both police and military for the Enclave. "These bills are some of the most important things I have done. It's getting noisier and more dangerous on the Outside, and we *have* to control it or we will fall. This salmon photo is just a cheap tactic by my enemies to discredit me and

distract from these successes. Unfortunately, as cheap tactics go, it's fairly effective." He looked down. He had seemed confident up to now, but suddenly seemed nervous, not an emotion David Kramer wore easily.

"James, you know what I'm really afraid of? I'm afraid that we won't get the recruitment we need to have a stronger standing military, because of this silly distraction. But you know what would turn the story around? If my son, the good-hearted medical student with a bright future, enlisted. It would really help burnish the family reputation, and turn the news cycle back toward defending the freedom of the Enclaves. That's a human interest story they would eat up."

James felt his jaw drop. If he hadn't been sitting, he would've actively recoiled from his father. "Excuse me? The nerve – the *audacity!*" he spluttered. "I come here and confront you on your selfishness endangering the Enclave, and you have the nerve to ask me to enlist in your pet military projects? Do you even know me? Me, James, your son! The one who wants to heal people, not hurt them! The one who wants no part of your political games! The one who is going to be a doctor, definitely never a soldier! The one who would heal every Unclean beyond the walls, if he could, instead of keeping them subdued!" He rose, sure that he wanted no more of his father's words, and stormed out.

Rowan

They followed I-90 for four days, until it crossed the Yellowstone River on its way into Billings. They said goodbye to the road and followed the river instead. Tall, crumbly sandstone bluffs surrounded the river, and often forced them to walk well away from it. They filled their flasks when they could. The vegetation remained brushy and dry, a far cry from the thick verdant forests they had come from. At least, Rowan thought, it was easy to keep their eyes on the river. She felt relieved that they could see if anyone approached them from afar, but also felt terribly exposed, and wondered who might be watching their slow trek across the southern edge of Billings.

It was one of the first hot days of summer. The air felt too-still and thick. KT pointed out the red sun and commented “Smoky!” without further elaboration. Could be wildfire smoke from far away or nearby, or could be something big burning in town. Rowan scanned the horizon for a smoke plume, but found none. They were used to smoky summers, all of them. There wasn’t a summer in memory that hadn’t been, either blowing in from wildfires in Ontario, or in Minnesota’s northern forests. Rowan knew that the West often burned, but looking at it, she wondered how – it seemed too sparse for fire.

They fell into an easy and familiar rhythm. With the exception of a few exciting days here and there, they’d

been walking together for over a month, and the tasks of living happened between them familiarly and in comfortable silence. KT walked a bit ahead, sometimes stopping to examine plants or tracks or who-knew-what-else. Rowan walked at the back today, and enjoyed watching Elko and KT be lost in thought as much as she appreciated the other scenery.

Before long, they came to a trail, which led them higher up onto the bluff. They had a good view of Billings on the other side of the river. Once again, Rowan had prickles on her nape wondering who was watching them. At the next fork in the trail, a large hand-painted sign advertised “Jiffy’s auto shop” in large letters, and underneath it, in smaller text, “vehicles, solar arrays, battery-op devices, retrofits/repairs, biofuels” with an arrow that pointed off to the left. Their nominal path was straight. Rowan waited anxiously for their *de facto* leader to pass judgment on this intriguing side track. KT in turn looked back at Rowan.

“Well?” Rowan asked finally, unable to wait out the silence.

KT grinned. “I’m intrigued, are you?”

Rowan felt her own smile broaden, buoyed by KT’s response and the prospect of finding out what kind of tinkerer’s treasures they were about to encounter. “Hell yeah,” she said. “Ooh, I cannot *wait* to see what kind of stuff this guy is retrofitting!” She clapped her hands together giddily.

KT laughed. “Oh, and I was worried you wouldn’t want to stop!”

“Are you kidding me? A little extra danger for a lot of curiosity satisfied? A good trade!”

They sped off to the left, KT in the lead and still watching warily, but buoyed onward by Rowan’s urgency. Soon, they ran into a tall chain-link fence topped with barbed wire. The trail continued around it to the right, and they were urged onward by various signs, including “Front entrance this way → ” and “Don’t even think about theft: booby traps will kill or cripple you” and “Not joking around: I’ll blow you up. No trespassing.”

“Wow, this guy is really not one for concise signage,” Elko observed.

Rowan laughed, still excited enough to cancel out her apprehension. “Can’t blame the guy. You’d have to have pretty extreme security if your livelihood depends on selling goods this valuable.”

“Yeah, but I could give him some tips on making shorter and punchier signs,” Elko said, smiling. They followed the trail by the fence until it led them around the compound to the front entrance. The gate was closed and locked, but another wordy sign invited them to ring the doorbell, but informed them that if Jiffy was in the machine shop, he couldn’t hear them. The machine shop, or what Rowan assumed must be the machine shop, was close to the gate and sported a full solar array on its south-facing rooftop. They could hear a bandsaw yowling within. When the noise stopped, Rowan hit the doorbell.

She didn't hear anything, and nothing happened, so she pressed it again, harder.

A door slammed somewhere, and a nasally voice shouted "Yeah, yeah, I heard you the first time!" A man emerged from around the side of the machine shop. He looked part mechanic and part puppet. His face was both weather-beaten and probably poorly-arranged to begin with: a large nose that looked like it didn't quite fit, thick fleshy wrinkles, and bushy gray eyebrows so long they might need their own trellis. He sported a short, patchy gray beard that hid no flaws. His hair was thinning on top, mostly gray with a little color remaining – perhaps auburn if one were feeling charitable, but orange seemed like the more apt descriptor. He wore blue mechanics' coveralls, filthy and stained with oil and paint. He was short, and walked with a bit of a limp. He stopped just outside the gate.

"I'm Jiffy," he said, hands on hips. His nasal voice really completed the puppet resemblance. "Who're you, and what do you want?"

Elko, Rowan, and KT introduced themselves. Rowan wasn't sure where to go from there, but KT helpfully supplied "Rowan here is a tinkerer as well. We would love to come in and look. And –" she looked at the other two "– we've come a long way and we've a long way to go. We could really use a vehicle, but we're not sure if we can afford one."

Rowan wondered idly how a person would even pay for a vehicle. Such an expensive object would surely cost a

colossal amount in other trade goods, in food, clothing, batteries, filters, or anything else. It would be impractical for Jiffy, if that was indeed his name, to receive such large amounts of goods, and impractical for his buyers to pay in them. “How... do you accept payment, anyway?” she asked, unable to stem her curiosity.

He peered at her from under his substantial eyebrows as he unlocked the gate. “Ah yes! Teehee! The old money problem.” He giggled to himself, then continued. “Well, it sure would be nice if we still had the good old U.S. dollar, but we don’t now, do we then. How do people pay for stuff where you’re from, dearie?” Rowan was taken aback by his mannerisms, especially the little giggle. She wondered if this was who he really was, or if it was an act. If so, she thought, it was strange to pick such a silly character to play. If she wanted to be mysterious, she would’ve gone with a more intimidating act.

“Um, there are common goods people accept as payment usually, knowing that even if they don’t need them, they can exchange them elsewhere,” Rowan answered. “Usually batteries, filters, cloth. Food stuffs are common.”

“Quite right, quite right.” The door swung open, and he beckoned them inside. “Did you read the signs?” he said, changing tack. “You know everything will explode your insides out if you touch without my say-so, yes? No robberies here! Teehee!” He kept walking, albeit slowly with his limp, and they followed. “Well there dearie – what

was your name? I can't just keep calling you dearie. You'll have my eyes right out!"

"Um. Rowan," she managed, not sure how else to respond.

"Well then, UmRowan, yes, some people do pay me that way. A wagonload full of all kinds of goods. People around here certainly use filters and batteries more or less as currency too." He cleared his throat. "Back in my day, you know, people used to go to school for this shit. Economics! Anyway, inside the Enclaves, they issue currency. Around here there's a pretty good trade with Yellowstone, so people use Yellowstone credits sometimes. I take them if I can get them. It's always useful to get a favor on the inside." He grinned. His teeth were yellow and cracked, and Rowan found herself wanting to flinch away from him, but didn't. "And sometimes people pay in services, of course. I get my house fixed by a guy –" he waved his hand vaguely towards the ridge. "– and a couple of guys help me with manual labor when I need it. Lifting and sawing and all that silly stuff." He giggled again, for apparently no reason, or Rowan just didn't get the joke. It was unnerving.

He stopped walking at another locked fence, which he unlocked, and led them into a large dirt lot full of all kinds of treasures. They were so many different sizes and colors and styles, and Rowan had never seen anything like them before. Jiffy walked around, narrating. Rowan had no context for the words he was saying, but she liked having labels for the vehicles.

“This one here is a refitted ice cream truck – that’s a truck we used to have back in the day that sold ice cream – and I made electric so it can be plugged into a solar array. I thought it might be nice for a town to have a thing like that. Freezer works and everything! But the speaker is gone so you’d have to yell the ice cream song out the window! Teehee!

“And this one here’s an ATV. Runs off biofuel now. Not very stealthy,” he looked at them sharply. “If you’re trying to be stealthy. Vroom vroom, you know? But other than that it’s great for all kinds of terrain and modifying for any purpose. These vehicles sure have been popular since the Fall! The Corolla of the Afterlife, Teehee! Just a regular little old guy to get your groceries in! Hah! Imagine pulling up to a Kroger’s in this. Haha!” At that he had a couple of good genuine laughs, and even wiped a tear from the corner of his eye. He appeared completely unbothered that his guests didn’t share in his jokes.

“Here we’ve got a snowmobile, over there’s where I keep the pickup trucks, and, um, let’s see down here I have a couple of electric cars that came that way, not even retrofits. Oh and over there” – more vague waving – “is where I keep the other ATVs. You know. Like I said, they’re popular these days.”

Rowan was captivated by the pickup trucks. Smaller than the giant shipping trucks they had seen on the highway, but larger than an ATV, with a wide bed for carrying stuff in. If it wasn’t so expensive to get fuel these days, wouldn’t that be the perfect vehicle? She thought

Two Harbors could certainly benefit from having one or two. Jiffy's pickup trucks were also in many handsome mismatched colors. Rowan thought they had probably all painted the trucks one color, and that he had mixed and matched parts of different trucks as he repaired them. Some looked rusty, and some looked rustier, but the jewel tones of their paint attracted Rowan as if she were a hummingbird. She almost touched one, but Jiffy's hand shot out and grabbed her arm like a vise. Or a claw – he was surprisingly strong.

“Ooh, don't forget, UmRowan! Don't touch anything, or your braids and your teeth won't say hello to each other ever again!”

What an unsettling threat. Rowan nodded understanding, and he released her. She rubbed her arm where his claw-hand had been. She had no idea whether he was bluffing about his vehicle protection booby traps or not, but best not to find out.

He led them through another gate to an open area with big pines and a circle of stumps around a fire pit. He gestured them all to sitting, and sat himself down on a weathered foldable blue chair. Rowan thought suspiciously that it might be a synthetic fabric, from before the Fall. It did look comfortable, though.

“So,” Jiffy said. “You said you might be interested in buying. What do you want, and what do you have?”

He was looking at Rowan, but Rowan looked desperately at Elko and KT. Fortunately, Elko was ready to take over negotiations. She smiled.

“I’m Elko,” she said brightly, inserting herself into the conversation for the first time. “We don’t know much about vehicles, but we would love your expertise on what would be best. Allow me to tell you our story...”

She launched into full storytelling mode. Rowan had heard her explain their story to others they had met, and some parts of it were well-polished old words, but her art was in how intentional it was each time. This time, she included parts just to butter up old Jiffy, reminding him regularly of how little they knew and how grateful they were to have his advice. From anyone else it would have seemed too much, or unbelievable, but it was just so hard to doubt Elko’s sincerity. Rowan didn’t know if it was her appearance – the small frame, round face, dark eyes – or the performance and storytelling, or what it was, but it worked more often than it should have.

Elko also sold the tragedy of their story this time, weaving in the threads of their community back home, and recounting what it was like to learn that she was sick. Rowan knew that Elko hated to feel pitied, but for this, she was willing to play the terminal illness card. It was a performance, yes, but it was also true. Maybe that was part of her magic. Elko said true things, and you believed them. Because you could tell they were true, and you could tell that she was sharing something vulnerable with you.

Elko wrapped up their story with hopes and questions for the future. She asked if he had advice for the road to Yellowstone, if he knew much about the Enclave, and of course, what vehicle he’d recommend for them.

Jiffy was silent for a long moment, digesting the tale and stroking his scraggly beard. Elko's questions hung pregnantly in the air.

"So you have no money," he said finally. Rowan wilted. "And your few trade goods were stolen by Raiders. Just what were you thinking of trading for any kind of vehicle?"

"Services?" Elko said hesitantly. She didn't know, either, but was hoping one of them had an idea.

Jiffy raised an eyebrow and stared at them. "Services," he repeated flatly. Rowan's heart sank.

"Not those services," KT cut in, her voice harsh. "No no, none of that. She meant work, do you need any other labor done for you. I can hunt and trap. Rowan does water systems and has a good engineer brain. Elko is a nurse's assistant, and she can help out with anything else, too."

Elko blushed deeply and shook her head, embarrassed at the implication and at her own naiveté. Jiffy merely stroked his beard again, thinking.

"Well, not enough for a whole ATV," he said. "When people do work for me, it's usually for fixing up their own vehicles." He got up and wandered away. The three of them looked at each other, startled, unsure if they were supposed to follow him, or if the interaction was over.

"Come along then!" he said loudly, without looking back. They all scurried after him obediently.

Behind the second ATV lot was another meadow that appeared to be full of junk. Or parts, maybe. There were so many strange metal things that Rowan couldn't identify.

Many piles were covered in oiled canvas tarps or piled together under haphazard lean-to structures with roofs of canvas or of corrugated metal. Jiffy stopped at a tarp-covered contraption and pulled off the cover. It had four wheels, a large platform, and a small seesaw. The metal parts were painted a cheerful but flaking yellow, spotted with rust. Rowan didn't see a compartment for a motor, so it had to be manual. "Oh!" she said softly. "It's like a bicycle, but powered by a hand pump?" She reached out to the seesaw to demonstrate pumping it, but remembered Jiffy's prohibition on touching and pulled her hand back.

Jiffy giggled. "Yes indeed! It's called a handcar. Do you know where it goes?"

Rowan didn't understand the question, so she just shook her head.

Jiffy pointed to the wheels, which were not round and fat like a tire, but concave. "They fit onto a railroad track," he explained. "A long, long time ago, people used these kinds of cars to maintain the railroad. A less long time ago, they weren't used for railroads anymore, but people used them for tours or races as a novelty – because people like old-timey shit. I only knew about them from movies, a long time ago. Now, both those purposes are more or less defunct." He laughed. "I have one because it came my way, and I thought, who knows, maybe it'll come in handy someday. It hasn't come in handy yet, not even for parts, which means that I'll lend it to you. I want you to bring it back, but you can borrow it, for a day of manual labor

from the three of you. And I'll tow it to the tracks for ya. I'm not sure, really, how fast you can go on this thing, but it'll be faster than walking. And you'll get to put your bags down and rest your feet."

"Do you know where the tracks are and where they go?" KT asked. "How close to Yellowstone can we get with this thing?"

Jiffy thought. "I don't have a map of railroads or nothing, but I know there's a set of tracks that parallels I-90. So you could go as far west as you need to. If you find other tracks that head south, you could always try 'em, see where they go. And if not, stash the handcar in the woods for the return journey and walk south."

Rowan wished fiercely that he would just give them an ATV, but had always known that wasn't going to happen. The handcar seemed absurd. She felt like Jiffy was giving it to them almost for his own amusement, but he was being kind to them nonetheless. She shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth, she told herself.

Jiffy leaned on the handcar. "What do you say, folks?"

Elko glanced at the others, and seeing no objection, consented for them all.

They camped inside Jiffy's gates that night. Jiffy, once he'd started being helpful, had dropped some of his unsettling behaviors and odd speech patterns. He still giggled maniacally, said things that made no sense, and looked funny, but they'd started to become accustomed to his mannerisms and see him for what he was: an old man

who loved to tinker, lived by himself, and seemed to exist with half his mind still in the time before the Fall. Camping inside his gates, therefore, was somewhat of a relief. They didn't feel the need to keep watch, and all slept soundly in their sleeping bags next to the machine shop.

The next day, their day of manual labor passed quickly and pleasantly. Jiffy had plenty of odd tasks he wanted help with. They carried heavy things, sorted small parts, and provided extra hands while he fixed things. Rowan got to learn to use a bandsaw, which thrilled her to no end. That evening, Jiffy invited them to dinner. He hung a pot on a tripod over a well-used firepit and threw in lentils, dried mushrooms, venison, and carrots.

"Now let's chat," Jiffy said. "I'm just a sentimental old man, and I get attached easily. I'm invested in your story, against my better judgment. Let's talk about Yellowstone. What's your plan there? It sounded earlier like you were just planning on showing up and yelling at the gates." He raised one hairy eyebrow delicately. "Please tell me you have more of a plan than that."

The three looked at each other. KT looked bemused – it wasn't her plan, and despite her commitment to the mission, she viewed herself as merely the guide. The decision to come hadn't been hers. "Well," Rowan ventured tentatively, "we were actually hoping to get your opinion on that, and ask the locals around Yellowstone, and then formulate a plan. Since we don't know much about it." She winced under Jiffy's withering stare. "We

came from far away! We figured it would be foolish to make a plan without any knowledge of the Enclave!”

“You don’t even have a contact there?” Jiffy asked. “You literally just decided to walk to Yellowstone without any idea if they’d help you?”

Rowan nodded, staring at the ground, red-faced. Elko was looking defiantly at Jiffy, ready to defend her friend, and KT crossed her arms and leaned against a tree, the corners of her lips twitching mirthfully.

Jiffy sighed. “Here’s the thing,” he said. “They really have no incentive to help you. The Enclave benefits from keeping people outside their walls, as simple as that.”

“What about the Baby Lottery?” Elko asked. “Is it real?” It had been a crucial part of their decision to come – Yellowstone was the only Enclave they’d heard of that did that sort of charity.

“It’s real,” Jiffy confirmed. “But so limited. It’s just a few a year, and it’s to placate the Outsiders. Just to make them feel like their Enclave is better than other Enclaves, in hopes they won’t rise up. They’re scared of us, you know. The Enclaves are scared of the masses breaking down their walls. It’s happened before and it’ll happen again.”

“Is there a black market trade?” Elko asked. “Do you think it’s possible that we could trade with someone to smuggle us in?”

“There’s a healthy smuggling trade, just like everywhere. But for that, you’d need a contact on the

outside. The Outsiders really don't have any incentive to help you either."

Elko frowned. "But we're Outsiders!"

Jiffy raised his eyebrows. "You're awfully naïve. Haven't you just had a journey where you've met all kinds of dangerous people? You were even robbed by the Convoy Raiders, the militia of our own people! Isn't that enough to teach you that people are self-serving and will not help you?"

Elko lifted her chin stubbornly. "Au contraire. People have helped us a surprising amount. With the way that everyone is suffering, it is miraculous that they ever spare a thought for someone else, but they do. Of course they look after their own first – that's only natural. KT and her people trusted us and helped us right away, even though they had no reason to. The people at Leech Lake could've robbed us, and it's not like we were even friendly to them – but we traded with them civilly instead. And even the Convoy Raiders left us everything we needed to survive, even though they could've used it. They didn't believe us one bit, and they still only robbed us of things we could spare. And you! You said it yourself, you're invested in our story now, and you want to help, even though you'll get nothing for it. That gives me hope for humanity! And it gives me hope that the people outside of Yellowstone could help us too."

Jiffy contemplated her words. It made him smile slowly. "I have to hand it to you people who grew up after

the Fall,” he said finally. “You’re awfully tough. Props to you for finding the beauty in Hell.”

He turned away and tended to the pot over the fire for a minute, stirring and adding spices. When he turned back to them, he said “Listen. I just think you should be aware that there’s a lot of politics at play here. These Outsiders have an agenda. They’re trying to negotiate with Yellowstone to get a supply of water diverted off for them from Yellowstone Lake, among other things. Some people are straight up just trying to get the walls to come down, and presumably seize all that Yellowstone has to offer. It’s a whole lot of activists with different ideas about what should happen, messily working together – or separately. They all have their own goals, their own stuff to smuggle in or out, their own dreams, their own fears. And I think they might not see the point of helping you out when you – no offense – have so little to offer them. Or they might see an opportunity in it, which could be very dangerous. Don’t sell your soul to the devil, and be careful of getting roped into any plots you don’t want to be a part of.”

A general silence followed his words, filled only by the sound of stirring. None of them knew what to say. It was both good advice, and not enough. Rowan wondered how one could possibly tell the difference between a good opportunity to get involved and earn some favors, and getting roped into a plot they didn’t want to be a part of. She wanted Jiffy to give them a plan, but that was not his job or his problem.

“That reminds me,” KT said, from her stump on the far side of the fire. “This Convoy Raider told us to go around Billings, that stuff was happening there. We did – it’s how we ended up here. But... what’s happening?”

“Oh, that. The same thing that’s happening all across the former U.S. of A., I’d say. Civil unrest. The people are tired of not having enough, and they know that the Enclavers have what we don’t. And people are in touch with each other over surprisingly large distances, what with following the Convoy routes and all. They’re learning from each other that they have power. Anyway, there’s been riots in Billings – best not to get mixed up in it if you don’t know the scene.”

“But the Yellowstone Outsiders... is it safe to go *there*?” Rowan asked.

Jiffy scowled. “No! That’s what I’m trying to tell you!” He disappeared abruptly into his house, muttering to himself. The three of them looked at each other, bewildered. Had they finally been so dumb that he’d had enough chit-chat, and abandoned them to their fate? Rowan looked at the stew uncertainly, hungry enough to wonder if they could eat it anyway.

Jiffy reappeared just as abruptly, carrying a loaf of bread in one hand and bowls in the other, still talking. “It’s dangerous everywhere, is what I’m trying to tell ya. You just have to be careful and think hard before you do anything. I wish I could... well, never mind. The best I can do for you is give you a name. Jan is one of the leaders out there, one of the ones tryna do right by everyone. Got a

heart of gold, she does. We go way back – if you tell her Jiffy sent you on to her, she might do her best to help you. She's got a lot on her plate though, I imagine. They're trying to do big things. So even so, maybe not. She's one of them who might try to rope you into her plots as well. But," he shrugged expressively, "I guess it's up to you whether you wanna get involved."

"Do you have a last name, Jiffy? Or are you the one-and-only?" KT asked.

He grinned. "Since I opened my shop, I been goin' by Jiffy Lube. It's a joke for the old timers."

"Hilarious," KT said sarcastically. "Because only old timers know what lube is."

Jiffy laughed and laughed, seemingly all the harder because they did not laugh with him.

James

James absently ate breakfast as he scrolled the news. His cereal was soggy and his coffee starting to get cold, but his attention was far more focused on the newest casualty report than on his sustenance.

Despite his dislike of politics, James had long been a reader of the news every morning. He couldn't discount that it was important, and politics had been a dinner conversation at home since he was small. These days, it felt more consequential, more real. The Council had voted the relief force of YSDF men to be sent to Sawtooth, and now the morning news detailed what was seeming more and more like a war with the Unclean. James didn't understand how they could possibly be putting up such a fight, against the technological and industrial might of the Enclaves, but he supposed they had a numerical superiority at least.

What he had expected would be a quick and brutal mission had turned into something else entirely. Sawtooth was under siege, Yellowstone's supporting force was too small to break the siege, and they were at a distinct disadvantage not being able to join with the larger force of defenders. More Unclean had arrived behind Yellowstone's force and pinned them in. Yellowstone quickly dug themselves in, relying on trenches and in their well-armored tanks to protect them from the explosives

coming at them from two sides. Still, there had been casualties.

Part of his fascination with the war was simply because of the casualties involved. In an Enclave, there were simply very few reasons a person would have to die before reaching a ripe old age. The field of medicine had continued to make so many advancements, even since the Fall, and the list of diseases for which there was no cure was mercifully much shorter than ever before in human history. James viewed this as the greatest success of the Enclaves – that they had managed to do so much to keep scientific advancement going, to *preserve* human life in a world that was increasingly difficult to survive in. *What good was it to belong to an Enclave if you were just going to die in battle?* he thought.

James sighed, and rubbed his eyes. His nighttime activities decontaminating the Foreigners had been having an effect on him, politically at least. He understood that from their perspectives, the Enclaves were evil because of their exclusivity – because when the Fall happened, the wealthiest people built Enclaves to hole up in, and kept out the poor. In that sense, it was a system of oppression based on the accumulation of wealth that only unfettered capitalism had made possible. This understanding is what made him think to himself, only somewhat sarcastically, *What good is it to belong to a wealthy post-capitalist resource-hogging assembly if you can't even beat the poor Unclean with military might? We can't even say we're keeping the peace!*

He finished his soggy cereal, and poured a little more in to not waste the milk.

Just then, the phone rang. It was James's mother. She was frantic, sobs and words competing for precious air. All James gleaned was that it was something about his father.

"I can run across town to be there, Mom," he suggested gently. "Would that be easier?"

"NO!" She took a deep breath, and this new sense of urgency forced her sobs back. "You should stay where you are. If you're at home. Your father's been taken by the Unclean. It's a hostage situation. The security chief said he'll send some soldiers to you to protect you. Olivia and I are safe at home with some soldiers as well."

James paced around his dorm room as he peppered his mother with questions. She didn't have all the answers, but apparently the Outsiders had gotten inside *somehow* – James felt his stomach knot in guilt, realizing that if he had reported the security breach earlier, this might not have happened. They'd taken advantage of the decreased YSDF presence with the departure of a substantial number of troops to Sawtooth. His father had been up late at night in his study, and they'd broken a window and gotten him out without Julia or Olivia's noticing. This morning, of course, Julia and Olivia realized he was missing – and the hostage note tacked to the doors of the other council members announced their demands. The note demanded a certain amount of water to be released from Yellowstone Lake on an ongoing basis, as well as delivery of certain medications to the community outside the walls. The note

promised a return to peaceful relations if their demands were met, and said that their capture of David Kramer was more of a demonstration of their capabilities than merely a hostage situation – if the Council did not acquiesce to sharing more resources, it implied, the Outsiders would be liable to creating far greater damage than merely kidnapping the head of the Council.

A sharp rap on the door announced the arrival of his new security detail. He bid his mother a quick farewell, promising to call back soon, and opened the door.

“Don’t you have better people to guard?” he asked, then winced at his own words. He didn’t mean to sound irritated, but truly wondered if the skeleton crew of military forces left here would be enough to investigate the breach in Yellowstone’s walls, attempt to retrieve David Kramer, guard all the other important citizens of Yellowstone, and have enough personnel left over for protecting family members.

The soldier scowled at him. “Just doing my job, sir.”

James apologized, and tried again, asking if the other Council members were also under protection. The soldier confirmed that they were, and suggested that James might want to take his other questions to someone with a higher pay grade.

James had relocated, despite the initial discouragement from his new guards, to the family home. He had been

cooped up with his mother and sister for a day now, and the house was starting to feel too small for his pacing, his mother's tears, and Olivia's uncharacteristic silences. He didn't feel like eating, but was making tea and slathering a few slices of toast in jam, in hopes of feeding his mother. He thought maybe a snack would be less intimidating than trying to eat a whole meal.

He looked over the toast at his mother, curled on the sofa with a blanket around her, though it wasn't cold out. He wondered if she was as angry as he was. Not just at the kidnappers, but at his stubborn father. A few hours ago, one of the heads of the YSDF and a Council member had stopped by and said they'd managed to get in contact with the kidnappers to ensure that David still lived. He was livid but seemed unhurt, they reported. He had been adamant that the Council not give in to the Outsiders' demands. "We do not negotiate with terrorists," he had repeated. "Do *not* teach them that this is a viable strategy. It isn't. They are powerless in the face of the Enclave's superior forces."

James knew this to be false, and he knew that his father knew it too. The Outsiders had a lot of power over the Enclave, and always had: the Convoys, essential to Enclave society, were always vulnerable. And now, with the walls that were supposed to secure Yellowstone apparently full of holes, the Enclave felt more vulnerable than ever to being overwhelmed by the greater numbers of the Outsiders. It hardly felt any safer than walking right out of the walls and into a village of Unclean.

What's more, James had come to empathize more and more with the Outsiders, even the ones agitating for change. His nighttime activities treating them had left him unable to do otherwise. Even though he still believed that there needed to be an Enclave, believed in protecting a small slice of civilization for the benefits of medicine and technological advancement, he'd started to think that those benefits could be distributed a lot more fairly – in other words, that the Enclavers lived a life of privilege and needed to consider shouldering a greater burden of responsibility in providing for everyone else. As it was, Yellowstone pretended to benefit the Outsiders greatly, but in reality were barely paying lip service to charity.

James came to sit on the couch beside his mother, and placed the toast and tea on the table in front of her. "Here," he urged. "Please eat a little something."

She turned to him, her face a mask of grief. "What are you thinking?"

"That I wish Dad wouldn't be a martyr about this. That we could just accept the settlement they're asking for, and it wouldn't even be that bad for Yellowstone, and then we'd have Dad back." His voice cracked, delivering that last phrase, and he realized all at once that despite trying to be stoic and be a caretaker, he was, in fact, very scared. This wasn't fun and games, anymore.

Elko

The yellow handcar was a welcome break for everyone's weary bones, but especially for Elko, whose bouts of abdominal pain were increasing in duration and severity. Elko spent much of the three day journey to Livingston curled on the yellow platform, fighting back waves of nausea and pain as Rowan and KT took turns pumping away. They had all felt like Jiffy had been making fun of them, giving them this silly method of transportation, but once they got the hang of it they discovered it was indeed far superior to walking. The occasional sign by the tracks helped them follow their progress along the map, and they were shocked to discover that they had gone 40 miles on the second day.

KT and Rowan were both hovering, in their different ways. Rowan hesitantly checked in with Elko many times per day, wanting to know about any changes. KT was quiet but watchful, almost chivalrous, stepping in immediately to help Elko on and off the platform, or grab her bag for her. Elko's mood was foul, and though she tried to cultivate gratitude for her friends, who had sacrificed so much for her, she found herself instead becoming irritable and withdrawn, which she felt was the best alternative to snapping at them. She felt guilty and embarrassed that she couldn't take her turn at the handcar pump, and felt even worse when KT and Rowan also did more than their fair share of camp chores.

Food was becoming scarcer. They hadn't yet acknowledged it out loud, but they all felt pressed for time – rushing to get to Yellowstone before Elko deteriorated further. While they had the handcar, it felt easy to go faster, and so they spent more hours traveling and fewer hours hunting. The first night they camped at a spot where the tracks approached the Yellowstone River, and KT got up early and caught a couple of fish before Elko had even stirred. The fish stew, a couple of squirrels, and a dwindling sack of oats kept them going, but all three had growling bellies.

Dawn the third day broke bright and cold, bright enough to wake even Elko out of her stuporous slumber. They breakfasted on the last of the oats, and broke camp with the smooth efficiency of over a month on the road. KT boosted Elko up to her seat on the handcar, and took first shift at the pump. Before an hour had gone by, Rowan spotted a fallen-over sign in the brush and hollered for KT to stop. She trotted over to investigate.

“Big Timber!” she said, pointing off to the right. “I remember seeing that on the map!”

“We should make it to Livingston today, then,” KT said. “In less mileage than yesterday.”

Rowan hopped back on and replaced KT at the pump. “Good! Hopefully we can get fresh supplies.” She frowned. “All we have left to trade are those water-purifying mushroom plugs. I dunno if people will want them. I haven't even seen any mushrooms growing

practically since we left Minnesota! I don't even know if it would be possible to cultivate them here."

Elko looked at KT, who looked back at her. KT could steal them some food. Elko had been so opposed a mere week ago, but her moral fiber was wearing thin, against the teeth of hunger and pain. Elko smiled wanly at KT and nodded, silent permission to do what she must.

"Don't worry about the trade goods, Rowan. I'll figure out a way," KT promised.

That night, they camped just outside the city limits. KT muttered that she was going to set some snares and hope to catch something overnight, and vanished into the trees. Rowan fretted over Elko, trying to make her comfortable, and when Elko finally banished her as kindly as she could, went to go filter water by the river. Elko, realizing she hadn't been alone in ages, wandered slowly into the trees to look for any plants to eat.

She took her time, picking slowly amongst the dead wood on the ground. Here, so close to water, there was plenty of greenery, though Montana still seemed far less dense than Minnesota's junglelike forests. It was June, peak photosynthesis time, and the plants were practically exploding in green curls all around her. Though her stomach informed her that it was dinnertime and the air was already cooling towards evening, there were still hours of sunlight left. She took off her long-sleeve shirt to fill it with lambs-quarters, a familiar edible green that would be a welcome addition to the evening's soup. The mountain

air gave her goosebumps, the kind of pleasant chill that makes you feel alive.

She stopped to admire a shimmering spiderweb, whose plump, crab-like resident sported flashy yellow stripes. Her feet, without her conscious decision, carried her to the water. The yawning dark of the river in shadow appeared between the trees, calling her, and when she broke out onto the banks, it looked like it was snowing. In awe, Elko spun around, then collapsed dizzily on the sandy bank and lay on her back to look up at the snowfall against the blue, blue sky. It was cottonwood fluff, coasting merrily on the breeze. The trees cast long shadows over the water from the opposite bank, but Elko's shore glowed with golden-hour light. She closed her eyes and turned her face up to the sun, drinking it in.

Hard to imagine, Elko thought, that such a mighty tree could have such tiny seeds. The trees themselves lined the riverbank, proud and noble in their deeply ridged bark and their fragrant pale leaves. In times like these, Elko liked to remind herself that life is a gift, to remember to be grateful for each moment, all the more because she knew her moments were numbered. She shook her head at herself, smiling ruefully. *An hour ago you were curled in a ball, cursing every moment.* She breathed deeply, relishing the sweet papery smell of the cottonwoods she loved so much. *Yeah, I guess that about sums it up, doesn't it? Life is pain, life is joy. Life is a gift, life is unfair. I can be grateful to be alive in this moment and be pissed that I don't get more of it, all at once.*

Enough philosophizing, she decided. She rose and picked her way back upriver towards their camp, loath to leave the sound of the water and the cottonwood snow. By the time she returned, her shirt was full of lambsquarters, wild onion, and stinging nettle, plants she deemed nutritious and good for bulk, though not terribly filling. When they'd been up on the dry ridges in eastern Montana, the plants had largely been unfamiliar to her: grayish, scrubby plants with sharp smells and sometimes spines. As they wound their way into the mountains, and especially by the river, the environment was wetter and the plants more familiar, a welcome feeling. Her finds today were greens she'd eaten her whole life.

KT and Rowan awaited her at camp, and a pot bubbled promisingly over the fire. They had set out the (presumably stolen) rations in rows, dividing it up to count how many days it would last. Elko saw oats, lentils, two loaves of hearty-looking bread, rounds of cheese, cured salami, and a sack of potatoes.

"Rowan and I were just talking about the journey ahead," KT said, inviting her to join them. "It's 110 miles or so from Livingston to Yellowstone. It's on the north side of the lake, here," she indicated its location on the map with a long, dirty finger. "When we started, we could've done that in 10 days or less. Now..." she hesitated.

"It's okay," Elko said. "You aren't going to hurt my feelings by acknowledging what's happening."

KT ducked her head, embarrassed, but carried on bravely. "What do you think you can do? If we take most

of the weight in our packs, do you think you could walk... five miles a day?"

"I don't want to go slower," Elko said stubbornly. "Let's aim for eleven miles a day – 10 days. I feel like we're running out of time. We still don't know what we're gonna do when we get there, how we're going to try to get help, and who knows how many days that'll take. And at this stage – maybe I'm already too late for treatment."

Rowan turned her eyes, huge and sad and blue, on Elko. "I don't want you to suffer for nothing, Elko. Don't you think taking 20 days to get there would be okay? It's barely any extra time."

"I'm already suffering, whether you like it or not," Elko said shortly. She regretted it as soon as she said it. Rowan looked like she'd been slapped. "Plus, this food isn't gonna get us 20 days," she added more gently, gesturing at the pile. "I appreciate your concern. Let's just try to get there as fast as we can, and see how it goes."

Elena

Elena rushed along the hallway, her heart pounding. She stopped to place her hand against the scanner by the door, which seemed to take an extra long time to recognize her prints and open the door for her, as if it knew that time was of the essence. She entered the room in a flurry, surprising the five researchers at their computers within. It was Saturday, so the room was much emptier than usual, but these dedicated souls were either taking advantage of overtime, genuinely engrossed in their work, or both.

“There’s been a breach in the walls,” she said. “Councilman Kramer kidnapped, and many other Council members’ houses visited to deliver demands from the Unclean.”

Dr. Browning, a young, book-smart chemist, cleared his throat. “And... what do you want us to do about that?” he asked, nervous that he was missing the obvious. He was.

“She wants us to hurry the eff up,” said Dr. Wells, to his right. “Yellowstone is more fragile than they like us to think. If it falls, everything this lab is trying to accomplish will be lost.”

“Ah,” said Dr. Browning, slowly putting it together. He frowned. “But... no one else has the kind of lab we have. Even if we managed to send our spores to another Enclave, which would be very difficult on its own...”

“Exactly. So we hurry the eff up,” Dr. Wells repeated flatly.

“I’ll call Dr. Patel and get him in here. But here’s what we’re going to do. We’ll take our current research calendar and double it! We’ll do two days in every one day. I’ll bring in the lab techs, and... and we’ll borrow more space from another lab...” Dr. Kenjik strode to her office at the back of the lab, muttering mostly to herself.

“Is it... really that bad?” she overheard Dr. Browning ask. “I mean, we don’t really think Yellowstone will fall, do we?”

“No,” Dr. Wells answered, more patiently. “I mean, I don’t know, but probably not. But the consequences of it falling are catastrophic. We are the only lab in the world that has not only this breakthrough of a truly plastic-decontaminating fungus strain, but also the only one with the technology to process and manufacture it. If the Enclave falls, and everything is looted, then the world will just be contaminated forever. It’s our last best hope. So even if we think it’s only a 5% risk... we should act like we think it’s serious.”

James

News arrived that evening with a bang. It was simultaneously rolling in on the news app and on the TV, breaking news about Yellowstone Enclave's breach. James, Olivia, and their mother sat together on the couch and watched the coverage, while both Olivia and James read it on their phones at the same time. Julia, who normally would have bemoaned the double-screening attention spans of the youth, didn't criticize.

The TV showed brief, somewhat blurry footage that looked like it was from a security camera installed in the upper corner of a cell. A small man sat in a chair, the only furnishing visible inside the close concrete walls. He looked like he'd been beaten, his face swollen and purpled. His hands were tied behind him. The video was merely a 20 second clip of the man with his head down, looking defeated, then looking up and fixing on the camera with piercing, hungry eyes. They had looped the clip a couple times so the audience could get a good look at him, as the voice-over and banner text explained that this man, Matthew Taylor, was responsible for the breach. They had caught him, YSDF had secured the breach, and civilians were now allowed to hear the tale.

To James's surprise, he was not an Outsider. The smug tenor of the story, an announcement of victory by Yellowstone authorities, seemed to gloss over the fact that whichever specific Outsiders had been involved were still

at large. James reflected absently that perhaps it was because the Outsiders were not really viewed as individual humans with agency, but as a mass of animals that foamed threateningly at the gates. Aside from that, it was certainly true that capturing a traitor was a far better story for the media anyway. The citizens of Yellowstone would be gripped, appalled, by such treason. What resident of an Enclave would betray it? It seemed nearly suicidal.

The coverage, though unsympathetic to the traitor, nonetheless seemed to lay the facts bare. A year ago, Matthew Taylor, a maintenance worker for the Enclave's water system, had been down in the tunnels to check on the pumps that brought water from Yellowstone Lake up into the water treatment plant. He had stumbled into three people skulking through the tunnels. At first, Taylor had mistaken them for Enclavers, perhaps just teenagers sneaking around for a private place to have some fun. But this was a high-security area, so he yelled for them to stop and chased after them. They fled around a corner, and when he followed them around it, they stopped him with a metal pipe to the gut. He crumpled to the ground, and realized that they had surrounded him. They carried only metal pipes, but there were three of them, and Taylor was unarmed.

The three Outsiders, it turned out, had been waiting precisely for such an opportunity to apprehend a single person with knowledge of the water system. They laid out their plan before Taylor. They had somehow acquired a blueprint of Yellowstone's water maintenance area, and

gotten in by digging a tunnel that met up with the existing maintenance tunnels. They had two goals, and they needed Taylor's help with both of them: first, they were trying to divert some water from the lake to their community outside the walls. They couldn't do this on the surface, as it would be easily noticed by the Enclave. So they were driving a pipe through the earth, and needed Taylor's help to connect it to existing pipes without disrupting the system. This was for Taylor's own good, they emphasized, and the good of the Enclave – they were trying to do the right thing and not damage any of the Enclave's infrastructure. Of course, the TV announcer explained, this was also to their own advantage, because without Taylor's help they would not have known where to put it so that it would not be detected by the maintenance routine checks.

Their second goal was to use their entry point for other activities within the Enclave. They wanted one person on the inside, to keep them abreast of information about maintenance checks or security patrols, good times and bad times to use the tunnel access, and anything else that might help them evade detection. They asked Taylor if he could arrange to be the only maintenance worker who would ever be down in that corridor. He could, and he did.

What leverage did these Outsiders have over Taylor? the talking heads asked, rhetorically. Well, they made it quite clear that if he did not cooperate, they would kill him, and try someone else. And, they said, if their second contact were to also refuse, or if Taylor agreed to cooperate but then reported them to YSDF, they would not

hesitate to poison the entire water supply. Taylor evidently believed them that they had the tools and the knowledge to make Yellowstone Lake unfit for an Enclave to live on, even with the Enclave's cutting-edge treatment technology. More information about this alleged toxin was apparently classified by YSDF, but Chief of YSDF Garrett Dupont had released a statement assuring the Enclave that they were working on neutralizing this potential threat. In the meantime, Yellowstone citizens had nothing to fear, the statement went on, because the Outsider's access point was secured and all security heightened.

The coverage returned to Matthew Taylor. The threats against him had been comprehensive, both against his own life and against the safety of the Enclave. He negotiated only a limit on how much they would use the access point, and they assured him they wouldn't be using it for anything that would hurt the Enclave as long as he cooperated with them. It was silly of Taylor to take filthy Unclean at their word, the reporters editorialized, and after the kidnapping of Councilman Kramer, we can clearly see that they had nefarious intentions towards the Enclave all along. Taylor agreed to protect the access point, and helped them attach their pipe to siphon off some of Yellowstone Lake's beautiful clear water. He added a one-way valve so that they couldn't add anything to the water system through their own pipe, but knew that was a futile exercise, as they could access any of the pipes if they really wanted to.

Just when James thought the report was coming to an end, the reporters began discussing why the Unclean needed the access point, and what else they were using it for. Taylor had apparently asked the same thing, had wanted reassurance that whatever their purposes were, that they wouldn't be detrimental to the Enclave. They told him that they mostly wanted it for medical treatment, that they planned to go get themselves some doctors and smuggle people in for treatment. Taylor balked at that, told them that the Enclave couldn't possibly treat every sick Outsider. No no, the Outsiders had said. We can't possibly make this access point public knowledge either. We'd be swamped with people trying to come in for treatment, and some people would want to come in with bad intent, to loot the Enclave. We have a system. We'll just be treating the leaders of our movement, for now.

"These questions remain," said the voice-over, as the video panned over a shot of the Yellowstone Institute of Medicine. "And the YSDF said that they would not comment on this still-open investigation. Did the invaders find doctors willing to treat their smuggled-in Unclean? How many citizens of Yellowstone betrayed their own Enclave out of fear for their own well-being? Are the halls of the YIM full of treasonous colluders? Time will tell, and we will all stay tuned for further developments pending the release of information by the YSDF. Anyone with any information should call the tip line." A phone number appeared on the screen. "Doctors, techs, nurses, medical students, or any other medical professional who has

exhibited suspicious behavior should be reported to the YSDF for further investigation.”

James turned green and felt his stomach drop, a sick feeling of emptiness where it normally resided. The punishment for treason was death. The Enclave was not tolerant of citizens endangering its safety. It was possible his father could get him out of it, but not too likely, especially not if he wasn't there to try. James swallowed suddenly gummy spit, his mouth dry. *Is getting up for a glass of water suspicious behavior?* He thought. *Oh god, I'm going to be overthinking every move I make. This is terrible.*

“That was a lot of news,” he said, attempting a breezy tone. “I think I’m gonna go lie down.”

Olivia looked at him over her phone, her eyebrows saying *Okay, weirdo*. But she said nothing, and her gaze returned to the screen. He stumbled off to his room, his thoughts circling around him vultuously.

Rowan

Ten excruciating days had gone by, since their last resupply. It felt like everything had gone against them. It had thunderstormed, four of the days. Their clothes and sleeping bags had all gotten wet and taken days to dry, and in the meantime were heavier than usual and smelled of mildew. Elko wasn't eating well, and though she managed to keep her feet moving, clearly the pace was too much for her. Rowan worried and hovered, and got snapped at sometimes to leave her alone. Rowan worried most when Elko let herself be helped, too tired to resent it. On the rainy days they stuck together, but when it was dry KT went ahead and hunted while they walked, providing rabbit and squirrel to supplement their rations. Over the last 5 days, the road signs proliferated, and were faded brown instead of faded green. It had taken Rowan a whole day before realizing abruptly that this had been a national park, before the Fall. It explained a lot – why there was so much road infrastructure, despite this place having such intolerable winters outside the walls of the Enclave. She imagined not many people would have lived here year-round, before the search for less contaminated waters drove people towards pristine alpine lakes.

They knew they were drawing close to Yellowstone Enclave, and thus close to whatever village of Outsiders lay outside its walls. It was the Outsiders that they hoped to find first, but they didn't know which direction from the

walls it lay. KT logically suggested that it must be north of the lake, along the river, since they would need water. They expected they might find it today, and KT had gone ahead to scout. Rowan walked behind Elko and was lost in her own thoughts, imagining what the Enclave looked like, and what the people were like inside. The landscape alternated between open vistas with sparse sage scrub, and clumps of pine and spruce forest. It was stunning, when Rowan remembered to admire it.

They entered a grove of pines, and Rowan heard a rock fall behind her. She whirled to face it, accustomed enough by now to the sounds of the wilderness to know when to be alarmed.

“On your knees. Hands in the air,” said a cold, calm voice behind her.

Shit. Fell for the oldest trick in the books. She put her hands up and looked over her shoulder. Three guns were pointed at her and Elko, close enough not to miss.

“On your knees,” the one closest repeated. They knelt. Two more materialized out of the trees in the other direction, both with loaded bows.

At their leader’s command, two of them came forward and bound Elko and Rowan’s hands behind them, then searched their bodies and packs for weapons, removing their knives. The one who bound Rowan’s hands was a woman, as was one of the ones with a gun. It made her feel marginally better, though she had to laugh at herself for thinking that was any reassurance. Elko asked them who they were.

“We will be asking the questions. You will be answering them.” The man giving the orders was of medium build, middle-aged, with salt-and-pepper stubble and a deeply lined face. His eyes were set far back in his head, under thick eyebrows that made him look angry. Or maybe he was angry. He wore a wide-brimmed leather hat in addition to the camo fatigues that the whole group sported.

“Ask away,” Elko said, smiling weakly.

He grunted a negatory. “Not me. Big Sam will be asking the questions. Later.”

That didn’t sound good. Rowan didn’t like the idea of being questioned by anyone with Big in front of their name.

Their guards put black cloth bags over Elko and Rowan’s heads. Rowan’s smelled planty and a bit musty. At first she panicked and struggled, thinking it was impregnated with some kind of chemical. Strong hands gripped her arms, and someone said “you’re all right.” When nothing else changed Rowan began to think that maybe it was just a foraging bag.

She turned her attention to listening, her heart racing as her sight had been taken away. There was a quiet discussion of who would carry what – *haha, at least you have to take my backpack for me if you’re gonna tie my arms behind my back*, Rowan thought, weirdly smug – and then they were off, the strong hands guiding Rowan and hustling her hesitant feet along. Every once in a while the voice would murmur some guidance so she wouldn’t trip,

but otherwise they didn't speak much. Rowan tried to stay oriented, though once they left the crumbling road and began winding up through more uneven footing, she quickly lost track of which direction was which. Even trying to estimate how long they'd been walking was impossible. It felt like they'd been walking forever, though she knew it hadn't been. It was physically and mentally exhausting to walk with her arms behind her and without sight.

"Elko?" she asked, suddenly worried that she hadn't heard the other voice offering guidance in awhile.

"I'm here," Elko answered from ahead. Their guides did not react. Rowan wondered if they had gotten KT as well, or if KT was free. If so, did she know that they'd been taken? Was she following, or blissfully unaware? Rowan figured that their captors were probably the exact people they were looking for, but that didn't mean that they weren't dangerous. If Rowan and Elko couldn't convince these people that they were on the same side, they might wish they'd never gone looking for them. Best not to ask about KT, Rowan decided, on the off-chance that they would need to be rescued and that KT could get them out. Rowan hoped Elko would come to the same conclusion.

Finally, they arrived somewhere. Voices swirled around them, and doors opened and closed. Their captors spoke to others in low voices on the far edge of Rowan's hearing, so that she could never quite make out what was happening. They went down a set of stairs, which made

Rowan plead to have their hands unbound. The request was not granted, but two sets of hands guided her from above and below. At last they came to a halt, and Rowan's hood was removed. Her guide knelt at her back to undo the cords binding her hands.

Undoubtedly, they were in a cell. It felt like they were underground – at any rate, it was dark and damp. Light filtered in weakly from thin slits high up on the walls. There were two bedrolls on the ground against opposite walls, a bucket in a corner, and nothing else. The walls and door were of roughly-hewn wood, and the floor was dirt.

“You’ll be here until Big Sam can question you,” said Rowan’s guide, the woman. “Someone will bring you water and some food.” Her tone was straightforward, and not unkind. She hesitated as if she were about to say more, but didn’t. The guards filed out of the door, and a lock clicked decisively shut behind them.

They waited until the footsteps receded down the hallway before speaking.

“Are you all right?” Rowan whispered, reaching for Elko’s hands.

“Yes, are you?”

Rowan nodded.

“I think this is good,” Elko said. “I bet these are exactly the people we were looking for.”

“That’s what I thought too! But... I still don’t think this is good. Why are they treating us like prisoners? What harm could we possibly want to do them? We’re Outsiders too!”

Elko tilted her head, considering. “Could be for any number of reasons. Different Outsider factions could have different goals. Or fighting for water access with each other, that kind of thing. We don’t have that much where we’re from, but just because we’re all Outsiders doesn’t mean we can’t fight over things.”

They discussed, in tiny voices, where they thought KT might be, as well as their strategy for interrogation, which they decided would be to tell the truth as much as possible without mentioning KT. Soon, footsteps returned along the hallway, a key turned in the lock, and two guards appeared in the room, one carrying food and water and the other carrying a gun. They set the tray down without ceremony or conversation and retreated. Upon investigation, the food was lukewarm lentil soup, under-flavored but not terrible, and a hunk of dry bread. It was enough that they wouldn’t go to bed hungry, while not being a generous helping.

After dinner, they sat next to each other on one of the bedrolls for many hours, watching the light change slowly in the high window slits. Eventually, they decided they would likely not be seeing Big Sam that day. They pushed the two bedrolls next to each other and lay down. Though it was not yet full dark, Rowan’s bones ached, and she was sure Elko’s body must hurt even more. Stretching out on the ground felt good, though the padding between them and the ground was thin.

“Rowan,” Elko began, reaching out to hold her friend in the gathering darkness. “I think we should talk a little about our goals, and what we expect to happen next.”

Rowan put her head on Elko's shoulder, letting Elko's arm curl around her. "By all means – I have no idea what to expect next."

"I mean with trying to get me into the Enclave," Elko said. "It's not gonna be easy or simple. It'll probably be very dangerous."

"I know that," Rowan replied. "What are you getting at?"

"Why did we come here?" Elko asked.

"To try to get you treatment," Rowan answered. She would've been irritated at this circuitous conversation, but it was hard to be annoyed while being held so tenderly.

"Right. To try to save a life. Not lose one. Rowan, when the time comes to do the dangerous things, to try to break into the Enclave or whatever it is we're gonna do, I want you to stay far, far away. It would be such a waste to lose you when –"

"What? No!" Rowan interrupted. "I'm here with you! We're in it together. I want to give you the best possible chance to get in there and get treatment, and to get out! It's no good if you get in but then get killed before you make it out. You'll need all the help!"

"No, Rowan! Listen to me. I'm dying, and yes, it's tragic, and yes, I hate it and I wish it wasn't happening. But it is happening! If I don't get help, I die. And that's definitely the most likely outcome, considering we don't even have a plan or know anything about the Enclave. That's... how the world is, unfortunately. But it would be so, so dumb if you went in there and got yourself killed for

no reason. They need you back home, love! I want you to carry on with your life. Go home, tell everyone about all the adventures we had. Go back to work. Fall in love, maybe have some kids, grow old. Maybe you'll have grandkids. You'll see the world change in all kinds of ways that I'll never know." Elko's voice cracked, and suddenly Rowan was crying too. "It makes me so happy to think of you as an old woman, all wise and full of stories. Please, please, if I get one dying wish – it is for you to come out of this insane mission alive."

Rowan swallowed, trying to speak without sobbing. "Elko, I will try my very best not to die... but you can't let me come all this way with you and then stop a few yards from the finish line! I'm in this with you!"

Elko sat up, disturbing their snuggle so that she could look Rowan in the eyes. She took Rowan's hands in hers. "You keep saying that, but I need you to understand that it's not like that. Already, I'm on a journey that you're not on. You're not..." – she gestured to her abdomen – "you're not in my body, with my pain. You're not waiting for death with me. You're walking alongside me, but we're not on the same path. I'm... I'm on my own, in this. You can't follow where I am going."

"I can damn well try," Rowan said quietly. But she knew that wasn't what Elko was saying, and she felt bad, selfish even, for refusing to acknowledge it.

Elko smiled a small, sad smile, suddenly distant. "We can come back to this later," she said, and that was the end of that. They lay down beside each other in the darkness,

and listened to each other pretending to sleep long into the night.

Elko

The following morning, two guards entered their cell. One of them pointed to Elko.

“You first,” he said. “You’re going to meet Big Sam.” Rowan rose anxiously with her, but the guard said “No. One at a time.”

They cuffed Elko’s hands again and marched her down the hall, where they let her into a small room. Her eyes went first to the large man behind the desk. He was sitting, but it was still evident how very tall he was. He was broad-shouldered and looked basically strong, but with a bit of a paunch, as if life at a desk had softened him from what must have been an athletic youth. Maybe in his fifties now, he was handsome-ish, black hair and an expressive face like a 20th century movie star. He was writing, his giant hands making the pen look comically small. He seemed to be ignoring Elko, looking up at her only to indicate the chair in front of his desk with his pen. She sat. He continued to write.

Her eyes wandered around the rest of the room. The small desk between them was rough but serviceable, and surrounding them were many boxes of papers and ledgers. The few wooden chairs all had cushions. This room had a proper window, and morning light streamed into the room, the fingers of sun illuminating dust hanging in the air. It was not, in the slightest, the torture chamber Elko had been

half-expecting, nor did Big Sam seem to be the knee-breaking goon his name implied.

He put his pen down and looked at her appraisingly, chin resting on linked hands. "So. My scouts captured you in the woods. Who are you?"

"Elko Nelson, from Two Harbors. Who are you?" she asked, deciding to see if he'd allow a two-sided interrogation.

"Sam. They call me Big Sam, though I've always found it to be a rather unimaginative nickname," he said drily. "I cannot tell you my last name or where I am from, though I wish to cultivate some goodwill with you. I will tell you what I can, that does not compromise the security of our little settlement." He spoke like he was reading from a rather academic book, his voice measured and even. Though Elko was not physically afraid of him, and his words seemed kind, it gave her the impression of a dangerous intellect. "Why are you here, Elko of Two Harbors?"

"Wait, I get one more," she said, "since I told you where I'm from. What are you, like a captain of security or something like that?"

He raised his eyebrows at her, thought before he spoke, but did answer. "Security, yes. A better job description would perhaps be *spymaster*. Or... director of intelligence."

She giggled, involuntarily, the product of her nerves and a vivid imagination. He looked surprised. "Sorry, Big Sam, sir," she said. "You don't look like a spymaster. I

mean, I've read books – spymasters should be short men with thin mustaches and oily voices. And sweaty hands.”

That startled a laugh out of him. Elko was pleased, feeling like putting him off his guard was a point in her favor in this interrogation.

“I’ll be sure to let my supervisors know, for next time they need to hire a spymaster. All right, Elko. Your turn. Why are you here?”

Elko told him, trying to keep her tale short and succinct. She left out any mention of KT, but otherwise was truthful. She was beginning to feel practiced at telling their story, but had to be particularly careful with her words this time, pausing regularly for thought to make sure she knew how to tell the next part. Big Sam listened and nodded, occasionally making notes. When she mentioned Jiffy's name, and that he'd told them to find Jan, Big Sam let an eyebrow twitch in his otherwise impassive face.

When she was done, wanting to continue the back-and-forth instead of letting Big Sam steer the conversation, she asked, “Why do you guys need a spymaster? And why are you interrogating us? We’re Outsiders like you.”

Again, he looked surprised. “Have you never met an Enclaver?” he asked.

She thought about it. “Briefly, I guess, when we had a run-in with a convoy. But otherwise no. My town back home sometimes had battles with the Enclave, but it was always from far away. Like they’d dump plastics into our

water when they thought our raiders were attacking their convoys.”

“They look just like us,” Sam said. “That may come as a surprise to you, but we’re all human beings, and there’s all different heights, ethnicities, and faces, inside and outside the walls. Inside, they may be cleaner, or wear different clothes, they probably eat better and they definitely live longer. But the ones we meet, the truck drivers, the soldiers, the spies... we can’t easily distinguish them.”

“Oh,” Elko said, feeling dumb. “That... makes sense. So is that why you imprisoned us? You think we’re Enclavers?”

He nodded, the corner of his mouth tugging upward in amusement. *Hopefully not anymore*, Elko thought triumphantly. She wasn’t a good liar, and felt confident that her sincerity shone through. Even though she felt stupid for not realizing that Enclavers wouldn’t look different than them.

“There’s also all kinds of Outsiders,” Big Sam went on. “With all kinds of agendas and ideas about what is best. Some of them are quite opposed to what we are doing, and we try to keep those ones out. That being said, we have quite a... diversity of opinions and visions within the walls of our camp. We do the best we can to work together. But this is not a democracy, not yet – it is a people’s resistance to needless oppression. We call ourselves the Yellowstone People’s Militia.” He smiled. “Some call ourselves just The People.”

Though Elko felt that there were many layers and hidden meanings behind Big Sam's words, she nonetheless felt stirred by them. The Enclave near Two Harbors had never been kind to them – they had besieged and ransacked Duluth to its destruction, and kept Two Harbors better behaved through a campaign of fear and harsh retaliation for convoy raids.

"I want to resist," Elko whispered. "Please, can we join you?"

"If your stories check out, and I find no reason to distrust you, then yes." He smiled.

Thinking she was dismissed, Elko rose from her chair.

"One more thing," Big Sam added, lifting one large finger in the air. Elko sat down again, suddenly nervous again. "Were there more members of your party that you might have left out of your tale?"

She stared at him, eyes wide, unsure what to do.

"Elko, it is very important that you tell me the truth. If you do not, we will not help you, and your whole journey will have been for nothing."

"Yes," Elko whispered. She cleared her throat. "Her name is KT. She's our guide. We met her 5 days out from Two Harbors. At first she was just going to take us as far as Leech Lake, but we ran into some minor trouble, and when she saw how incompetent we were at wilderness survival, she took pity on us and decided to come with us. She's no traitor. The only reason I kept her a secret was in case this didn't turn out well, I was hoping she could

rescue us. Do you have her? Or did you just see her out there?”

“She’s here,” he said. “I’m going to interview Rowan next, and then I’ll have you both – or one of you, if you prefer – go in and convince her to talk. It may be... difficult to convince her that we are not enemies. But you must be a persuasive one. It seems that your friends have chosen to follow you into great danger already, and to little reward.”

Elko shuddered involuntarily, and her stomach sank, wondering what condition they would find KT in.

“Now you may go.” Big Sam dismissed her with a wave of his hand, and a guard waiting outside the door walked her back through the dim corridors. Rowan was already gone from the cell when she returned. Elko, worried, asked the guard where she had gone, and the guard responded that Rowan was on her way to Big Sam. Evidently their captor didn’t want them trading notes before the second interview.

Big Sam himself came after lunch to bring them to KT. As he took them down a narrow flight of stairs to a different basement half-level, he spoke over his shoulder to them quietly.

“I think you can expect your friend to be very unhappy with us,” he said. His words, which always seemed to be a hedging, carefully controlled understatement to Elko,

made her fear even more. “And I would expect you to be unhappy with us as well. But I want you to try to understand: from our perspective, our camp is constantly under attack, being subjected to surveillance, infiltration by spies, sneak attacks, dirty plastic bombs in our river, and more. We fear the day that Yellowstone will just send their armies to wipe us out. We’ve moved our camp many times, and built up our defenses. When we encounter people coming towards our camp, we assume the worst. You were more cooperative, and so you were not hurt. I wish I could say the same for your friend. She gravely wounded two scouts, when they first found her, and I am sure that did not help future negotiations of her surrender go well. Fortunately, the scouts seem to be recovering already. I do not wish any ill upon KT. But you must try your best to convince her to follow your lead and talk to me. If she does not wish to join us, I may be forced to keep her here, imprisoned, for now. I don’t presently have the staff to bring her far from the perimeter and release her.”

Elko nodded, throat dry. The guard accompanying them unlocked the door and pushed it open for them. Nervously, they entered. KT stood in front of the cot in the back corner. She was poised, like a coiled spring or a feral animal, on the balls of her feet. When she saw it was just Rowan and Elko, and the door swung shut behind them, she cried out in something like pain or relief or both, and sagged down onto the cot. Elko and Rowan rushed to her, sitting on either side of her and looking to examine her injuries, both talking at once. KT cried out loudly, holding

up her arms around her face as if to ward them off. “Don’t touch,” she whispered.

“Okay,” Elko said as calmly as she could. It made her chest ache to see KT like this, KT who was normally so invulnerable, poised, sarcastic, KT who never needed anything, KT who hated to be weak. They scooted farther apart on the cot. Rowan’s face, on the other side, was a poorly-controlled mask of terror and secondhand hurt. Elko was glad KT wasn’t looking at her. “Can you show us?”

KT bobbed her head once, stone-faced. She carefully rolled up her right sleeve, exposing a swollen and bruised forearm. “It’s broken,” she whispered, her voice jagged and raw. “I set the bone back in place but don’t have anything to splint it.”

“Do you have good circulation in your fingers?” Elko asked, wanting to take the poor purplish hand in her own and squeeze the nailbeds, look for blood return, examine gently the way she’d been taught. She sat on her hands to resist the temptation to reach out too soon.

KT nodded, wiggled her fingers. “I have tingles, but it could just be from the swelling.”

They continued the tour of KT’s injuries. She had a gnarly black eye, with old blood pooling deeply under the skin on top of her sharp cheekbone. At Elko’s request, KT pressed gingerly on her eyebrow and to one side of the bruise and proclaimed nothing was broken. They all politely didn’t comment on the tears that now rolled soundlessly down KT’s cheeks. They moved on to KT’s

neck, which sported hand-shaped bruises encircling her throat. She pointed at them silently and offered no other information. Finally, she pulled up her shirt and showed them her ribs, maybe cracked, definitely bruised with a rather boot-shaped imprint. She nodded when Elko asked if it hurt to breathe.

“How about your legs and feet?” Elko asked, when it appeared the tour was done. She was thinking of how KT had seemed to melt in pain back to sitting when they’d come through the door.

“Everything hurts,” KT said. “I’m sure I have some more bruises and whatnot. But the forearm and ribs are the worst.” Then, to everyone’s surprise, she began to sob. Elko and Rowan looked at each other, unsure what to do. It was so easy to want to wrap their arms around their hurting friend, so hard to know how to comfort someone who didn’t want to be touched, who was so skittish after so much hurt.

“Do you want to tell us about it?” Rowan ventured.

KT shrugged expansively, dramatically, as if it was all too much to even begin to say. Or too obvious, perhaps. “I was just so powerless,” she said in between sobs. She gestured vaguely to her neck, which painted a vivid enough picture to Elko of KT being sat on and choked out by many large armed strangers. The powerlessness of not knowing what they were going to do to her. KT, who had always been so strong, with her strength taken away. Powerless indeed. “There were too many of them and they took me by surprise. And now I’m broken. Helpless. Can’t

help you get out. Can't help me." She trailed off despondently into panicked sobs, and began to hyperventilate, staring at her forearm. Elko got off the cot and knelt in front of her as close as she felt was safe, looking up into her distraught face.

She got KT to breathe with her, slowly gentling her ragged short breaths. In and out, medium-sized breaths that don't hurt too much, Elko instructed. Nervous that it could be more triggering than calming, she nonetheless ventured into leading KT through a sensory calming exercise, asking her to focus on the feel of the cot beneath her, the ground under her feet, the smell of earth and wood and their own bodies, to look at the walls and the floor and notice patterns in the wood grain or the footprints in the dirt floor. KT accepted all this, seeming to calm. Eventually, tired out, KT leaned across the gap and placed her head gingerly on Rowan's shoulder. Relieved, Rowan scooted in and stroked KT's hair as gently as if she were made of spun glass.

"KT, I'm just going to go talk to Big Sam about getting you some medical help," Elko said gently. "Can I give them your word that you won't attack them or try to escape? They're very jumpy about you. I gather you gave them some difficulty."

KT snorted. "Do I look ready to attack anybody?"

"You sure did when we came in the door," said Elko wryly.

KT nodded. "I'll cooperate as long as they don't hurt me."

Outside, Elko made it quite clear to Big Sam that now was not the time for them to be convincing KT of any course of action, but that providing a forearm splint and pain medication, some bandages, and more food and water would go a long way to improving their relations. Big Sam agreed to move her to their small medical clinic if Elko and Rowan went with to ensure her good behavior.

Rowan

After two days in the medical clinic, things were looking up. KT's bones would take time to heal, and even her bruises would take time to fade, but despite the purple-and-yellow swollen face, she looked better. Less pain, more alert, and less distraught. The two capable workers staffing the clinic were kind to them, as was the rotating cast of people who brought them meals. Big Sam showed up once, the morning of the second day, to talk to KT. He sent Elko and Rowan to the far corner of the room so they couldn't hear, but evidently was satisfied with a brief interview, and left after just a couple minutes.

"What did you tell him?" Rowan asked when he was gone.

"Just that I'd followed you two this far, and I was going to trust your judgment and follow your lead, if you think these people are the best way for us to get Elko treatment. I promised to behave and not break any more of their guards."

"Anything else?" Elko asked. "Did he ask you to confirm anything else about our stories?"

"He just asked me why I had brought you this far when I didn't even know you before. In return I asked him why he worked for these people. He said it was because he believes in the cause, and fighting for a more just world is worthwhile. I said, me too, that's why I'm with Elko and Rowan. So, I think we're good."

At that, Elko cried, and they all laughed together at her big soft heart. KT winced when she laughed, her cracked ribs protesting, but Rowan thought the laughter was good enough medicine to be worth it.

That afternoon, a new face appeared at the door. “Are you ready to meet with Jan?” she asked politely. The three of them looked at each other, confused.

“Oh,” she said. “I was told you wanted to join with us, and so they had me make an appointment with Jan for you. She meets with new members and sees what they have to offer, and assigns them to a task or a crew.”

Rowan had forgotten, in the blur of events since their capture, all about Jiffy and his recommendation of finding Jan. She hoped it was the right Jan. Maybe it was too late now for his name to be much help, as they already seemed to be on better footing with their captors, but it couldn’t hurt.

“Yes,” Rowan said, looking at Elko and KT for confirmation. “We’d be happy to meet with her.”

“Wonderful,” the woman said. “Please, follow me. I’m Marina. I do organizing and logistical work here, and keep Jan’s calendar. Wonderful woman, great leader – a bit scatterbrained. Good thing she has me.” She smiled warmly at them, as if including them in a great inside joke.

They followed her down the hallway and out the front door, into cold but clear sunshine. Rowan took a deep breath of the outside air, realizing at last how trapped she had felt inside the small clinic. They were in a small

village. All the buildings looked a bit ramshackle, sturdy enough and insulated to keep out the mountain chill, but like the whole place had been constructed with some haste. People of all kinds bustled about in the daily business of living. Rowan could see up on the hillside behind the village was a rather sprawling tent city. She wondered if they were new arrivals, or just temporary homes – this would not be a good place to live in a tent, come winter.

Down the street was a sort of town square. Though nothing was paved, a clearing of flat rock and open sky was surrounded by a square of small homes. A couple vendors hawked food or wares from blankets on the ground. Marina led them to a long, low log-cabin style house and entered without knocking. In the first room, several people sat at scattered tables, quietly hard at work poring over ledgers, or writing. They followed Marina down a hallway and entered a library. It was well lit, with a rare picture window that looked out over the square. Hidden amongst the books at a desk was a small woman with nut-brown skin and wrinkles betraying a habit of smiling. She had striking long gray hair with darker streaks, pulled up in a high messy bun with two pencils stuck through it. She wore navy blue coveralls, worn but clean, and the shirt pocket was full of pens.

She stuck out her hand for handshakes, an old-fashioned gesture, but it came across as respectful. “I’m Jan. I heard you want to join us. Big Sam filled me in a bit on your story, but tell me a bit about yourselves! Can I pour you some tea?”

Jan poured them tea, and asked them easier questions, and some harder questions. She was instantly likable, with a kind of warm personal magnetism, and easy to talk to – so easy that Rowan had a hard time remembering if there was anything they were trying to keep secret, still, but she reminded herself that they’d decided on a policy of honesty. She zoned out for awhile while Elko filled Jan in on their journey, meeting Jiffy, and their hopes for getting to Yellowstone for treatment. Rowan’s attention was captured by the vast array of books – more books than she’d ever seen in one place, and in a temporary militia camp at that! She sipped tea, and ate some bread and cheese that had appeared on the desk at some point in Jan’s bustling.

“We thought we’d come up with something good, some sneaky plan,” Elko was saying. “But we’re not that good at sneaky, so we’re just hoping to be honest with you about what we can offer and what we need, and hope that’s enough. If you really are working for the people... well, we are the people.”

“Hm,” Jan said. “An admirable sentiment! Who even are the people?” Rowan wasn’t sure if it was a rhetorical question, but no one answered.

Jan turned to the window, looking out over the bustling village of the People’s Militia.

“Did you go to school?” she asked quietly. At Elko’s affirmative, she asked if they knew much about the French and American Revolutions. Rowan wrestled her gaze from

the nearest bookshelf to bring her full attention back to the conversation, confused about where this was going.

“Not much,” Elko admitted. “Our history classes were focused on the Fall and events leading up to it.”

Jan frowned. “But you’ve heard of the American Revolution, surely?”

“When the US split from Britain – no taxation without representation, right? That’s about all I got,” Rowan said, feeling foolish.

“Very good.” Jan nodded, and Rowan felt childish for the way her heart softened at the praise. “The American Revolution has gotten rave reviews for centuries. Very noble and principled and all – and then of course they went and hammered together a government unlike any before it, and it worked out pretty darn well. It was the leader of the free world for a long time. Of course, that history is written by the victors – but it’s true in many respects.

“The French Revolution, on the other hand – what do you know about that one?” They shook their heads blankly. “It was a very bloody time, by all accounts. The people rose up to overthrow the king, but decided to also go ahead and kill anybody who stank of old money and aristocracy, or even anybody too educated. It ended up as a brutal dictatorship, and short-lived. The French people remember it as a crucial part of becoming a modern democratic nation – but full of extremely regrettable mistakes.

“The question these people” – she gestured out the window – “must grapple with, whether they understand it

or not, is which Revolution they would like to be. A vast oversimplification, of course – and I am no historian. But even if it's apocryphal at this point, my analogy stands. Will they overthrow the Enclaves, kill and rape and pillage, extracting revenge until their sins are as great as the injustices they struggled against? Or will they overthrow the current order to establish a new one, governed by sensible people, with institutions that can last? Will they protect our resources and redistribute them fairly, or will they try to take all they can for themselves? In a land that has been so hard on us, will they be able to believe that there is enough for all of us to live?"

Jan stopped abruptly, and it was silent until Elko broke it. "I take it there are... different factions, and some have an agenda of chaos?"

Jan nodded. "Of course there will be many different perspectives, and many different goals. I'm trying so hard to bring all these people together with one coherent vision. I know deeply, in my bones, that we suffer terrible injustices, and that we must demand greater cooperation and aid from Yellowstone. But I'm not advocating a mass killing of the Enclavers, or destruction of what they have. We *need* what they have – and I need everyone to believe that there is enough for all of us, if we insist on fairness.

"Another Enclave near here fell, yesterday," Jan went on, her words shocking Rowan. That was no everyday event. "Sawtooth Enclave – one of their closest allies, and an important producer of much Enclaver technology. The militia that overthrew it was a motley collaboration of

many people with differing dreams, just like we are. But once they began to engage in military action, both sides kept escalating in force, until it was just bloody warfare. The walls are down, many civilians on both sides are dead, and I fear that all that work was for nothing, and everyone is worse off than when they began. I'm sure the people looted what they could, but so much has been destroyed. It is... the outcome I fear most, for any of our actions."

The weighty silence returned, filling the room, growing larger and larger. Rowan wasn't sure what to say, and it seems the others didn't know either. Jan stood, still facing the village, as if her words could have carried out the window into the ramshackle homes and wormed their way into the hearts of every liberation fighter in the camp. Her gray hair shone silvery in the dim light, and Rowan was struck by how small she was in profile, her expressive hands now folded neatly into her arms. Jan broke away from the window and looked at Rowan, and she felt as if Jan's stare was at once piercing her innermost thoughts, and also placing a heavy weight upon her. Jan turned the same intense gaze to Elko, and to KT. Rowan thought she could see the weight settle upon them too.

"The American dream was a rotted ivory tower," Elko said solemnly. "But it worked for a long time. I'm sure the American Revolution had its own makeover in the textbooks, but I hope that what you say about it is true. I need to believe that such a Revolution is possible. And I would like to be a part of one. I'm not here to burn anything down without having a plan for rebuilding."

Jan smiled, and Rowan felt her own face automatically mirroring hers as they all looked at each other, agreeing silently with this worthy cause.

“All right,” Jan said. “Let’s get to work.”

It was clearly a dismissal, and whatever thing it was inside of Rowan that ached to please Jan and follow her every word wanted to walk right back out the door and go about doing whatever new task they’d just signed on for. But she cleared her throat.

“We came here because we wanted treatment for Elko,” she reminded Jan. “We’re on board to help. But Elko is very sick, and,” she faltered, willfully not looking at her friend, “may not have much time left. Has anyone here gotten any treatment or medicines or anything from Yellowstone before? Is it possible?”

Jan took a deep breath in through her nose and pressed her lips together, an unreadable expression passing over her face. “It has been done before.” She hugged her elbows, a gesture Rowan found curiously childlike in a woman who was small of stature but so grand in presence. “I cannot promise to prioritize this, when so many things are now happening so quickly. My priorities must be the safety of The People, and our central mission.” Rowan could hear the capital letters in her speech. “I hope you can understand that.”

Elko nodded. Rowan reluctantly gave a single nod.

“But if people are going into the Enclave for other things,” KT pressed, “Could we not bring Elko for

treatment? You get two of us for the Militia's business, for the price of one treatment. Seems like a good deal to me."

"I promise to keep you in mind," she said firmly. "I wish I could give you any more of a guarantee than that. But one of the things we hope to negotiate for is access to their decontamination technologies. If we can't get you inside sooner, Elko, I hope that we can arrive at a settlement with them soon enough to benefit you." She called to Marina, who opened the door promptly, smiling cheerfully at them. "There are many things I must attend to," Jan said, "but Marina or one of her people will orient you to the camp. You'll have a place to sleep, regular meals, and work shifts. I appreciate you three taking the time to talk today," she said smoothly.

As if we were busy doing anything else, Rowan thought acerbically. Strangely, she felt personally wounded by Jan's dismissal, but did her best to continue looking friendly, nodding her head at Jan as they followed Marina out the door. She looked for KT, whose stony face, as usual, revealed little of her impressions.

Elena

Elena sat at her desk, fidgeting with a pen and drawing idea after idea. It was late. The day's news had caused her anxiety about finishing the project, already high, to sky-rocket. Sawtooth had fallen, and the news ran and re-ran footage from a few clips of burning buildings and gun-fire. They had to keep running the same clips and dissecting what they'd already heard, because not long after the walls had fallen, communications had gone down. There was no more word from the Enclave, nor from Yellowstone's supporting military force.

Speculation ran rampant that the lot had been obliterated, that maybe the Unclean had gotten ahold of a U.S.-era nuke and just bombed the hell out of everything. Elena knew that to be unlikely – it wouldn't be to their advantage at all to destroy the resources they were fighting so hard to access. Plus, most Enclavers just didn't understand the tenuousness of long-distance comms these days. Within an Enclave, it was easy to connect everyone, and they were all hooked up to a local cloud that had large portions of the old world wide web backed up, plus all the new material Yellowstone had published since its founding. But to get ahold of other Enclaves? That required patching into old systems, using cell phone towers or satellites that hadn't been maintained by anyone in three decades.

Of course, they had systems that worked - most of the time. Enclaves needed to stay in touch with each other, to negotiate trade, to share new developments in technology, to warn each other of convoy raider movements. But these comms went down with some regularity. It was altogether possible that all it had taken was an explosion near one rickety Verizon tower. Elena could, if she wanted to, build a ham radio, but that was illegal – radio communication with other Enclaves was only for Enclave officials, not for civilians. God knows she'd considered it often enough, in her desire to get the lab's research out to other Enclaves. If there had been a soldier or two carrying radios for military communication... but who knows what happened to them. Despite her desire to sort through the technological questions, she would probably never get to know the answers. Elena smiled grimly. In the absence of radio or cell tower comms, she imagined sepia-toned visions of messengers on horseback – or better yet, messenger pigeons with cute little scrolls attached to their feet!

She shook her head to clear those thoughts away, and looked back at her notebook. She hadn't thought that they were close enough to the end product to start worrying about distribution, but now here they were, close enough to taste it practically, and she worried every night that Yellowstone would fall before they could release it. So it was time to start thinking seriously about distribution systems. How to send spores to cover the entire planet as quickly as possible? She had drawn spore cannons, then drones, then spore cannons mounted on drones, then

drones that would drop packages of pre-inoculated plugs of dirt across the land.

She rubbed at her face. Exhaustion was getting the better of her. Every time she began to contemplate spore dispersal, she was consumed by doubt. They had tested their plastivore fungus extensively, but it was impossible to know how it would perform in the real world. In the lab, they'd genetically modified it to produce more often, with more copious spores, than it normally would. Where a normal fungus might fruit just once or twice a year, this one could fruit monthly, as long as it had enough plastic particulate to consume, from spring until late fall, or year-round in more temperate locations. It formed little puffballs, that a person could harvest at the right time and transport to a new location to spread the spores around further.

Microplastics were so ubiquitous, and they'd bred their fungus to be so hardy, that Elena knew once they released it, it would change nearly every ecosystem in the world. They hadn't *found* a problem with it yet – they'd fed it to animals, who seemed fine, they'd tested its interactions with many other species of plants and fungus, and they'd tested it in many different temperature and humidity conditions. It seemed to co-exist just fine with all the organisms they had tested it with. Their extensive simulations had not turned up any likely problems, which was downright astonishing. But their lab was not the real world. Would replacing all the plastic in the world with a new, ultra-strong fungus be an improvement, or a new

nightmare? Did the scientists who had nearly released the problematic plastivore bacteria test it this thoroughly?

But oh, to think that maybe they had done it! That maybe, this fungus, after decades of research and experimentation, would *save the world* – would make it safe for people to drink water everywhere? There wouldn't even need to be Enclaves! It would be safe outside and in. People's life spans would be so much longer. Perhaps it would even re-knit the old threads of society. Elena had been in her early 20s when the Fall happened, and 30 years later and in an Enclave, she still longed for the security and simplicity of her youth. She liked to imagine that maybe the U.S. would re-form, once the plastic went away.

One of her other worries, one that haunted her, was that after they released the fungus, it would prove to eat other things besides plastic. What people referred to colloquially as “microplastics” was actually a great many things – and for a long time, scientists had believed that the cure would need to be many different types of fungi, that each ate a different plastic pollutant. Maybe there would need to be a whole suite of them, just to cover the array of PFAS. But Elena and Prasad had hit on a winner, a lucky combination of breeding and genetic modification that gave them this voracious plastivore. Elena worried that it would turn out to also hunger for some specific mineral, and wreak havoc in pursuit of it. Of course, they'd tested. In theory, it *shouldn't*.

They were pretty sure it couldn't affect the human body, but it hadn't been through the kind of testing the

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FDA would have required in Elena's youth. They'd already been testing prior versions on animals for years, but it was only six months ago that Elena and Prasad and a few other researchers had begun interacting with the fungus at various stages of its lifecycle with no personal protective equipment. So far, they were fine. But could there be effects that wouldn't show up for years? It didn't affect mouse reproduction, but Elena and Prasad certainly weren't having babies – what if it affected human reproduction? Or caused early senility? Or any of a million other things that could go wrong with our fragile human bodies. And if so, would it be better or worse than the effects of plasticosis that afflicted millions of people outside the walls?

Elena hoped that they would have time for more testing. Surely, she was just being overly cautious because of what had happened at Tahoe, and everything at Yellowstone would turn out okay. Maybe the military force was already on its way back from Sawtooth, and would soon secure Yellowstone against the Unclean. But Sawtooth's fall, and its destruction, was exactly what she feared would happen to them, and the reason she had sped the lab's activities up to double-time.

Elena had begun to hatch an escape plan since the day she'd arrived in Yellowstone with Noah and Cass, exhausted and terrified after their long journey through the Fallen Lands. She's promised herself that at the first sign of trouble, she'd take her copy of their research, and preferably at least one packet of spores, and go, to try to

repeat her successful escape to another Enclave and continue the research elsewhere. But they were at the point in testing where she thought that now, it might be time to switch her plan from escape to spore release, if her lab were to come under scrutiny or attack. They both had risks, and she knew that her fear made it hard to evaluate those risks objectively. She'd tried to assign percentages to the likelihood of different events, but didn't really have much data to go on, so was forced to abandon a Bayesian decision and rely on her flawed human gut instinct. And that gut instinct told her that she was more likely to be successful at setting off a spore dispersal than at escaping an Enclave, potentially in a war zone, getting to another Enclave safely, *and* having that Enclave agree to host a fungal solution lab. There were just more steps, and more uncertainty, in the latter option.

It's time to get Prasad in on this, she thought. Prasad hadn't ratted her out when she'd confided in him about looking for extra-legal options to get in touch with other Enclaves, though he'd given her low odds of success without getting caught and recommended against it. If she was really considering a rogue release of spores, she didn't want to do it without his expertise. And if he thought it was a terrible idea... well, maybe it was. Maybe he could sway her back to the escape plan.

Would I know when to make the call? she mused. She could very well just be sleeping in bed when the walls fell, and everything could be lost in a fiery flash before she could even pull the trigger on the spore dispersal. Her eyes

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flicked to the low couch behind the file cabinet, where she had begun sleeping some nights when she was too tired to walk home. *Not that it would probably make a difference,* she thought, *but perhaps I'll just sleep here from now on.*

KT

Jan had refused to give KT a job, insisting that she focus on recovering first. Her forearm was in an old-fashioned plaster cast, itchy and smelly, but it had helped reduce her pain. She could still wiggle her fingers and use her cast to pin things down, and was constantly testing herself to see what she could do. She felt so vulnerable with a broken wrist, and her dominant hand to boot. She had no doubt that they would soon be needing to head into the Enclave, and it felt like she was about to march naked into a thicket of stinging nettle and thorny blackberry bushes – except that her friends were always naked and defenseless, and normally she was the one to protect them all... okay, the metaphor kind of fell apart there, but the point was, KT didn't like it one bit.

Elko had been assigned to the medic, and spent her days taking care of the guards KT had injured so badly and inventorying supplies. KT had begged to be allowed to come with her, insisting that she could count supplies while sitting on her ass and resting, and would feel better than idling around the village and in the shared bunkhouse. She'd been firmly rebuffed. Rowan had been assigned to a general work crew, on a rotation of cooking, cleaning, and digging a new latrine trench.

The bunkhouse where they'd been offered space was a tightly-built, narrow log cabin, well-insulated against the harsh mountain winters, but windowless. It was fully dark

unless they left the door open or lit a fire in the hearth, which they did at night. Twelve sets of bunks lined the walls, and there was little open space. It made KT feel crazy to rest in there during the day, so she had taken to bringing her sleeping bag outside and napping in the sun, or watching life go by in the village.

That morning, the door was propped open to let in the dawn light, despite the chill in the air. Many of their roommates had already departed for work, but some were still getting ready. Elko and Rowan were just lacing up their boots, and KT was lying listlessly on her bunk dreading another day of boredom, when they heard shouts and the sound of running feet. Somebody whistled loudly, and the whistle was passed along down the row of bunkhouses and up into the crowded tent city in the meadow. Gasps came up from the best of the bunkhouse. Somebody said “Evacuation! Let’s go!” The three looked at each other, confused. KT rolled off the bunk, cracked ribs protesting at her sudden movement, and shoved her own feet into her boots.

A man arrived in the open doorway, panting. “Evacuation!” he announced breathlessly. “We’re under attack – follow the line of people heading north into the woods! Hurry!” And he ran off to the next bunkhouse. Most people, it seemed, already knew what the whistles meant. A crowd of people was wending their way northeast out of the camp.

The three of them all reached for their backpacks, which were mostly still packed anyway. KT awkwardly

struggled to put hers on backwards from her usual, left hand slinging the bag over left shoulder. She knew it would hurt her ribs to wear it, and that Elko couldn't carry a pack far either. KT hesitated over the sleeping bags, which were loose on their bunks. She looked around for guidance from their roommates, who were leaving without them. Okay, she decided; they had layers, and they could build a fire.

"Come on, KT," Rowan said anxiously from the doorway, pack already on her back. KT cast one last look around the place, grabbed the flint that she'd left carelessly on the hearth, and followed Rowan out the door.

They half-ran up the hill out of the camp. They hadn't heard any gunfire or seen Enclaver soldiers yet, and they also didn't know how far they were about to trek or where they were going, so unsure whether to sprint or walk, they fell into an uncomfortable trot. KT's side hurt with every jarring step and with every breath, but she was sure it would hurt more later once the adrenaline wore off. Soon they were a part of the river of people.

"Where are we going?" Elko asked a woman near them.

"A backup camp with a storage cache," she said. "It's on Thistle Creek, someone said. I don't know how far." Elko thanked her, and she sped ahead of them, towing a child of about ten behind her, who was running to keep up with the woman's long strides. KT stared, momentarily distracted. She hadn't noticed any children in the resistance camp yet, and a hard feeling rose in her throat –

something like judgment, that the mother had brought her child here, into such danger. She tried to brush it away, suddenly uncomfortable, reminding herself that she didn't know this woman's story.

An explosion boomed behind them. The crowd, almost as one, turned to look, in time to see a ball of fire engulf one of the buildings. KT thought it was the building with the library, where they'd spoken to Jan. The people down below who were still leaving began to sprint for the trees. KT saw small drones, at least a half dozen, flying around the buildings, their loud buzz reaching her ears despite the distance.

"KT, let's go," Rowan said, tugging at her elbow. She turned away from the fiery scene and let Rowan pull her along.

It was maybe only a mile and a half later that they arrived at the backup camp. Some people were calmly directing the crowd, asking everyone to sit in the large clearing. In front of the group, someone was standing on a box holding a megaphone. Not currently talking, just waiting, as people filed in. Every once in a while he raised the megaphone and asked for people to sit and wait. KT grabbed Elko's arm when she went to go sit in the middle. KT feared and distrusted crowds, and wanted to be in the back.

"But then we won't hear anything!" Elko protested.

"I'm sure even if we don't hear, we can ask one of the hundreds of people who did," KT said sharply, and that

was that. They sat with their backs against the wall of one of the long, low buildings that surrounded the clearing. There were only four buildings, and KT wondered what they would do for lodging. Some people circulated through the crowd with water and food, checking in on the seated masses.

Finally, the last stragglers seemed to have arrived, and the clearing was full. KT counted a block of people and then multiplied, trying to estimate how many people filled the clearing. Maybe four hundred, she guessed. It was more than she'd imagined from the size of the camp they'd left, and most of them were young adults who could be fighters. *Almost enough to make an Enclave afraid*, she thought. *And organized, to boot.*

The man standing up front with the megaphone switched places with another, handing the megaphone to an extremely tall man who'd just arrived. "Big Sam," KT whispered in surprised recognition. She didn't think a spymaster would be the one to address the crowd.

Big Sam addressed the crowd in the same measured tones he used one-on-one, thanking them for their calm and speedy evacuation. "We were lucky," he said, explaining that they had come away relatively unscathed because for once, they were in possession of a valuable hostage.

The crowd gasped, and murmured questions rose and hung pregnantly in the air. "An Enclaver?" "Who?"

Big Sam did not answer them. "Yellowstone did not want to fully destroy our camp because they did not know

where we kept the hostage. That is good – that means our people aren’t talking, while their walls and secrets are porous to us.” Even from far away, KT could see him smile. A warm feeling of pride swirled about. Some people laughed, and one gave a single loud hurrah that caused more to giggle at the interruption.

“So they sent drones with small explosives, to try to target the leaders without unduly risking the hostage. Fortunately, our scouts and alarm system proved effective, and we had extra time as the drones made a lap inside to look for the hostage first, before detonating. Everyone got out in time, with only a few minor injuries from shrapnel.” The crowd cheered. “Our hostage remains safe and secure as well.”

“Now then, I would ask that we all join together today to focus on our collective survival. While the drones are gone, quite a few of the buildings have burned, and we have decided not to risk moving back to our camp after such an escalation of force. In our cache here, we have food, blankets, and some big canvas tents we can put up for people to sleep under. We’ll be organizing a force to go back to our camp today and scavenge what materials we can. I would like you all to organize yourselves into your bunkhouses and tent circles. Pick a handful of strong and able-bodied people to send back for your group to collect tents and blankets. We have a few carts, but you may have to carry everything on your backs. We will meet at the beginning of the trail, where you just came from. Each group will also send a few other volunteers to meet at that

building” – he pointed at the farthest one – “to put up the canvas shelters. If you have medical needs, the medic will be setting up shop over here.” He pointed to the building they were leaning against. He thanked them again for their calmness and for their discretion, and reminded them not to talk too much about it and to report unknown faces. KT wondered how many times people would report the three of them to Big Sam, new as they were. They’d have to make an effort to get to know more of their new allies.

James

They'd had the same soft brown couches since James was a child, in a long L-shape in front of the TV and the picture window in the living room. It was odd to curl up on the couch and be able to flash back to childhood that way. James and Olivia had been playing a lot of cards during their long days of waiting in the house under armed guard. Just like they had when they were children. Cards on the couch, popsicles on the couch, movies on the couch – nothing had changed, except that everything had changed. At times James felt like a child in a borrowed adult-sized skin, and at times he felt himself to be an ancient being trapped in his childhood home, his childhood bedroom, even trapped with two-thirds of his family.

The waiting was hard on them all, and the lack of forward momentum. It seemed everyone in the Enclave was busy except for them, as if they had been forgotten, locked away in a cupboard and the key carelessly lost. Certainly the Council was busy enough, making foolhardy decisions if Olivia had anything to say about it. Which she certainly did.

James, never a particularly political animal to begin with, was trying hard not to say anything about anything, afraid that he'd somehow give himself away. This enraged Olivia, who thought that James ought to have opinions about the war now that they had such a personal stake in it.

It seemed that she desperately wanted someone to spar with, and was hoping James would disagree.

He didn't. Olivia said that it was stupid that the Council was escalating with the Outsiders while most of the YSDF was away at Sawtooth, instead of waiting for them to return home. It was meant, they supposed, to show the Outsiders the power and might of the Enclave and punish them for their incursions within the walls. But whether the Council realized it or not, it was mostly a bluff. While the Enclave had vastly superior technology and weapons powers, their remaining force was quite small in number. James didn't know how big the Outsider force was, or who would win in a fight – but it would be close enough that the Enclave shouldn't be provoking a fight they weren't sure they could win.

That much of Olivia's analysis, James agreed with entirely. It *was* stupid that the Council had sent drone explosives to the Outsider camp. Moreover, it was heartless. James's real opinion was that it was unnecessary violence. All the Outsiders were asking for were negotiations to give them a share of clean water and medicine. Was that so hard? Why couldn't the Council just say yes, and send them aid? What a waste, he thought. He wondered how many had been killed in the drone raid, and if any of them had been after-hours patients of his. Even if the Council had waited for the YSDF to come home before attacking the Outsider camp, it still would just be stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

"Are you even listening to me?" Olivia asked, irritated.

James looked up from his card shuffling, which he realized he was also doing angrily, as if the cards themselves were at fault. "Sorry. I was thinking about what you said at the beginning. What were you saying?"

"I was saying that by sending the drones, the Council basically forced the end of negotiations. Which is so stupid. They could've putzed along with negotiations until the YSDF got back, created a military extraction plan to get Dad, and then not gone through with whatever deal they were hammering out. We would've been back at square one, where the Outsiders didn't really have any bargaining power."

"I agree," said James levelly.

"*JAMES!*" Olivia swatted him lightly on the arm, annoyed, then leaned back into the couch, crossing her arms and sighing deeply.

"What?" he said indignantly. "Your analysis is perfectly solid. I have nothing to add. What more do you want from me?"

To his astonishment, her face changed from teen-with-big-opinions to sad-and-uncertain-child. In a very small voice, she asked, "Do you think the Council has any intention of trying to get him back? Do you think we'll see Dad again?"

"Oh," he said, feeling stupid for not realizing what this was about. He racked his brain for any logical kind of reassurance. Olivia looked at him desperately, but he wasn't about to try to comfort her with empty platitudes. She would hate that, and it wouldn't make her feel any

better. “Um. Hm. Yeah, I guess I think it’ll still be worth it to them. Getting Dad back would get rid of the Outsiders’ bargaining power, like you said. And maybe the drones are creating enough chaos that it would be a good opportunity for a small force to retrieve him.”

Olivia looked skeptical, as he was afraid she would. “A small force to retrieve him? Now? I don’t think they have the manpower for that.”

James shrugged. “I don’t think we really know what kind of manpower they do have. They’ve been a little cagey about it.”

“That’s not exactly reassuring. If they’re being cagey, doesn’t that sound like they’re trying to cover up how few YSDF troops are left?”

“Maybe that’s what they want the Outsiders to think.”

Olivia snorted. “Not if they want their bluff to be effective, it’s not.”

James sighed. “I wish I had more to reassure you with, Olivia. The reality is, I don’t know. And it sucks that we’re powerless to do anything about it. But I’m not giving up hope for Dad yet, and neither should you.”

“Yeah.” With a schooled neutral expression, Olivia unfolded herself from the couch and retreated to her room.

Elko

It was only two days after the evacuation that word started to buzz around camp that they were mobilizing for a raid on Yellowstone Enclave itself. Elko, in her pain, was quieter than usual, but was still making an effort to be in the places where people were talking. She'd discovered that the kitchen was prime gossip territory. Everyone took turns around the dishwashing tubs and cooking fires and chopping blocks, and mindless work for the hands left the mouths free to run on.

Though at first suspicious of new faces, once they knew who Elko was and why she was there, they were remarkably quick to overlook her presence. She must be exceptionally nonthreatening, she thought. They all witnessed her taking breaks from her tasks to weakly sit down, or run to the nearby woods to vomit behind a tree. *If I was working for the Enclave*, Elko thought wryly, *this would be the perfect disguise*. But of course, how could anyone be sick from the plastics and not on the side of The People?

And Elko was realizing that there's a different kind of invisibility that comes with dying. It makes people uncomfortable. They don't know what to say, and so they don't, they pretend not to see. Elko found it odd. Every one of these people had lived in uncomfortably close proximity to mortality, either their own, or that of their loved ones. They all knew Death. But it seemed that it was

impossible for them to look at Elko and see both a person and Death. They either tried to ignore Death, or Death was all they could see, when in reality, Death and Elko were grown together, both present and both wanting to be seen.

So Elko was quiet, and the others buzzed around her, busy at work, and chatty. They all knew, of course, that they weren't supposed to be talking about their assignments. They'd all been trained in security culture, and knew that such chatter is how the enemy gets wind of your plans. But nonetheless, in conspiratorial whispers amidst the chopping of carrots, the news was spread.

The leaders had sent a message up to the Enclave, they said. It said that the People were aggrieved by this terrible violence inflicted by the Enclave, and that we, the People, reject war. The message pleaded for the Enclave to send negotiators so that a settlement on water sharing could be reached. It even offered the return of the hostage, whose identity was rumored to be David Kramer, head of the Yellowstone Council, if the Enclave sent negotiators in good faith.

The Enclave had responded simply: "We don't negotiate with terrorists."

And so, the leaders had evidently decided that they would need to take what they wanted by force, and quickly, because who knew when – or if – the YSDF force would return from Sawtooth. People were being called into command central in small groups and given their orders for the raid. Roughly, they fit into three large task forces:

water, food, and medicine, a three-pronged initiative to give the People what they needed.

Elko also learned, in the course of her eavesdropping, that the People's Militia was much larger than she'd known. Apparently, there were two other camps – this one happened to be the camp that housed the central command, but spreading out made logistical sense, as well as provided a modicum of protection from the whole Militia falling to an Enclave attack. Those two other camps were going to provide the forces for a diversionary frontal assault on the Enclave, drawing the guards toward the gates and keeping attention away from the tunnel entry points. Elko considered whether or not to be glad that their camp was not in the frontal assault, and in the end, couldn't decide which role seemed more dangerous.

One by one, the dishwashers fell silent. Elko had been taking a break, perched on a nearby crate until her dizziness subsided. She was having a particularly bad moment, her vision blurry, a loud rushing sound in her ears, and pain throbbing in her gut. But she looked up fuzzily, wondering if they had stopped talking or if she had stopped hearing, and saw Marina approaching. She had been walking all over camp all day, calling people in groups to learn about their assignments. It took Elko far too long to realize that Marina was coming for *her* – how unexpected – and that she stood in front of Elko now, repeating her name.

She kneeled, concerned. "Elko, are you okay?"

Elko bobbed her head. The rushing in her ears was beginning to subside. Time to pull it together. “Yes, sorry,” she mumbled. “Give me just a moment, I’m almost ready.” With a deep breath, she stood, firmly telling her pain it had to shut up for a second and let her walk. When she stood, her vision grayed out completely. She swayed, but didn’t fall, and waited for it to come back. “How’s your day going, Marina?” she asked in a steady voice, hoping to disguise her blindness until she could walk again.

“Busy,” Marina said. “Are you sure you’re okay? I can come back later.”

“No,” Elko said, her vision returning to a fuzzy tunnel, and then back to normal. “Now’s a great time.” She followed Marina to central command, the largest building in the middle of camp, a low, log-cabin structure like the bunkhouses back at their old camp. Despite the relatively warm day, there was a fire in the hearth for light, and lanterns hung around the room. KT and Rowan ducked in through the doorway just after Elko’s arrival. The room was divided roughly in half, chairs and tables on each end. Large papers covered in writing filled every surface, covering the walls and the tables. A small group of people was meeting on the left side of the room, getting their own assignment; on the right, Jan awaited them, motioning them to waiting chairs.

“I have good news for you,” she began, without preamble. “I have a task for you that’ll help us all immensely.” Rowan looked at Elko, hopeful eyes shining bright, a smile on her face. Elko smiled back weakly. She

hadn't put it to words yet even to herself, let alone to her friends, but a cloud of intuition haunted her, a strong belief that she would be untreatable even with the Enclave's technology. With her condition worsening day by day, the thin glimmer of hope that had borne them along so many miles felt dimmer than ever.

"You'll be on Operation Medicine," Jan was saying. "KT, how's that arm of yours healing up?"

"Oh, it won't be a problem," KT lied smoothly. "It's much better – I'm sure I could use it in a fight."

Jan made a neutral "hmm," her eyebrows rising skeptically. "Word is that you're quite the accomplished warrior, KT. I'm hesitant to send an injured soldier in for such an important task, but I am sure you have many tricks up your sleeves."

"And how about you, Rowan?" Rowan perked up at her name, trepidatious but trying to look confident. "I haven't heard if you were a fighter, but I can only imagine so, since you brought Elko so far from home."

Rowan, though a terrible liar, couldn't miss the implications of this one. "Yes," she said, her voice squeaking. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Yes, I'm a strong fighter. You can count on me."

"What weapons do you prefer?" Jan asked.

Rowan looked sideways at KT, desperate for guidance. "I mean, a gun would be ideal?" she said, unsure if it was a trick question.

Jan laughed. "Fair enough," she said. "We can give you each a gun. And knives for backup." She stood up,

paced across the small space once, then seemed to remember herself and sat down again. “We have a young medical student named James who has been doing decontaminations for us. He’s actually the son of Councilman Kramer!” She laughed. “I never would’ve thought to recruit the son of a conservative politician. But he was vetted by one of our informants. They said he had a good heart, and sure enough, he has been unable to say no to treating our people so far.”

“Wait,” KT cut in, “informants?”

Jan nodded. “Sympathizers. Enclavers who believe in our cause, and are willing to help us. We have a handful of them. It’s been very helpful.” The three of them nodded, impressed and surprised.

“James is currently under guard with his family, as are all the other Councilmembers, to protect them from being taken hostage. To the best of our knowledge, James is not suspected of aiding us. There should be only two guards, and they may abandon their posts to rush to respond to the raid when they hear of it. Your job will be to get James from his family home to the Yellowstone Institute of Medicine – they call it the YIM – and specifically, the decontamination clinic. There, if you have time, you will ask James to begin the first step of treating Elko. But the primary reason for this action is to steal the right equipment and medicine for us to have our very own decontamination clinic, so that in the future, we can treat people like you, Elko, right in our own camp.” She paused

for their reactions. The three of them were riveted, hanging on to her every word.

She went on. “You’ll be meeting up with another task force once you arrive at the YIM. You won’t be alone, and the man in charge of Operation Medicine will be in the building, commanding both your task – Operation Degrué – and another team that will be liberating other types of medicines. I’ll introduce you once I go over the details of your operation.

“You’ll have to get James to advise you on what to steal. He knows what you’ll need, so don’t let him feign ignorance. There will be other people there to help if you’re having trouble, but I thought it would be best if he got this request from you, Elko. He’d have a harder time turning you down, faced so directly with the suffering of our people, than if some rowdy with a gun is threatening him for it. Of course, we’ll threaten him if need be.”

Elko winced. She saw Jan’s point – it was practical, for sure – but she hated it. Being sent in there purely to provoke pity in some selfish Enclaver’s cold heart! She saw KT’s eyes flash angrily, and before she could stop it, the acerbic tongue got loose.

“Please sah,” KT mocked. “Won’t you take pity on poor little old me, just livin’ full of tumors and eatin’ mud in a ditch! We don’t have much book learnin’ where I come from, so if you could just save me please, with your massive brain and heroism!” She put a hand dramatically against her forehead and sighed.

“Enough!” Elko snapped sharply. She never raised her voice, and KT looked at her guiltily, afraid she’d overstepped. “Pity’s a small price to pay, KT,” she said more gently. “It’s a fine means to an end.”

Jan, leaning back with her arms crossed, was supremely unimpressed by this outburst, and waited until KT muttered an apology and asked her to please continue before she spoke again. “Once you have all the equipment loaded up and ready to go, your last step is to steal James. We’ll need him to train us on how to use the equipment and perform the medical procedures ourselves. Do not tell him he’s going to be kidnapped until after you’ve gotten everything else you need from the lab – you wouldn’t want to jeopardize his cooperation too early. He’ll have questions about it, I’m sure. Reassure him that he’ll be well taken-care-of, and that after he’s done training us, we’ll release him back to the Enclave.”

Elko cocked her head, genuinely curious. “Is that... true?”

Jan turned both hands upward, a small gesture that suggested, “who’s to say what will happen in the future?” She stared at Elko intensely, and said, “If possible, yes. But don’t tell him that. Tell him whatever he needs to hear.”

The rest of their meeting was spent deep in the details. They pored over large maps of the Enclave and the YIM, and Jan gave them small versions to keep. They discussed how the guards would be armed, how they’d move the

heavy equipment, how to use the ancient radios that each team would carry to keep in touch with their commanding officers, who would keep in touch with Jan and the other leaders at command central. The excitement of it was palpable. Despite how they'd reacted poorly to Jan, Elko felt that liberating this decontamination equipment would be by far the most important thing they would ever do in their lives. Even if she still died, if they could do this, it would have all been worth it: all the suffering, the burden this had been on Rowan and KT, and leaving her community to die so far from home. So many lives could be saved, and so many people made healthier and stronger. She imagined people visiting from communities far and wide to get treated here, just as she had done – but treated by Outsiders, by their very own hands! It was a mission far bigger than themselves, a mission she'd be proud to die for, if it came to that.

And despite herself, hope began to creep back into her heart, that perhaps, after all, she could be saved by this DeGrue fungus. This whole journey had been resting on the tiniest sliver of a dream of hope – she had never considered it a likely outcome that she would be healed. But they were closer than ever to treatment, and the worn-out grain of hope she carried in her began to grow, filling her with new warmth. She was nervous, but felt invincible, buoyed up by her newfound passion for the mission and her hope of her own survival.

Meeting the captain of their operation only deflated her high a little. Jan called him over from the group meeting across the room. Elko realized the group must be the team leaders of the three big Operations and the frontal assault, as well as the other command central leadership staff, and she stared across at them with fresh interest. It was a remarkably ordinary-looking group of men and women. But then again, she reminded herself, heroes do look just like ordinary people. Big Sam was the only one she recognized among them. He was standing and speaking to them by a large map, drawing paths across it with his massive hands.

The one approaching them was a thin man of middling height, all hard lines to his face, a knit brow and a permanent crease between his eyes. A close-cropped black beard and mustache hid thin lips that wore the suggestion of a military scowl. *Hope he has a shining personality beneath the unfriendly exterior*, Elko thought.

"This is Captain Sam Milyenitsky," Jan said by way of introduction.

"Little Sam?" KT joked immediately, unable to contain herself.

Oh no, Elko thought. *I don't know her; I just work here!*

Little Sam's scowl deepened, completely unamused. "Captain Milyenitsky will do," he said coldly, one step more civil than a snarl.

Smoothly, Jan intervened. “This is Elko, KT, and Rowan,” she indicated each one of them in turn. “They’ll be your James Kramer-nappers.”

He turned his withering stare away from KT to examine Elko, briefly and dismissively, and then Rowan, only slightly more appraisingly. “You sure they’re up to the task?” he asked bluntly.

“I sure hope so,” Jan said mildly. “As you know, Captain, we’re spread pretty thin. Every last one of our fighters will need to be trusted with an important task if we’re going to pull all this off.” She smiled at Elko, warmly. “Plus, they are extremely motivated. That goes a long way, in my experience. They’re not going to crawl off and hide – they’ll bring you James, or die trying.” Rowan nodded solemn confirmation at the Captain. She was almost pulling it off, Elko thought. With a little armor, she could look like a Viking ready for battle, with her stoic expression and her long blond braids.

“They’ll get to prove their mettle soon enough, then.” The Captain saluted them, and Elko wasn’t sure if the crisp military gesture was sincere or was meant to mock them somehow. He about-faced and returned to his meeting on the other side of the room.

KT whistled softly, provoking a laugh from Jan. “He’ll warm up to you,” she said, seeming unconcerned. “He doesn’t like new people. But he has many other redeeming qualities – and the military experience he brings as a captain is one of them.”

The night of the raid, the entire camp went to bed early in preparation of their early morning attack. Elko was sure not a one of them was sleeping, but politely, the meadow of tents was quiet, just in case anyone was successfully dreaming away. She lay in her sleeping bag, trying to be still, her body turned towards the tent door and her back touching Rowan, who in turn was surely touching KT. The three of them were in a two-person tent, stuck in snug accommodations after the evacuation. Some didn't have tents at all, and rolled out their blankets in rows under the big communal canvas tents. Though the nights were chilly, Elko had fastened the door of the tent rolled open, to facilitate her occasional need to dash from the tent and empty her insides of the little food she was able to eat. It was for this reason as well that they'd laid claim to one of the smaller tents, and pitched it at the edge of the clearing next to a stand of tall pines. Elko thought of them as her pines, covered in her bodily fluids as they were, but she was sure other people used them to empty their bladders at night as well.

Through the open door, she could see from where she lay a small window of stars, stunning in their clarity, numerous beyond counting. A quarter-moon was beginning to rise, its light shining diffuse through the trees, so Elko thought it must be around midnight. The wake-up call would be coming soon. She closed her eyes, and in a blink of half-sleep's elapsed time, woke to the sound of singing. She opened her eyes. The moon was just above the trees now, shining right down into the tent, bathing

everything in gentle silver light. She blinked. The song rose ethereally over the waking camp, a solo soprano voice, achingly beautiful in a haunting minor key. The melody was old, a folk song Elko couldn't identify but knew that she had heard before, but the words were new.

Across the clearing, bodies were stirring, sitting up, pulling on boots, but all were quiet, not wanting the magic of the singing to end. The verse came to an end and the singer returned to the chorus. Soon, another voice joined hers, harmonizing in thirds and fifths. They repeated the chorus again, and this time, many voices joined, the whole meadow swelling with it, a collective sound rising up of love, and grief, and hope.

*We'll find each other by the water
To the water we must go
Mother, father, son and daughter
United by the river's flow.*

Too breathless to sing, her chest aching and her chest tight with unshed tears, Elko stood in wonderment. She looked up at the moon and stars, so bright and full of promise above her. She looked all around at the people standing up and singing all around, feeling like she could burst with love for them. Here they were, prepared to sacrifice everything for a dream of plenty, and in the last peaceful moments before the raid, they were making something beautiful. Finally, she turned and looked at KT and Rowan, who were both now fully dressed and on their

feet. Their faces glowed in the moonlight, KT's high cheekbones and Rowan's broad ones highlighted elegantly. Elko studied them, wanting to keep the image of the two of them here forever in her heart. Two sets of eyes, brown and blue, shone wetly, and one silver tear streaked its way down Rowan's face. She did not wipe it away, but reached out and held both of their hands.

One more time through the chorus, but softer, and in its aftermath, a silence hung, pregnant with the last chord. It wormed its way into their bones and stayed there, sacred and wordless. The people took a collective breath into that silence, and by mutual accord, the spell was broken. Rowan squeezed their hands and dropped them. Across the clearing, people began to move out, finding their teammates and disappearing down the trail in small groups.

They moved to find their cohort, and followed them into the trees. The only voices spoke in whispers, and Elko still had the lingering feeling of sacredness, as if the forest through which they walked was an ancient cathedral. She hoped the trees blessed their passage, and for once wondered what the trees would hope for in the world, and if they, too, thirsted for clean water.

Jan had explained to them that their entry tunnel into the water treatment plant was heavily guarded, now that the YSDF knew how they'd gotten in. But beneath Yellowstone was a sprawling maze of tunnels, some for water intake from the lake, some for sewage, and still others with unknown purposes. If the YSDF thought they

had truly secured the tunnels, they were fools. More likely, they knew that they hadn't, but didn't want the populace of the Enclave to panic in the absence of the force that had gone to support Sawtooth.

The Enclave had once punished the People's Militia for a convoy raid by dumping sewage into the Yellowstone River, downstream, of course, from where the Enclave drank from. It had caused illness in the camp, and they'd had to carry water from upstream for quite some time. The advantage of the dirty attack, Jan had said, was that they'd found where the sewage pipe came out and followed it all the way back to its sewage tunnel. That had been their first entry point into Yellowstone, long before they'd dug a tunnel into the water filtration maintenance area. They had used it sparingly, but tonight, it was a highway taking both Op Medicine and Op Food into the Enclave. Op Water had their own entry point, closer to their own objectives.

At first, they crawled through a small, unfinished tunnel built by the people who'd traced the sewage pipe back to the sewers from whence it came. Rocks in the roof of the tunnel dug into Elko's back and roots caressed her face on her way by. When dirt sprayed her in the eye from KT's movement in front of her, she could only blink and curse futilely, knowing that rubbing her eye with her filthy hands would just make it worse.

At last, KT disappeared from in front of her, and her small sound of surprise echoed below, giving Elko the impression of a much larger and harder place. She wormed her way around until she could drop her feet into the hole.

Hands caught her kicking feet and placed them on the rungs of a ladder. Relieved, she stepped down into the sewers. It was better than she'd expected. They were not standing in a river of waste, but on a narrow raised platform on the edge of the stream. The walls and ceiling were made of dark bricks, with occasional iron rungs sticking out. It smelled organic and pungent, but not as bad as Elko had expected. KT gestured for her to move down the line, out of the way, and then grabbed Rowan's feet to direct them next. Elko followed the train of people picking their way carefully down the catwalk.

At each fork in the sewers, the line in front of them did not hesitate, but each one after the other followed left, then right, then right again. Elko wondered who was in front, and how they knew which way to go. She hoped it was Captain Milyenitsky, and that he'd been here before. Catching a glance behind her, she could dimly make out KT's face, giving her a reassuring smile.

It felt like they'd been walking in the sewer for miles before they arrived. Now, the line of people was swarming up another ladder and out a round manhole. Elko felt like it must surely be dawn, but when it was her turn on the ladder, she looked up to see a bright circle of stars and diffuse moonlight. Strong arms helped pull her out of the manhole when she struggled to lever herself out. The man murmured a quiet apology, and she decided not to mind. Not tonight, it was not the time for incorrectly insisting she could do things herself.

She stood on a paved street surrounded by tall, shiny buildings. They had so many windows! At first she was excited to see so many, then nervous when she remembered that people could be looking at them through the windows. She tapped the man who'd helped her up and gestured up at them, questioningly.

"No one's there at night," he whispered. "That's the clinic, and that's the research arm. There's a hospital that would have people overnight, but it's around the other side." He turned and pointed to the other large, shiny building on the street. "That one's the Capitol building, where the Council meets. It should also be empty now."

Elko's jaw dropped, at the idea that these fancy buildings didn't even have people sleeping in them at night. What a waste!

Captain Milyenitski drew the three of them aside. He reached out to the radio that KT wore slung across her chest, checking to make sure it was on and the volume on low.

"That way," he said, pointing down the street. "And then left on Canyon —"

"Right on Pinyon, and left again on Sage," Rowan finished for him.

He nodded. "Just making sure. Godspeed," he said, almost kindly. Then, as if he couldn't help himself, "Don't muck it up."

The three of them slipped down the street, leaving the rest of Op Meds behind them, on their way to kidnap an almost-doctor.

There should only be two guards at the Kramer house, Big Sam had assured them. And they expected to arrive at the house around the same time that the alarm would be going up all around the Enclave at the arrival of the frontal assault on the gates. The easiest way would be if the guards left their post at the Kramer house to go respond to the gates, given that the YSDF was spread so thin. When they arrived near the blue house on Sage Street, KT pointed Elko towards a large bush.

“You wait in there,” she whispered. “We’ll go find the guards, and we’ll be back for you soon.”

Elko wanted to argue, but knew that she wasn’t likely to be useful here. She began to crawl into the bush, but sudden feelings of misgiving snuck over her, and she stopped. “Wait!” she hissed. “Please... try not to kill them?”

KT and Rowan looked at each other. Elko read exasperation in KT’s face.

“It’s just... it doesn’t make sense. To be here to try to save my life, but sacrifice the lives of others to do so? It’s not their fault I’m sick!” Elko explained.

“Yeah, but, we love you,” Rowan said, cavalierly. “Seems worth it to me.”

“They chose to join the YSDF,” KT added. “When you join a military force, you’re agreeing that you’re willing to die for a cause. They made that choice, and so did we, actually – this is bigger than you, Elko. No offense.”

Get your ass in the bush and shut up, Elko, is what that meant. Okay. She crawled into the bush, and KT and Rowan disappeared with a whispered “We’ll be back!”

As soon as they were gone, Elko was struck with a sudden fear that she would never see them again. What if those were the last words they ever exchanged? It seemed deeply inadequate. “I love you both,” she whispered helplessly into the darkness. “And I’m proud to know you.”

Minutes stretched by, infinitely long, before she heard footfalls announcing their return. Anxious to see if they were hurt, she peeked out of the bush. Not them! It was a guard, wearing a crisp blue YSDF uniform. Elko shrank back, heart thumping loudly, hoping against hope that he hadn’t seen her or heard her small, startled intake of breath.

The steps paused. A pair of shiny black boots approached the bush slowly, as if unsure. Elko wished desperately that she had a gun now. She had a knife at her side, but didn’t want to give away her exact location by moving far enough to unsheathe it. Instead, her hands curled around a rock at her feet. Broad and flat, it must have been an extra flagstone that ended up here by chance.

Foliage moved, the guard brushing leaves aside to look inside. Elko looked up in time to see the startlement on his young face at finding her. His other hand moved, bringing up a handgun, and in that instant Elko sprang from her crouch into him, pushing the flat side of the flagstone up into his face. He went down, and Elko fell on top of him.

He grabbed at her, one arm finding her shoulder and pulling her left arm back painfully, his grip like iron. His other hand scrabbled for the gun, which had fallen to the side. Desperately, she lifted the flagstone again with just her right arm, and smashed it back down into his face. She couldn't lift the stone very far with just one hand, and it wasn't hard enough to do more serious damage.

He pushed hard into her pinned left arm and heaved with his body, rolling her into the ground on her right side and coming up on top, straddling her. Now he had the upper hand. His one hand still pinning her upper arm, the other found her throat and squeezed hard. She panicked. His grip was strong, and there was no way she could break it. With her right arm, she tried to reach for her knife, but it was on her other side. *Wait, the gun!* In rolling, they had moved closer to it. Her vision was beginning to go black, and although the strong hand still held her left arm close to the shoulder, her hand was free to swipe across the ground. Miraculously, the gun was there. She found the trigger and fired it blindly, at an angle. He cursed in pain, and his grip on her throat slackened for a moment, before redoubling. She fired again in the same direction, and heaved with her body to try to get him off of her. He fell backward.

Gasping, her vision still dark, she crawled back away from him, clutching the gun and trying to listen for another attack. It didn't come. He moaned, and began to gurgle.

Her vision returned, though it took a couple minutes before her gasps subsided into more regular breathing. Her throat hurt, badly, and she wasn't even sure yet if she had

sustained other injuries. Her gaze fixed on the young man, obviously dying, in front of her. He gurgled one last time, with a painful rise and fall of the chest, and then, abruptly, his body slackened. She stared, sickened.

It was a corpse now. She had seen death before, death from sickness and old age, back home in Two Harbors, but this was different. There was no peace in this bloody form. His eyes stared, bugged out. His nose had been thoroughly smashed by the rock, and his face was covered in blood.

Nervously, she scooted forward, still holding the gun in front of her, afraid that his eyes would suddenly move and flash back to life. But she wanted to see where she had shot him, know how the blood had left his body, feeling that somehow the knowledge would free her of sin. But that was silly, she thought. She'd murdered the man, no matter how you cut it. Self-defense, yes, but for Elko, what was self-defense? *Saving a walking corpse?* she thought bitterly. Elko closed his staring eyes first, then investigated, finding one bullet hole through his stomach and another higher up, in the lungs.

The smell hit her, coppery blood and something fouler, from his intestines. Abruptly, she vomited, barely managing to turn away and not vomit on the man's corpse. When she was done, she found that she was crying and shaking. She wiped her mouth on her sleeve, then wiped her eyes, then wished she had done those in the other order. She closed her eyes and breathed slowly, trying to calm herself, but behind her eyelids lurked the man's surprised face when he saw her in the bush.

Why was he surprised? Didn't he see me? she wondered. Perhaps he'd thought the movement was just a rabbit or a bird, and despite being diligent enough to check, wasn't really prepared to find a person. She cursed softly, wishing fervently that she'd kept her head in the bush. She'd been lucky, she knew. It was miraculous that he hadn't shot her – only surprise had saved her.

KT and Rowan rounded the corner of the house at a run. They must have heard the gunshots. Probably, so did everyone else on the street, including James. *We should really get going*, Elko reflected. Elko held up her hands in a calming gesture to her friends. "It's fine! He's dead. I'm okay."

Rowan turned her towards the bush, away from the body and her vomit, and began checking her over and asking questions, deep concern in her blue eyes. KT, behind her, checked over the body and divested it of weapons, before kneeling before Elko.

"How about the other guard? Or are there more?" Elko asked, when she'd briefly explained how the struggle with the guard had happened.

"Taken care of," KT said shortly. Her face was stony, and Rowan's, for once, didn't reveal much more. She hadn't heard any other shots, so she wondered what had happened. Her imagination supplied a few answers, and she immediately regretted wondering. Bile rose again in Elko's throat, and she swallowed it down, wishing she had some water. Evidently, she wasn't cut out for war. She'd spent so much time grappling with her own mortality, and

she found she couldn't gloss over the deaths of others. Taking other lives, even if for a good cause, had never sat well with her from the beginning. Here now, seeing it in the torn flesh and staring eyes was worse.

"We gotta go," KT said. "Time to get this James character." She handed Elko the dead soldier's gun. Elko recoiled at first, but steeled herself and took it. She didn't want to try to kill anybody with a rock again, either.

In the end, getting James out had been the easiest part of the mission. Checking the map, they found the correct corner of the house and pried open his bedroom window. James was inside, alone, and seemed completely unsurprised that they were there. He'd been lying on his bed with a book, long legs hanging off the end of the bed, looking for all the world like an extra-long kid. Elko knew he was a med student, but hadn't expected him to look so young. She wondered how he could possibly know enough to treat the plastics, and how long he'd been in school. His height didn't come across as intimidating; he was lanky, and good-looking in a soft and boyish way, with a mop of golden-brown curls. Elko wouldn't have bet on him in a fight. Then again, she wouldn't have bet on herself, either.

"You're coming with us," KT had commanded sternly. He'd stood up, hands raised. His only request had been that they keep a gun trained on him for the walk to the YIM.

"In case anybody sees us," he explained. "I don't want them to think I'm cooperating."

But no one stopped them. Most of the YSDF was already at the gates, though a few patrols still ran by. The Enclave swarmed with People's Militia operatives, mostly trying to stay out of sight of the guards, but when they were seen, exchanging fire. There were guns, and gunshots, and yelling. Not wanting to get tangled in any crossfire, they ducked into cover whenever they saw another group.

They were almost to the YIM, when a patrol of YSDF running towards the lake caused them to duck into the landscaping at the side of another large, glassy building and crouch behind a fountain. Quiet radio chatter from Captain Milyenitsky informed them that Op Water's presence had been discovered, and a few YSDF squads were headed there. Op Meds seemed to be undetected, so far – the Institute of Medicine was clear of guards, and ready for entry. As they waited for the patrol to head out of sight, James finally asked what tasks they wanted him for.

"Two things, hopefully," Elko explained in an earnest whisper. "If we have time, I need to be treated. I'm very, very sick from the plastics. I... hope that it's still treatable." She looked only at James when she said it, not wanting to see Rowan or KT's faces. They hadn't discussed that possibility much, though Elko had been assuming for weeks that she might be past the point of Enclave medicine being able to help her. James looked sympathetic, but didn't say anything, just listened.

"But mainly," Elko continued, "we've been charged with liberating one or two of every medicine and piece of

equipment needed to do our own DeGrue treatments outside the Enclave. There will be a team joining us inside who'll have dollies to carry everything out. We just need your advice about what to take."

He frowned, thinking. "How are you going to administer the treatments without anyone trained in it?"

Damn, he hit on it right away, Elko thought. She'd hoped he wouldn't notice that detail.

"Oh, I'm not sure," she said vaguely. "I guess they'll train some of our own people. I think someone said they have obtained training materials from the Institute. Our job is just to get the stuff."

He hummed, thinking. "If you rely on just stealing the DeGrue fungus, you won't be able to do it. There's a whole pharmacy that germinates the fungus and mixes it into the medication cocktails we use. You'd need to get all that equipment too, plus someone who knows how to do it."

"We know – and there's another team on that," Elko said firmly. That much was true – there was another team ransacking the pharmacy and kidnapping one of its technicians. But James didn't need to know that part.

Elko waited for other objections, but apparently those were the only problems.

"If you're going to be able to do your own treatments, does that mean they won't need me to do them at night anymore?" James asked hopefully.

She smiled at him, and reassured him that if all went well, they wouldn't need him anymore. Inside, a turmoil of

conflicting emotions surged. She hated lying to him – he was so earnest, and clearly didn't wish anything bad upon them. He was just a guy who wanted to sleep at night, and not be in trouble with the law. On the other hand, a spiteful part of Elko hated him for his privilege, and for his health. He wanted to just go back to his comfortable life in the Enclave, and forget about the suffering of the Outsiders! How could he look away?

She looked at her shoes, uneasy. Well, he wasn't looking away yet. He had gone with them willingly – and had willingly helped Outsiders in the past. She would reserve her judgment, for now.

The coast was clear, and they ducked back into the street to the Yellowstone Institute of Medicine. They went in through the main doors, vacant as they were of guards, straight under the impressive stone archway with engraved lettering. Elko allowed herself to revel in it, a hit of triumph at walking under those words. She wished she could send a mental postcard of this moment back in time to the much-younger Elko of two months ago, back in Two Harbors.

James led them down the hallway and pressed a button on the wall. To Elko's astonishment, a door slid open, but it did not lead to a lab room, just to a small metal box. She stared at James, suspiciously.

"Come on!" he said, waving them in. "Let's go!"

She shook her head, unsure. He still seemed affable, but she couldn't see any reason why they would need to go in the box, except if he was trying to trap them in there.

“Oh,” James said, realizing the problem. “It’s just an elevator. But never mind – we can take the stairs.” He opened a nearby door and took them up two flights of stairs, finally palming his way into the Decontamination Clinic.

“What the – !” James stared, blocking the doorway. KT pushed him aside, coming through with her gun raised.

In the middle of the lab, her hands full of electrical cords, was a middle-aged plump woman in a lab coat with shoulder-length black-and-gray hair. She yelped and put her hands up, dropping the cords at her feet. “Don’t shoot!” she squeaked.

“What are you doing?” James demanded. “Why are you taking all of our extension cords?” He looked suspiciously at Elko. “She isn’t with you, is she?” Elko shook her head.

“I can explain!” she said. “Please, put the gun down. I promise I won’t do anything.” KT lowered her weapon partway. “My name is Dr. Elena Kenjik. I work in one of the labs here in the YIM. Are you... are you Outsiders?”

“We’ll be asking the questions,” KT said calmly, but her non-answer seemed confirmation enough to Elena.

“I’m not,” James said cheerfully. He held his hands up as if to show her that he, too, was under duress. “Just a med student being held at gunpoint to decontaminate them!”

She squinted at him, thrown off by his apparent lack of concern, but went on. “I need these for a very important project. I’m... not at liberty to explain what it is, but I can

assure you that it's in *all* of our best interests if you just let me walk out that door, and pretend you never saw me."

KT scoffed. "Sure thing, go right ahead," she said sarcastically. "We won't mind you raising the alarm at all!"

Elena shook her head, terror rising on her face. "Please!" She fell to her knees in front of KT, apparently deciding KT was the boss. "I don't know how to explain this to you, but all of our lives are at stake! I only want what's best for everyone!"

KT looked down at her dispassionately. "You better start explaining more, if that's true, lady. Sorry, but your promise means nothing to me – I've never met you before in my life, and I have a low opinion of Enclavers."

Elena winced. A flurry of emotions passed across her face, including a desperate glance at the door, but she apparently gave low odds to her chance at escaping, because she didn't even twitch. She took a deep breath, her decision apparently made. "If any of us survive this, I'm going to be in very big trouble for spilling classified information," she muttered, then in a clear, matter-of-fact voice, explained. "I work in a fungal design lab. We've made a fungus that can eat microplastics of all kinds in the environment, and seems... no, *is* safe and effective. It's... the holy grail of solutions for this messed-up world we live in. If it works, there won't be Enclavers and Outsiders anymore. The world will be clean for everyone. No more plastics.

"When I heard the alarm go off, I knew it was time. We *have* to release it now. I just finished building the spore

dispersal system two days ago – it is ready. Imagine if this lab were to get bombed out in this conflict. It would destroy our last, best hope at saving the world – saving everything! I need these extension cords.” To their surprise, her voice broke, and tears streamed down her face as she spoke. “And I need to get back there and finish setting up the spore cannons. Please. If you stop me, you’re going to destroy everything.”

Elko, Rowan, and KT looked at each other. Elko could tell they all believed Elena. Or at least, she modified mentally, she believed that Elena believed what she was telling them. Whether or not this magic fungus was actually going to save the world.

“Maybe we should divide forces,” KT suggested. “I could go with Elena to make sure she won’t bring the YSDF back here, and you two can get started with James and the equipment.”

Just then, as if in answer, her radio started to talk. KT turned up the volume so everyone could hear. A young voice was reporting to Captain Milyenitsky, explaining that they’d intercepted someone – a lab tech – running through the halls. When questioned, the tech had done the same thing as Elena, pleading for his release – he had divulged the existence of a secret lab within the YIM that was soon going to release spores of a plastic-eating fungus that they hoped would cover the whole world and restore its clean and healthy waters. The tech had been on his way to assist the release right at that moment, spurred to action by the Militia’s attack.

Elena rose up in a panic, grabbing KT and pleading to let her go. “Quiet!” KT snapped. “Listen!”

Captain Milyenitsky’s voice crackled. “Stand by, Aaron. I’ll send this up the chain of command.”

Elena made a desperate break for the door, though somewhat half-hearted, as if she didn’t truly believe she’d get away. KT slugged her in the stomach with her hard cast. Elena bent double, gasping, and Rowan held her arm firmly.

“Sorry,” KT said, genuinely apologetic. “I would’ve just grabbed you, but my good arm is holding a gun.” Elena waved vaguely, as if to say, it doesn’t matter.

James spoke up, for the first time. “We should help her,” he said earnestly, turning his wide eyes on them pleadingly. “I know you have a lot of reasons to distrust the Enclave and its scientists, but we’ve come a long way since the days of technology companies ignoring pollution in favor of profits. Trust me when I tell you that Dr. Kenjik has no reason to lie to you. If she says this fungus is our last, best hope, then I believe her. This is an institution with ethics – whatever you think of the rest of the Enclave, the YIM is different.”

“I think we should go with her to the lab,” Elko said in a small voice. She felt that she wasn’t quite thinking fast enough to absorb all the implications of what was happening, but she instinctively believed Elena, and wanted desperately for this vision of a post-plastic future to be true.

“Hold on,” said KT. “You don’t know what they’re going to say. Let’s wait and hear – Outsiders have every incentive to hope for a cure for the world.”

As if she’d summoned it, the Captain’s voice came back on the radio. “Op Meds, this is Captain Milyenitsky with important announcements. The YSDF force from Sawtooth has arrived at the gates and is attacking our frontal assault from behind. Let’s consider that an invitation to hurry up and get out of here. I couldn’t get ahold of Command Central with this issue of the fungal lab – all channels are busy with more critical issues. We don’t know if this fungus is safe, or if it’s going to do what they say. Aaron, you and your team will destroy the lab. Make sure it burns hot to kill the spores. Team First Aid and Team Fungus, go to assist this operation when you’re done. Copy back to confirm.”

Elena howled in grief and terror. “No! We have to go! I’m begging you, help me stop this!”

They looked at each other only briefly, and all nodded. They didn’t truly have time to think things through, but all felt in their bones that Captain Milyenitsky was wrong.

“Captain Milyenitsky, this is KT!” KT said desperately into the radio.

“I copy, go ahead.”

“Captain, I beg you to reconsider this order! Destroying this lab could be destroying the only hope for saving this world! How about just preventing the spore release?”

“KT, you don’t have the information I have. I need every team to strike as quickly as possible and get out of here. We’re hopelessly outnumbered – the force at the gate won’t hold for long. There’s no time to capture all the personnel. There’s no time to do anything but chuck some grenades in there.”

“But sir! You have no idea what this fungus is! Please, get ahold of Command Central!”

“Enough insubordination!” the Captain hissed through the radio. “Team leaders, copy back for your new instructions!”

“Lead the way,” Elko said to Elena, opening the door. They all ran out on the tails of her white coat, sprinting to the staircase.

“To the basement!” Elena announced breathlessly. As they opened the door to the stairs, a lean Indian man in a lab coat was just passing by their floor, leaping up the stairs three at a time. When he saw Elena, he slowed down for her, barely casting a glance over the rest of them.

“I got them!” he said triumphantly, holding up a handful of glass tubes, full of black powder.

Elena crowed happily. “To the rooftop!” she cried, and all six of them raced up the stairs to the best of their ability. They came out at the top into another long hallway, identical to the others in its white tile floors and steel doors. They followed it until it turned, and right there in the corner, Elena and the man stopped. Elena pulled a lever, and a ladder dropped from the ceiling. Looking up, Elko saw the trap door leading to the roof.

“You go up, Prasad,” she said. “Give me one minute with these people.”

Prasad took the extension cords from her and disappeared up the ladder. Elena turned to them solemnly. “I know you have no reason to trust us,” she said. “But I can swear to you on anything you want that I am telling you the truth, and that I believe we must do this. They’ll be coming hot on our heels. Will you stand with us, and try to stop them?”

Elko nodded, and so did the others. She realized, like a sudden twisting knife to the gut, that this made them traitors to their own side. It was hard to believe they were helping Enclavers, and betraying the People’s Militia. Of course, if Elena was right, it was all for their own good. But was she right? And how long would it take, for everyone to find that out?

Regardless, she realized, their lives would be forfeit. That was okay, for her. Though she’d just started to have hope that she might live, she had always known that it was unlikely. But to lose Rowan and KT in this, too? That was almost a worst-case scenario.

Elena was still talking, giving instructions quickly. The hallway was L-shaped, and there were stairwells on both sides – they’d have to guard each one. They could open any of the other doors and find things to barricade the doors. “Even if you can only give us ten minutes,” Elena said, “it will be worth it. I’m hoping we have a head start if they think we’re still in the basement lab. But please – as much time as you can buy us.” With that, Elena

disappeared up the ladder. Then, as if remembering that she'd just asked them to die for her cause, she poked her head back down, eyes shining. "Thank you," she said, her voice cracking with emotion.

"Don't waste it," Elko said brusquely. Elena pulled the trapdoor shut.

The four of them stood in the hallway, looking at each other, not wanting to separate but knowing that was the next step.

"I'll go with James to the other stairwell," KT said finally. "It seems appropriate that you two should get to end the journey you started together." Then, to Elko's utter surprise, KT pulled Rowan to her and kissed her fiercely, one hand tilting her chin up and the other at her waist. "I love you both. It's been an honor to know you," she said, tearing herself away. "Come on, James." And the two of them ran down the hallway to the other stairwell.

Rowan, bright pink, held a sudden hand up to her lips as if to keep the kiss safe from harm. Bemused, Elko opened the nearest door and began dragging a table out to lean against the stairwell door. Rowan snapped into action, her cheeks still high with color.

"Did you know?" Elko asked, as they worked.

"No," she answered. "I had no idea – I was kind of busy – I mean, there was a lot to think about." They worked in silence for a minute longer before she added, "Yes. I guess I did know. But I loved you too, you know. And I never knew what to do about either one of you."

Elko knew she wasn't just talking about their friendship, this time. "I know," Elko said, smiling at her. Rowan blushed again, embarrassed, but didn't look hurt.

Their barricade as tall and heavy as they could make it, Elko and Rowan took up their positions with weapons at the ready.

"For what it's worth, Rowan, I'm really pissed off that you're dying with me. I never meant for this to happen. I always wanted you to go home and have a happily-ever-after."

Rowan reached out and squeezed her hand. "I know, love. I wish it could be different too – I wish we both lived in a world where none of this bad stuff had to happen in the first place. But we don't. This is a worthy cause, and it feels right. I'm proud to die here with you."

Noise in the stairwell barely preceded loud thumps at the door. Someone called through the door, "If anyone can hear us, let us in! Let us in or die!"

"Not far behind us at all," Rowan muttered. Standing at the ready with her gun in a shooting stance, her face dirty and set, she made for a convincing warrior. Torn between grief and pride, Elko smiled at her.

"I love you," Elko said. "And thank you, for everything."

Rowan smiled back, sadly. "I love you too. I'm sorry – sorry it had to end this way. I wanted to save you."

Elko shook her head, ignoring for a moment the intensifying pounding at the door, the cracking of the door

jam, and the flimsy ceiling tiles beginning to rain down in the hallway. “Don’t be sorry.”

“Well then, thank you. It was an honor to be here with you.”

Elena

It was done. The spore tubes were all loaded into the cannons, and a thick stream of black dust spewed into the air above them. Where it was caught by the high winds, it streamed out to the east towards the rising sun in a long, tapering line. The dawn was excruciatingly beautiful. Red clouds painted the sky in the east, and bright golden light fell like mercy out across the rugged landscape. From here, the tallest building in all the Enclave, they could see past the urban war zone below them to the granite mountains, the huge sparkling lake, and the dense pine forests.

“The YSDF is back,” Prasad observed mildly.

“I heard.” Elena followed his gaze to the gates of the Enclave, where muddy tanks and foot-soldiers swarmed inside, and the straggling remains of a routed force of Outsiders ran away from the gates for the trees. An explosion boomed somewhere by the lakeshore. Elena flinched, her arm coming up automatically to shield her face, but it was too far away to hurt them.

“Do you think we did the right thing?” Elena asked.

“Yes,” Prasad said, with little hesitation.

“Are you afraid it’ll go wrong?”

“Also yes.” His lips pressed together thinly, and though his expressions were always subtle, she could suddenly see the stress on his face – the drawn eyebrows, the frown, even the stubble on his cheeks and streaks of gray in his thick black hair. How long had young Prasad

been going gray? Barely over 40, he was the youngest scientist to ever hold a research director position at the YIM, promoted early due to his exceptional brilliance and steady personality. He'd always seemed so fresh and youthful to Elena – but she supposed the last year had taken a toll, even on level-headed Prasad. She turned her gaze away from her friend, away from the violence below them, out over Yellowstone Lake.

“It’s just so beautiful,” Elena said tearfully. “The trees, the water, the mountains. The sunrise. I just hope against hope that we did it. If we saved the world, Prasad! Just think!”

“I know,” he said, detachedly. But he was watching the violence unfolding below. Squads of Outsiders swirled through the streets below, clashing with groups of YSDF foot soldiers. The gunfire was thick, and explosions from small grenades lit up the urban landscape all through the city. It was unclear who had the upper hand – it looked like a blood bath. “Just like Sawtooth,” he whispered. “They’re all killing each other. Everything is falling apart. Why does this keep happening?”

It felt appropriate to Elena, somehow. The stream of spores above them, a Schrodinger’s Cat of right or wrong, and the violence below them – wrong – and the sunrise in front of them – right. If she had one wish, she would’ve wished for their fungus to do everything they hoped and dreamed with no negative consequences. But if she couldn’t have that wish, she would wish to know how it all turned out. Knowing that the Outsiders were coming for

them, it hurt her just to think that she wouldn't even get to know whether they were saving the world or destroying what was left of it.

Closer gunshots interrupted her thoughts. They came from the hallway below. She spared a thought for the strange Outsiders who'd appeared out of nowhere and decided to believe her. She wasn't the praying sort, but she sent a kind of thank-you-may-you-rest-in-peace from her heart up into the brightening sky.

She looked at Prasad, who sat hugging his knees to his chest, looking either contemplative or disassociated, it was hard to say. "Well," she said. "We did it, and the spore cannons are running. Should we go down below and guard the trapdoor, to give them a few extra minutes to disperse before they get shut down?"

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. "With what weapons?"

All the tools from installing the cannons were still strewn over the rooftop. She picked up a wrench, a long piece of rebar, and the blowtorch she'd used to weld the spore cannons to their metal bases. "Take your pick," she said, smiling bleakly.

He stared at her for a long moment, opened his mouth as if to inform her that the attackers had guns, thought better of it and closed it again. He picked the rebar and the wrench, leaving her the blowtorch. *How gentlemanly*, she thought.

“It’d be better if we waited for them up here. We’d have a better chance at picking them off one by one on their way through the trapdoor,” Prasad said thoughtfully.

Elena conceded that he was right, and they arranged themselves on either side of the trapdoor. Elena picked the side where she could still see the sunrise. They both uncertainly tried to find athletic fighting stances, causing Elena to giggle. Prasad raised his eyebrows questioningly.

“We make for a couple of unlikely warriors,” she said, gesturing. They made a funny-looking pair anyway, she thought, and she’d always felt extra short and fat when she stood next to tall, lanky Prasad. But they were both pale and unathletic, scientists who spent their daylight hours in the basement lab, not training to beat enemies to death with wrenches.

They settled into a tense silence, waiting. Her gaze escaped the trapdoor to linger, lovingly, on the sunrise. They would die, she believed, in defense of this beautiful world, and she was determined to spend her last minutes admiring it.

“Thank you,” she said to Prasad at last, meaning so much more than she could convey in any words.

He matched her gaze, steady again, in the end. “It was good, Elena. We did the right thing.”

Ikse Jenna Mennen

February 13th, 1995 - January 22nd, 2025



I am 29 years old, and I'm dying of metastatic sarcoma. That didn't used to be the first fact about me, but I would not have written this story without a diagnosis of terminal cancer. Elko's experience

is, of course, drawn from my own.

Before cancer, I was an outdoor educator. I got to teach environmental science, wilderness skills, French, and history all outside, as well as guiding canoeing and hiking trips. I worked for nine summers at Concordia Language Villages - Les Voyageurs, which is the source of much of my chosen family. I attended UW-Madison for linguistics and Scandinavian studies, and Minnesota State at Mankato for a master's in history. Originally from Sunnyvale, California, I have called many other places home, including Two Harbors, Minnesota, where Elko and Rowan grew up. My other favorite things to do include rock climbing, canoeing, backpacking, and reading.

I have always been a writer and I wish that I could have many more years to learn the craft and write more books. Enjoy my debut novel.