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Jonah and the Typewriter

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Jonah and the Typewriter

A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

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In a small, forgotten corner of rural Oklahoma, a boy named Jonah has a typewriter. No ordinary typewriter, this device allows him to make all his dreams into reality. But after five years away, Jonah comes home to find he has been replaced. His grandmother has adopted a young boy named Henry, and Jonah's only safe haven feels alien and unfamiliar.

The two boys struggle for control of the typewriter, and accidentally fling themselves into a world they can't control, inhabited by talking coyotes who tell stories as easily as lies, an army with a dark secret, and dragons who skirt the edges of reality beyond the mesas. Helped by a kindly storyteller and an outcast, Jonah and Henry trek through this new world in search of their typewriter.

Pursued by the power hungry Barons, Jonah hopes that the typewriter will finally send them back home, and put things the way they used to be. Only one question sticks in the back of Jonah's mind like a thorn-- what if there isn't a home to go back to?

A work of Young-Adult Fantasy influenced by Peter Pan, The Chronicles of Narnia, and the Hobbit, "Jonah and the Typewriter" is an adventure about family, friendship, and finding home.

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Jonah and the Typewriter

by Allen Jenkins

CHAPTER ONE

Home Ahead, Home Behind

The sun bore down in another sweltering midwestern summer when I came back home to Capra, Oklahoma. Outside the windows of the rumbling Greyhound Bus, golden wheat fields undulated. Dust devils danced across the tops of the wheat without their Pecos Bills to rein them in, disappearing into to the wind as quickly as they had come. I sat skimming my favorite Jack London book and sipping a Coke out of a large, sweaty Styrofoam cup. Capra was an insignificant town by all normal standards, nestled north of Watonga in Blaine County behind a lot of cows, wheat, gypsum and broken asphalt. To me, it stood at the center of the universe, the only permanent home I ever had. My Grandmother, Popeye, the antique store, and my magic typewriter all waited there for me.

I turned nine just before I left for Germany with my father. Dad, an Air Force captain, had children too late and got left alone too early. My mother died before I had a chance to know her. We never lived in one place for too long, which Dad thought would build good self-reliance, in his own words. Every summer since I could remember, Dad brought me back to Capra to visit Nanny. He'd stay a week, sometimes two, but

inevitably, sometimes thankfully, Dad left me alone for the rest of the summer at Nanny's house, which I eventually came to see as my one true home in the world.

That particular summer, I was going back on my own on a bus ride from New York, after having come in from Berlin on the biggest jet I had ever flown on, despite being the son of an Air Force officer. On the seat next to me a cardboard box and my backpack sat next to each other. The box jostled with new goodies that I had collected from little shops around Germany; comic books, gold teeth, and old, worn-out maps shook inside the box, waiting to be opened and given new life by their new owner. Black marks on the side spelled out "Popeye," for the antique store owner who ran one of the only still-functioning businesses in Capra. Popeye was a weaver of stories by trade and used to talk for hours without anyone really noticing - or so he liked to believe. Popeye's tales mesmerized me. As I grew, Capra itself transformed into a magical place to me, bursting with the stories that would become the fabric of my childhood.

Popeye gave me the magic typewriter on my birthday. It was an old, green, metal clunker that looked as if it might fall apart at any moment, and I loved it immediately. Popeye told me the typewriter once belonged to a famous writer and that it could create stories. He told me I could create stories, just like him. That night I took it home and into my room and focused on it as hard as I could, trying to create something. Popeye meant that I could write stories, but I thought I could make them real. The world began to move around me and shift. I focused harder, thinking of a magical forest, dark, lit only by the moon. The bookshelves in my room creaked and grew leaves, and the bed sunk into the floor and swirled, becoming a pool of glittering water. The wooden floors in my room spread and grass sprouted up in between the slats and the window shattered, and the sky

dissolved the walls. The moon outside grew and shone light through the leaves of trees that shot from the ground around me. That place became my secret, my hideaway, my Neverland.

I took the typewriter everywhere with me after that night. I made new worlds every day. They started as amalgams of my favorite books - I traveled often to Neverland, Narnia, and Middle Earth. Eventually my dreams became more and more my own, more daring. I slew a dragon one day, and captained a space fleet the next. I usually relegated these trips to my free time, at least in Capra. Often Nanny took me to movies, and Popeye brought me on trips to see old bookshops and antique stores where he had booths of his own items for sale. I read and watched movies voraciously, and amassed a small fortune in antiques. Everything that I consumed added layer by layer to my fantasies, creating new adventures in my mind. In 1986, when I left for Germany, I left the typewriter in Capra by some accident. I thought I had packed it with me, but when I arrived in Germany with Dad, I realized my awful mistake. I begged and pleaded to go back, but Dad heard none of it. Every summer I hoped and prayed to return, but we stayed in Germany those three years without one single trip home. Eventually letters from Popeye and Nanny confirmed that the I indeed left the typewriter there, and I took some small solace in that. They didn't understand why I wanted the typewriter so badly, and every summer I thought I would be going back to Oklahoma again, but five summers came and went without a trip, and I started to forget.

In Germany I spent most of my time reading, and playing Nintendo, imagining the adventures that I went on in books and games were my own, but I began to forget and doubt my memories. As the bus rumbled down the road, passing fields and barns and

little burnt-out gas stations, the memories started to come back, but seemed unreal. Even the memory of Germany seemed faded, and I found myself forgetting what my father's face looked like. As I struggled to remember, I could only catch glimpses in my head of his face half turned away, working at his desk, or walking out the door in the morning to start his work day. I looked in the window trying to catch his shadowy reflection before I recognized myself. I leaned up and pulled my old leather wallet out of my back jeans pocket, and fished a photograph from the pocket behind receipts and other junk that had accumulated inside.

The edges of the square photo looked frayed and yellow. Its small size only let me see a little bit of my father, standing next to me as a small child. Tiny creases ran through the fish I held and through my father's face, his strong jaw, his five-o'clock shadow that showed even when he shaved. He looked like an action hero, smiling next to me. He looked like someone different from the man I remembered. The man who never smiled. The man who didn't congratulate me on good grades, but expected them without giving more than an offhand comment, if he thought about it. We had only gone fishing once, the day in that picture. Even that memory seemed to fade as the bus screeched to a halt and drowned out my thoughts.

"Watonga." The bus driver's voice was fuzzy as it filtered through his intercom.

I quickly stuffed the photo back into the wallet, and put my wallet into my backpack along with my book. I hauled my few belongings off the bus, and set my box down on a bench under the awning of the gas station the bus had stopped at. I had very little with me - I tended to keep my things at Nanny's house, for fear that I would lose them on the road with Dad, but the clothes I had kept at Nanny's almost definitely didn't

fit me anymore. I grew at least a few inches since I had last traveled to Oklahoma, and I had worn through more than a few pairs of shoes. The bus driver came out and opened up the luggage compartments on the side of the bus, and I walked back out into the hot sun, leaving my box on the bench, to get my suitcase. I only had a few clothes, and hoped that I could go shopping for at least a few new things during my stay there to replace the old kid's clothes that sat forgotten in my dresser at Nanny's.

I dragged my suitcase back under the awning with me and sat on the bench. The heat billowed up even under the awning, and I coughed as I felt dust in my dry throat. I left my belongings on the bench except for my backpack, which I could easily carry inside with me. I filled up a large Coke, grabbed a bag of peanuts, and paid the sleepy man behind the convenience store counter, constantly looking outside the window as I did, hoping not to miss Nanny coming to pick me up. I stepped back out into the heat again, and plopped down on the bench next to the sum total of what I owned in the world, except for my antiques back in Capra, and waited, swallowing large gulps of soda. Soon enough, I heard the familiar rumbling and popping of Nanny's truck reverberating through the air. I stood up in anticipation, watching the cars at either end of the street, hoping each one would be her car. Out of what seemed like thin air, Nanny's old black Chevy slid around a corner and headed for the gas station. As it did, I thought I could see another figure in the car next to her, hiding behind the window tint. A glint of sun caught the windshield and quickly obscured my vision. Nanny's car screeched to a halt under the awning, parking in a space next to where I sat. I looked toward the passenger seat again, and I felt sure I could see a small head. Not Popeye, I thought. Its head looked too small.

Nanny stepped out of the car and looked the same as when I had left her three years before. Her round glasses perched under her curly white hair. She had big arms and hands outstretched for a hug as she walked towards me. I hesitated for a moment, still focused on the figure in the car.

"Liebchen! It's been too long!"

"Who's in the car with you, Nanny?" I asked. She let one arm fall, and used the other to hit me in the chest with the back of her hand. Nanny's reprimanding taps never hit enough to hurt, but always enough to get your attention.

"You don't see me for three years and I don't get a hug?" A stream of German curses of which I had never known the literal meaning left her mouth, leaving the unmistakable tone to speak for them. I smiled and she pulled me into a hug. I hugged back tentatively, but felt her holding something back. I kept my eyes on the figure in the car. A child? A midget? A sack of flour with a head?

"I missed you too," I said. "Who is that?"

Nanny let go and looked sheepish for a split second, but her face quickly changed back into a look of happiness.

"There's someone I'd like you to meet." Nanny gestured toward the little figure in the passenger seat. "Henry, you can come out now, Liebchen." My throat tightened and felt dry, as if the Coke I had recently gulped down had never existed. The battered passenger side door opened, and two sneakered feet dropped down behind it. A young boy with dirt brown hair and loose socks came out from behind the car door and wiped his nose. He leered at me with some suspicion as he walked forward, as if sizing me up. I did the same, and realized I was grinding my teeth. Suddenly Nanny's hand appeared

behind the young boy's head, and I felt my head snap forward as Nanny's other hand hit the back of my head simultaneously.

"That is no way to greet each other, you sheisskopfs!" Nanny said. I definitely knew the meaning of that one. I rubbed the back of my head and reluctantly extended my free hand towards Henry for a handshake. He took my hand with his small one.

"I'm Henry."

"Jonah." I said.

"Get in the car and I'll explain everything on the way home," Nanny said.

Confused, I set my things into the back of the truck next to a few sacks of flour piled in the back, and kept my backpack with me. I felt cramped inside the small cab, squished up next to Henry. My knees touched the dash and my backpack sat tucked in between my leg and the console on the red carpet of the truck floor.

"Henry is my foster child," Nanny explained. "But we're going to see about changing that. We're talking to his social worker about staying here for good."

"Since when did you take on foster children?" I asked, ignoring that Henry even existed. I vaguely noticed him staring at the Gameboy in the side pocket of my backpack.

"You don't know this about me, but before you were born, my house was a foster home. I stopped taking on kids when you were born though, because of what happened to your mother." Nanny always danced around the subject of my mother, despite the fact that I had never known her. She died in childbirth. Dad never discussed at any depth, and Nanny would only go as far as to say that it had made Dad a better person, but never wanted to elaborate. As a child I had searched around the house sometimes to find something about her, but Dad had always kept any trace of her tucked away, and Nanny

only had pictures. Sometimes I still wished that I had known her, but I had long since given up on searching for her, content to have one parent, or what often felt like no real parents at all. Nanny and Popeye felt more like a real mother and father to me growing up, and I missed them more than I ever missed my Dad or the idea of my mother.

Nanny continued to try and explain things as we drove along, tapping Henry for confirmation of certain points she made along the way. She spat out cute little anecdotes about Henry's time there but my mind glazed over the last hour of the drive, lost at first in a churning of my own thoughts, about the time I spent away, about the times before I lived in Nanny's house. My head filled with images of fat children running around Nanny's house before I existed, happy, full of food, unaware of their looming replacement. I realized Nanny's conversation had gone on without me when the car stopped, the brakes pulling me from my daydreams, and broken bits of Nanny's words still hanging about me like fog. We had arrived in Capra, at the Co-op gas station and commissary that formed the cornerstone of the very tiny town. The old, grey pavement of the disused highway met with Capra at a fork of even more broken and crumbling pavement that led into the streets of downtown in one direction, and the residential areas in the other. At the cusp of the diagonally placed township sat the Co-op, where Nanny got supplies, months-old magazines still collecting dust on the rack, and where Popeye picked up crosswords, decks of cards and any other puzzle or game that struck his fancy at the time.

"Come in with me, make yourself useful," Nanny said. "Be good Henry."

"Yes Nanny," Henry said, using her familiar name. By all rights, I thought he should have called her by something more formal, 'Miss Vivian' or something - but

perhaps he had lived there a bit longer than I had thought. I suddenly wished I had listened more closely inside the car, somewhat afraid that Nanny would give me a pop-quiz on Henry's likes, dislikes and personal history at any moment. As we walked inside the commissary, with its high metal ceilings that kept in little heat in the winter and did nothing but let heat in in the summer, Nanny grabbed a cart and headed to the desk. The clerk, Joseph, greeted her by name. Joseph had lived in Capra for a long time, much like most everyone else in Capra - young people hardly ever moved there. Joseph came up only a few feet over the counter, his big round head wobbling, seemingly under the weight of his huge, thick glasses. I imagine he couldn't see out of them very well anymore, as there was no eye doctor in Capra, and his glasses hadn't changed since I had known him.

"Jonah? Oh, good to see you again son," Joseph said, squinting through his tiny round spectacles. "Finally back home, eh?"

"Yep," I said. It didn't quite feel like home so-far, I thought.

"I've got that flour shipment in for you, Vee," Joseph said to Nanny. Nanny handed over a small lump of cash, and Joseph pointed behind him. Nanny gave him a look, and Joseph seemed to straighten, as if she were about to scold him. "I'll bring it out for you."

Once he had left, Nanny turned to me, and pointed her finger towards my face. Her eyes flashed with anger. She had to point upward, I noticed - I had gotten quite a bit taller since I had left. I tried not to laugh at the sight of her pointing upward.

"Now look here. I saw you get that glazed over look in the car," Nanny said, shaking her finger. "Just like your father. You never want to hear anything important."

I raised my hands in protest, but she stopped me cold.

"Henry is a nice young man, and he needs some guidance right now. A good influence," Nanny continued. "He's been through a lot, in and out of foster homes since he was three years old. Right now we're just fostering him, but if I have anything to say, he's going to be staying. I would like it if you two became friends."

We. She kept saying we. "Who is we?"

"Well, Popeye is helping out." Not Popeye too, I thought. "Now this is the last I want to hear you complaining, dummkopf."

Joseph with a metal cart full of flour, and Nanny immediately transformed from her angry state back to a happy one, thanked Joseph, and grabbed hold of the cart. Joseph handed me two bottles of Coke.

"Still a Coke drinker?" Joseph said.

"Yep," I responded.

"And still not much of a talker," he chided. "This other one's for Henry. Tell him I said hi."

I guess everyone knows Henry, I thought.

Nanny pushed the cart outside easily and directed me to pull down the tailgate of the truck. I did as I was told, and Nanny and I began throwing the sacks of flour in the back of the truck. Nanny seemed to pull them up with ease, having lost none of her strength in the time since I left for Germany. I felt relieved that I hadn't laughed earlier - she could probably still throw a mean right hook to the arm too. Still, Nanny looked different to me. I had thought Nanny always fended for herself, ever since Grandpa died in the war. Now it seemed she almost couldn't be without children in the house, like

replaceable commodities that could be changed out easily depending on the situation, like light bulbs, or flowers in a vase.

...

We barreled down Thompson Avenue, Nanny's street, with a full load of flour stacked in the back of the truck. Thompson Avenue's cracks slowly turned to gravel as the road went on, ground almost to dust from years of use and neglect. At the end of the road, the pieces of pavement mixed with a dusty white gypsum pathway that led up to Nanny's house, a squat looking house surrounded by tin outbuildings and a disused red tractor with wheels taller than me. Nanny skidded the car into park under the awning that passed as a garage, kicking up white dust. Out front, the diamond chain link fence gave way to a few rosebushes and a gray wooden archway flecked with the remnants of white paint from what seemed like ancient times. The lawn behind the gate met up with a rickety board fence that held a large field with a rusted pink bathtub, a few pygmy horses and a shack that used to be Grandpa's toolshed. The grass made a horseshoe shape behind the house, and the fence met with a chicken coop behind, a few pear trees, and a clothesline. Behind the coop sat an open-front tin shed, filled with junk accumulated through the years. Fishing poles, license plates from old Watonga buses that Nanny had driven, sawdust-caked Coke bottles and old radios with sliced open speakers where rats lived.

Henry jumped out of the car holding something, but I couldn't see what - Nanny made no move to chase him down, and Henry's small stature probably precluded his helping anyway. Capra held very few secret places to hide or get lost, and she had rarely seemed to worry about me getting lost when I was Henry's age. Nanny and I slowly

unloaded all the flour, carrying it through the front screen door and into the foyer that served as her laundry room and pantry all at once. I asked to be excused, and Nanny looked at me significantly for a few moments, worry streaking her face.

"You're not going to Popeye's yet, young man."

"I know, dinner first."

"You can go tomorrow."

I considered protesting for a moment, but shrugged and gave up. To tell the truth, I felt exhausted. Jet lag and ache from the plane ride and the two-day-long bus trip from New York radiated in my arms, legs, and head. I wanted to see my home again, to reassure myself that it still belonged to me and that things stayed where they belonged, to find where I had hidden my typewriter, to make sure nobody had stolen it, to make sure it actually existed. I tried to walk casually to my room, through the kitchen and living room, where my closed door sat in a wall full of old family pictures. I opened the door slowly, sighing in relief as the memory of the room began to match up with my eyes. The bed had the same brown quilt, the same kidney shaped desk under the window, and the same brown shag carpet. I dove to the closet and threw open the doors and to find the old chest where I had left my typewriter, sitting on the bottom of the closet, dusty and dark in the partial sunlight coming from the window. The old brass hinges and accents on the black chest gleamed as the sunlight hit them for the first time in years. The rectangular lid creaked open, and the box had been filled with linens. My throat went dry, and cold beads of sweat formed on my forehead. I felt ill as I threw back blanket after blanket, pillows dashing to the floor behind me. My fingernails scraped on the bottom of the wooden chest. I could feel my breath going in and out of my lungs faster and faster.

"Nanny!" I yelled, sitting on my knees. The room felt cold.

"What is it?" Nanny came around the corner of my door. Her voice sounded pinched and worried, and she looked at me with concern.

"Where is my typewriter," I said slowly.

"What happened to the room?" She said. I ignored her.

"My typewriter." I raised my voice.

"That is no way to talk to your grandmother," Nanny scolded. Her voice didn't have any authority in it, coming out of her mouth in a sort of shocked softness as she looked around the room. I looked around too. Sheets, quilts and pillows lay around the room as if a bomb made of linens exploded. Some books had come off the shelf along with a porcelain knick knack, landing next to the pillow that had apparently hit them. "It's on the top shelf. I moved it there a few months ago."

I looked up, and saw the typewriter case sitting on top of the shelf. I grabbed it as casually as I could, and set it on the bed. My insides were still squirming, but they were slowly calming down.

"Thank you." I moved to close the door as Nanny walked away. I sat down next to the typewriter, and opened its brown case. Inside sat a pea green typewriter, old and made of heavy, thick metal. The buttons, round and black, looked back at me like old friends. The row of lettered tines, some missing, looked like teeth missing from a smile. I typed a few letters, and listened intently. The silent seconds seemed to last forever. Had I dreamed it all up? I closed my eyes.

Finally, a whisper - and another. Voices and stories in chorus like a song you remember but can't describe came, but like in a long forgotten song, I heard voices and

noises I didn't remember. They began to flow out of the typewriter like water, increasing in volume, overlapping until indiscernible, flowing together like the sound of a crashing waterfall - and then silence.

Something sounded different.

CHAPTER TWO

A Faded Memory

I sat at the breakfast table, pushing my eggs around the plate. I grew out of eating breakfast in Berlin, since Dad never cooked and school always started early. Instead, I ate lunch whenever my stomach started rumbling. Still, I would have eaten breakfast if only to humor Nanny, but I had planned on coffee with Popeye and a big pizza at lunch. We might, I thought, even go to visit some of his booths around the state. Even after the long trip, I thought a calm drive across the easy rolling country asphalt, Popeye's tall-tales filling the background, would be just what I needed.

"Eat your breakfast," Nanny said. "Who knows when that old fart is going to feed you."

I knew better than to argue. Besides that, I realized I might get there faster if I ate breakfast quickly and excused myself quickly. I heard Henry snoring in his room on the way in to the kitchen, thankfully. I wanted to get going before he came in and Nanny the bright idea to send him with me. I slammed down an empty milk glass, and wiped my mouth, and tried to run silently to my room. I brushed excess egg off my teeth and leaned

down to the sink to gulp in some cold mouthfuls of water from the faucet. I carefully put my typewriter in my backpack. It bulged in odd places and the zipper fought against me as I slid it up. I heaved the heavy bag up over both shoulders, and picked up the cardboard box full of treasures I brought home. and walked through the kitchen. The straps of my pack dug into my shoulder as I walked, and made my neck tense. If Popeye planned on taking me to his booths around the state, I would want to have the typewriter with me, for a little test I had planned. Nanny called after me, but the sound of the screen door clacking shut and my feet hitting the dusty concrete floor of the garage drowned her voice out. I ran out into the cool early morning, breathing in some of the dew that still hung in the air. The sky looked like a painted light pink, the traces of sun casting long shadows on the crumbling bricks of the rows of old buildings, barely illuminating their faces as their occupants milled about or slept inside. Dust puffed up from the parched gypsum roads as my sneakers hit them, coating the black canvas with white powder. Slowly, I took in the suspended decay of Capra as I walked through backyards and abandoned lots towards downtown.

Finally, I came through a grassy alleyway to downtown Capra. The entire one-street business district was lined with shops that might have been. Sometimes, I thought I saw ghosts peeking out through the boarded-up windows and cracks in the glass. A few businesses thrived, in the Capra sense of the word. An old wooden Tetris cabinet with Popeye's long-held high score resided in the only restaurant, a pizza parlor. Next to that sat a general store that had a pharmacy and a barber shop all in one. Mr. Garner, the owner and only employee, sold anything the old fogeys in town could ever need, other than food, which most people bought in bulk from the co-op. On the corner sat Popeye's

place. A big glass door sat under a gently swinging sign that said "Antiques" in big bold print.

The lights already peeked through the front shades, and I knew Popeye probably sat next to a steaming cup of fresh tea by then, reading a book at his desk, stroking his short white beard. I pushed open the swinging door, and the bell above it jangled. Popeye's head, frizzled white hair covered by an old Mets baseball cap, popped up immediately at the sound of the bell. In a sleepy town like Capra, he represented the embodiment of energy and life. His dark skin and freckles wrinkled into a wide smile as our eyes met.

"Hi guy!" Popeye exclaimed. "Your Grandmother finally let you out of the house?"

"Yep," I nodded, setting my box on a rocking chair. The shop smelled wonderful to me, like the mysterious contents of a million attics. Treasures, and junk, plastered the walls and filled every horizontal surface available. Trinkets, porcelain dolls, bottle caps, and boxes full of vinyl albums covered the tops of every table, and the shelves and cabinets creaked and sagged with the weight of books of all kinds, a dingy rainbow of linen and leather spines. A few fans with unlit light bulbs spun overhead, anticipating the coming summer heat. Enough morning light came through the picture window to make the shop shine, and only one artificial light shone in the room, on Popeye's desk, casting light on the book he had clutched in his hand. Stairs in the back led to Popeye's small apartment above the shop.

"So, what did you bring me from Germany, mein Herr?" Popeye began as if I had never left. It probably helped that we had written each other periodically. Since the first

summer I spent in Capra as a small child, Popeye and I carried on an old tradition of collecting treasures for one another while I traveled with my father during the school year. This time, the box held a small trove of things I had collected in Germany, and a few from New York. I opened the dusty cardboard box and pulled out the items one by one. An old baseball mitt emerged, and I tossed it over to Popeye.

"I found all kinds of great stuff," I said, digging through. "There's some gold teeth in here from a dead Nazi, a couple of German comics..."

I retrieved a bottle of Coke, stamped with the German word 'Schutzmarke' on the cap, and set it on his desk.

"That's new," I said. "I thought they'd have something more interesting on the label, but it looks just like American Coke."

"Things are more often than not the same all around the world, if you really look. Why not Coke, too?" he laughed. I paused for a moment expectantly.

"Anything for me?" I held my breath. I didn't know why, but I felt a little worried Popeye had forgotten. I tried to look casual, but I know my tone had sounded expectant, if not entitled. I felt a little ashamed for a second.

"Of course," Popeye said almost immediately, although it felt longer. He began to rummage around his desk, muttering as if he had lost it. I couldn't tell if it was a joke. He came back up with his own cardboard box, around the same size as mine, and dusted off the top of it. Popeye carefully took out his pocket knife and sliced open the brown packing tape. He reached in without looking and brought out a small parcel of books tied together with twine, and gave a little flourish.

"Some Jules Verne for the European adventurer," Popeye said. He handed the old package to me, the books forming a band of grimy red, green, and gold.

"Verne was French," I corrected him. "I was in Germany."

"Verne's Lidenbrock was German," Popeye said.

"True," I conceded. He handed me the package and I untied it carefully, picking up one of the heavy tomes. It cracked open and a wave of old paper smell hit me. Inside, I saw an inscription - hard to read, but it looked like a J followed by some scribbles. I recognized the signature, and my eyes shot up to Popeye excitedly.

"Inscribed by the man himself. I was in the French Foreign Legion, you know." I did know- Popeye reminded me every chance he got, regaling me with tales of his adventures across deserts, jungles and cities. He got a certain mischievous look in his eyes when he remembered those days, the same look he got every time he started to spin a yarn. He leaned forward conspiratorially and adjusted his cap.

"It was Paris, 1925. I was on leave, and there I had become friends with Jules Verne's son, Michel. I always made sure to visit him whenever I got back, and we would have a drink at a little bar called The Highlands. But that time, I found him on his deathbed. He gave me these three books as a goodbye present, saying 'A l'œuvre, on connaît l'artisan.'"

"What does that mean?" I asked, bemused.

"The craftsman by his art is known." Popeye said. "It's an old French proverb. Michel always felt overshadowed by his Father's work. One of those books is Volcano of Gold, probably written by Michel, but under his Father's name."

"Poor guy," I said, feeling half thoughtful about and half skeptical of Popeye's story.

"So, how was Germany?" Popeye asked. He already knew, as I had sent back a few letters over the past 5 years. Nothing of real importance happened - I kept to the base and to my books. People told me I should be seeing the sights, traveling, but I didn't make too many friends. A combination of being new to base, on-base-schooling, and living in a country where I didn't speak the language functionally isolated me. My father certainly didn't have time to take me around more than once. I kept, instead, to my books and my video games, trudging through my homeschool curriculum alone, hoping the time would pass quickly enough to get me to summer, and back to Capra.

I opened my mouth to speak, but the bell above the door rang before I could answer, and a thought entered my head: Popeye knew all along about Henry, and never told me in a letter. As if on cue, Henry bounded into the antique store, a small ketchup stain on his white t-shirt. His jeans bore grass stains on the knees, and his worn red sneakers squeaked on the floor. His brown hair fell at awkward, messy angles, apparently still recovering from a night-long fight with a pillow. Popeye immediately forgot about his question and turned his attention to the interloper.

"Hi guy!" Popeye said as Henry entered. I looked at him, trying to keep my face expressionless, free of any kind of contempt. Still, my stomach churned when I saw him. I felt nagging irritation in my throat as I thought of Nanny sending him after me like some pet dog. Popeye got up from his chair and went to his fridge near the front of the room, pulling out a few bottles of soda.

"Now that you're both here we can get this road on the show," Popeye said. Great, I thought. He had this all planned out. Probably with Nanny, to get me to bond with Henry, or something stupid like that. Why did they have to change the plan? I thought. My teeth clenched but I kept my mouth closed, careful not to betray my feelings. Popeye caught my eye for a second and looked concerned. I looked away.

"Where are we going this time, Popeye?" This time, I thought.

"Same as usual. A couple of pops and some candy bars, and then we'll be off to the far reaches of the state. Maybe even to the city. I've got lots of stuff to drop off today."

"Are you sure you want a little kid coming with us to antique stores? He might break something," I proposed.

Popeye waved his hands in dismissal: "He's been with me a couple times. You're a good helper, right?"

"Right, Popeye," Henry nodded in agreement. I hadn't realized just how long the kid had lived here. "Can we find some baseball cards? I'm looking for a Cal Ripken, Jr. and a Mike Mussina."

"I'd bet you money. Maybe I'll tell you about that time I went to see Mickey Mantle play."

Henry's eyes widened. "You saw Mickey Mantle play?" I felt blocked out as the conversation went on, and we made our way to the back, picking up boxes to put in Popeye's trailer, which was hitched to his old pickup. I never knew Popeye liked sports. I had never even seen a baseball game. My father had tried to force me to play Little League, but most of the sports he wanted me to play took place in the summer, while I

stayed in Capra, with no other children my age. As we loaded boxes into the trailer, Popeye told the story of how he saw Mantle play, how a home run ball had fallen right into his lap, how he played catch with "Joltin' Joe," whatever that meant. He had never told me that story before. I ran back inside as the other two piled into the car, and picked up my backpack, the typewriter safely inside.

We stopped first at the co-op, and Popeye asked us what we wanted, even though he probably already knew. He left us in the car, still running, as if to get us to have some time together alone, if only for a few minutes. He and Nanny probably planned that torture together. I kept my eyes out the window, trying not to look at Henry, knowing he'd probably want to talk, like some hyperactive dog begging for a treat.

"Want to see my baseball cards?" Henry said. "I've got some good ones." He pulled a small stack of cards from his jacket pocket as I looked over. A rubber band looped taut around the slightly worn cards, but they looked as if Henry had taken good care of them. He snapped off the beige rubber band and fanned them out for me. The small collection mixed old and new, some brown and cardboard, some new with shiny holographic faces. The newer ones seemed better taken care of, as if he valued the shiny ones more.

"I don't like sports," I said. I told a half-truth-- I just didn't pay attention to sports. Still, I thought it would shut Henry up, or at least slow him down.

"Oh." He paused. "Not even baseball or kickball?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"I don't know, I just don't." I turned away.

"Well that's a dumb reason," he continued. "Don't you even know about Cal Ripken Jr.?" He produced another card out of an inside pocket of his jacket, this one in a hard, clear plastic sleeve.

"Who's that?"

"He's the Iron Man of baseball, dummy," he said as if I should have known.

"Two-thousand one-hundred and thirty-one games in a row, without stopping."

"Great. Whatever," I said. Silence filled the car for a moment. Perhaps he would shut up.

"What's your problem?" he suddenly said. I turned to look, and he stared me down hard. The door opened, jolting us both out of our stare, and Popeye came in with a Coke for me and a root beer for Henry, as well as some chocolate and peanuts. Henry looked happy enough, and I felt relieved the conversation had stopped. He carefully wrapped his baseball cards in a rubber band again, and stuck them in his pocket.

"What'd I miss?" Popeye said, turning on the car. We both stayed silent.

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We drove across the gold Oklahoma landscape for what seemed like hours, the ground seeming to hiss in the heat with the bugs hiding in the tall grass next to the road. Occasionally Popeye would come up with some story to tell, but I focused my attentions outside the window, trying to forget that Henry had come with us. Eventually small buildings began to pop up here and there, getting thicker, and finally turning into a full-fledged town. The small towns we drove through punctuated the drive, long spaces of road with nothing but red flowers dotting the grassy sides of the earth. The bottle of Coke I drank sat empty in my hand as I tore off the label, the rim sticky with dried sugar. The

Interstate finally gave way to the first stop on our trip east. Like many medium-sized towns in Oklahoma, it sat quietly, isolated in the middle of a sea of grass and farmland, even if it did have its own Wal-Mart. Most towns stayed quiet during the hot summer. Nobody wanted to set foot outside when the pavement really heated up. Popeye drove the truck downtown to a little antique store situated right next to a big splashing fountain. The stone basin where the water pooled ran right up next to a wall in a semi-circle, the wall behind plastered with a mural of light flowing down from the top of the ocean down into an azure reef of fish and coral.

Popeye directed us with a few of the boxes and we walked in the red door into a blast of air conditioning. We only unloaded a few boxes, and the woman took us over to Popeye's booth and told him what people bought. She handed him a little envelope with money inside, and we took to unboxing the trinkets Popeye wanted to put out.

Popeye held up his hand, and said "You two go ahead and walk around. I just needed somebody to help me haul this stuff around. I'll take care of putting it out."

"Are you sure you want someone his age walking around in a place full of such fragile things?" I warned Popeye. "He might break something."

"I'm in the fourth grade," Henry said, crossing his arms. "I think I can handle myself around glass plates."

"Settle down you two," Popeye admonished. "Henry will be fine, Jonah."

Henry walked off on his own as I opened my mouth to speak in my own defense, but Popeye stopped me.

"He's eight, Jonah. You're fourteen. Try to have a little understanding," Popeye admonished. I shut my mouth, grated my teeth, and walked back outside silently to get

my typewriter. Where did Popeye get off telling me what to do? I felt, for the first time, that Popeye had lectured me. He had never done that before.

My mind quickly shifted back to the typewriter, however. I still had my plan. I needed to know whether or not the typewriter still worked, whether I could still use it the same way, whether it was just the dream of a young boy, no more than a figment of my imagination. Back when I first got the typewriter, I would often make up stories out of objects, and use those to fuel the typewriter, to make it work. Being around antiques all day certainly helped with that. A huge number of items in Popeye's shop had stories that I had attached to them, little adventures I had made up to explain how they came to the store, who owned them before, what happened around them. I hoped that on that day, I could do the same thing. I thought perhaps nosing through some new antiques might be a good test for the typewriter, and for me.

I walked to the back, clutching the handle of the typewriter case in my right hand, looking around at all the objects. I tried to imagine power from the typewriter surging through my hand and up into my arm. Yet, nothing seemed to happen. No sounds, no whispers. Only silence. The typewriter case clanked as I set it down on an empty space on a wooden table sitting near one of the antique booths and opened the typewriter case up, unzipping around its brown leather edges. I stood back from the typewriter and looked around, trying to spot interesting items in the thin aisle, booths of antiques on each side.

Please, I thought to myself. Please work.

The sound suddenly left the room. It almost seemed as if the air disappeared, although I could still breathe -- I knew because I heard each breath I took, louder than I

had in a long time. I felt it. I felt it working. Then, shapes began to walk around the room. I glanced at a baseball bat, a stethoscope, a pile of old comic books. People, fuzzy like on an old television, began to emerge from the shapes. A baseball player with dusty shoes, a doctor in a white coat, a child whose face I couldn't make out reading Superman on the floor. They, and what seemed to be a mob of others, faded in and out of the room like old photographs. But again, something felt and looked wrong, not normal. Usually, I used the objects to create worlds, but now even as hard as I focused on my one special place, my haven, I couldn't bring it back. The song of the typewriter sounded wrong too-- it sounded incomplete, or at least very different. I knew it sounded different when I found it before, but then I knew. It had been tampered with. Stolen. Changed. The floors and walls of the antique store stayed still and static, and the ghosts of the antiques soon faded. Maybe the typewriter was broken, I thought. Who knows what might have happened to it in my five years away?

One image stayed, however- a small boy with a brown leather jacket and red sneakers, and a small ketchup stain on his shirt. Henry. He looked at me hard, his eyes wide and his mouth slightly open. My mouth went dry, and I swallowed, feeling my heart beat faster. Had he seen? Before, only I saw what the typewriter made. We stood staring at each other for a time, a new kind of silence filling the room. I thought I knew, then, why he hadn't been adopted yet, or at least why he had no permanent home. Henry was a thief. He might have stolen something from in the store. Whatever sympathy I had for him faded.

"What's the matter?" He finally said. I exhaled, and stuttered to find the words. Maybe he just stared because he didn't like me. Perhaps he hadn't seen. He clutched a

small stack of baseball cards in one hand, and a few old videotapes cased in an orange yellow sleeve in the other.

"Nothing," I said. Quickly, I shut the box top on the typewriter, zipped it shut, and picked it up. "Nothing."

"Whatever," he said. He walked past me to another part of the antique store. As he left I swear I caught him, from the corner of my eye, staring at the typewriter .

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CHAPTER THREE

Broken Ground

I could never remember the first time I met Popeye. I've always had a good memory, but I had Popeye in my life since before I could remember, like his stories. The day he gave me the typewriter, however, was etched in my mind like a carving in a rock wall.

I had fidgeted in my seat as Popeye told his story, absorbed, excited to hear every detail of his probably-made-up adventure. A lamp swayed lazily near the ceiling, moved by the spinning fan above it. The light came down in a bright beam, motes of dust passing through it, bright and on fire for a moment, before disappearing again. After coming home for the first time in a year, I had spent most of the day at the antique store listening to stories, playing with toys and reading dusty old books. Popeye gestured excitedly as he relayed an especially good part of one of his tales about his time in the French Foreign Legion.

"I was pinned down in the middle of some tall ancient ruins, hiding behind a fallen pillar. Gunshots careened off of every surface, and I was out of bullets." Popeye spoke with an air of danger, and I could almost feel the hot air of Egypt, thick with sandstone dust floating from just-made bullet holes.

"Suddenly, my hat flew off my head! It landed in front of me, and I realized one of the enemy had shot it straight through. The hole in it was still smoking!"

I almost couldn't believe it-- but as if reading my mind, Popeye produced, from behind a pile of old books, a white cap with a weathered black brim, and a black band held by two scratched and tarnished brass buttons. A hole sent rent and frayed strips of canvas outward, through the front and back of the hat. He extended the hat toward me, and I took it, cautiously. I felt the hat, stuck my finger through the hole as if to test it. The hat felt like it held the story, and again the feeling of the hot air came to me. I could feel the sand under my feet, its heat radiating through the soles of my size -three sneakers.

A jingle broke me out of the trance, and I looked over to see Nanny, silhouetted in the low afternoon light through the door.

"What kind of lies is this old fart telling you now?" she chided. As she walked in the entire room came back to me, like I was waking up, holding on to the last remnants of a dream slipping away.

"I was just telling him the story of my hat," Popeye said good-naturedly. He looked at his watch and slapped his forehead. "I suppose it's dinner time now. I've kept him too long again, haven't I?"

"Yes, come along, both of you. It's not getting any warmer, you sheisskopfs." I felt my stomach rumble at the prospect of food, realizing very suddenly that I was ravenous. I began to follow Nanny, but Popeye spoke up.

"Wait," Popeye said seriously, holding up his hand. "I almost forgot to give him his coming home gift."

I perked up at the word "gift." Popeye had given me a few books that day, now stuffed in my yellow and blue backpack, but for me, like any kid, gifts never got old. Popeye produced the pale green zipper-case with as much flourish as one could with such a bulky typewriter, and set it on the table. He brushed a little dust off of the top and wiped it on his fading blue jeans. Popeye unzipped and raised the top of the case slowly to reveal a green typewriter, slightly darker than the color of the molded case, glinting in the low light of the store.

"What is it?" I asked, stretching my neck to see it.

"This," Popeye began, "is a magic typewriter."

I felt excitement bubble in me, like lying in bed before Christmas morning.

"Magic?"

"Yes. With this, you can make any story you want, and it'll be real." I stood up and walked toward the typewriter, placing my fingers on the buttons, pretending I knew how to use it.

"A little paper and you can make any story you can think of."

Next to it lay a leather roll of tools and a plastic baggy of broken parts, the pieces that I heard shaking before. I could hear something like whispers in the creak of the hinges, in the jingle of the loose tendons inside it. The room became silent and I focused

on the whispers, not listening to Popeye's story. I thought they came from the back of the store, near the bookshelves. The voices grew louder and louder, accompanied by other sounds. Whispers, the galloping footfalls of horses, sword clashes, gunfire, and thunder.

Dark and sinister man, have at thee.

Window open, heat enveloping me, and whispers silent, I sat hunched over the typewriter, sweat on my forehead mixing with ink stains on my fingers and palms from handling the ink ribbon. I scratched my fingers on gears and small pieces of metal, tightening here, straightening long tendons there, performing emergency surgery on the broken typewriter. It hadn't been working properly the day before, I decided-- I tried it in a public place, sure, but that had never stopped me from escaping before. I had entered my own little world any time I wanted all those years ago. Why not now? Memories had sprouted people and objects but I was still there in the antique store. Something about the experience hadn't clicked, and the tense feeling you get when you just know you've forgotten something clenched in my chest.

I did all I could to fix the old thing, recalling what I had read in a repair manual that first summer. I thought perhaps it just needed a little fine tuning, since it I'd left it sitting in the dust for all this time. I let another thought infect and mix with the others -- perhaps Henry had broken it. Surely he couldn't use it like I could. I pressed the casing back on the top, and screwed it down, and breathed. I wiped my inky hands on a white towel next to my tools and used my sleeve to wipe the sweat from my brow.

The typewriter sat, silent, so I imagined a world. I imagined wheat fields and long rivers, green hills topped by blue sky, flying boats and fish in the clouds. I felt nothing. Those images dropped to the base of my mind as clunky, unreal words, as if I had said them so many times they had become foreign. I opened my eyes to the same dull room, the same heat and the same window looking out on Nanny's chicken coop.

The thought that kept cropping up during my crazed repair session came again -- Henry broke it. He must have. He could have even tried to use it, I imagined unsuccessfully. He looked at me so strangely in the antique shop. I wracked my brain trying to remember whether I missed a piece, but the bag was empty and I hadn't known every part of the typewriter in so long. Those summers themselves seemed more blurry than I thought. It had to be a missing piece, something that was keeping the typewriter from working as it should. It had to be Henry. He knew what it did, and he stole something to keep me from having it. Anger gurgled up in my throat.

He would tell me what he did. He would give me back what he stole.

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The next month or so went quietly around Capra as I tried to think of a way to confront Henry. Nanny thought I should be learning how to drive, so she let me rumble around in the truck every couple of days. She stayed with me initially, but I quickly got the hang of things and drove every day with ease. Part of me liked the freedom-- Nanny made me run for milk sometimes, and Popeye had me go out to get crosswords from the Apple Mart in Watonga. Every road in between Capra, Watonga, and any other place I had a mind to go were little used roads forgotten by anybody who would stop a fourteen year old from driving. Nanny said my father started driving when he was ten. Part of me

liked the freedom, the ability to go off somewhere, anywhere, when I ached for the typewriter to work, or when I felt replaced, angry, or alone. The other part of me felt like I was being pushed further away from the days that I could make the typewriter tell stories, like I was being pushed further and further away from home every time Nanny made me drive out by myself.

The truck rumbled and white gypsum dust kicked up in the rear-view mirror. Nanny had made me use the truck for the evening to take Henry to the movies. An old drive-in lay out in the middle of nowhere, off a small dirt road. It wasn't really the middle of nowhere-- the theater only sat ten minutes from Capra or Watonga. Still, the drive-in sat far enough out that any sign of town disappeared, replaced only by white road, grass, and fences.

I drove out to the drive-in-movie slowly, deliberately. I didn't want to kick too many rocks up and scratch Nanny's already beat-up truck, or more unlikely, attract the attention of some wayward highway patrolman, all the way out there on the dusty, half-abandoned roads of Blaine county. The shining sign came into view over the tall grass plastered against the old barbed-wire fences along the road side, a big arrow pointing forward and then down in a right angle, with the words "Cinema" in bright, dusty flashbulbs from another era. As I turned the car into the parking lot, more grass-stained gypsum spread out into a giant, half-neglected pitch with a few cars and little poles that relayed the movie audio through the windows to them. The projection booth sat near the back of the lot, a little red shack that doubled as a snack bar. Bright spotlights lit the off-

white screen, empty and waiting the movie to start in half an hour. I pulled the car up to one of the poles, rolling down the window.

"I'm going to go get some snacks," I said. "What do you want?"

"Some Reese's Pieces, please."

I opened the door and made my way to the snack bar. I wanted to act as nice as possible to Henry tonight, to loosen him up and get him to reveal what he had done to the typewriter when the time came. Perhaps if I bought candy and put on a good show, Nanny would get off my back, I'd figure out what went wrong with the typewriter, and all would go almost back to normal. I could get away from the real world, folding myself in the blankets of an imaginary adventure, like drifting to sleep after a bad day, hoping dreams would hold better days ahead.

I paid for two small Cokes and some popcorn, a candy bar, and a bag of Reese's Pieces. The sweaty kid at the booth took the money absentmindedly and leaned on the counter, waiting for the right time to start the film, staring out at the lights illuminating the empty screen. Sounds of speech came from the truck as I walked nearer. I realized I had heard Henry talking to himself. I couldn't make out every word, but I caught snippets of changing voices, talking to imaginary enemies. From the back window, I saw him playing with a tiny Indiana Jones action figure, one I didn't know he had with him. It looked old, but well taken care of, like many of Henry's possessions. I stopped for a moment, staring, thinking, remembering how I felt at his age. Suddenly Henry's eyes moved back, catching me looking, and he stuffed the action figure hurriedly into his pockets as I walked back to the car.

"Here's your candy," I said, throwing them onto the seat, next to him. He muttered a furtive thank you and picked them up cautiously. "So you like Indiana Jones huh?"

"Yeah," he said, but with a certain finality. I just asked a friendly question, I thought. I could sense his embarrassment in the silence. The sound of cicadas, crickets and a million other summer evening bugs filled the car between the words not spoken. I stared out the window, like the snack bar attendant, at the empty white canvas.

I didn't know what to do. I overwhelmingly wanted to ask him about the typewriter, but I knew the right time hadn't presented itself yet. I couldn't sound accusatory, even though I knew what he did already, that he stole my treasure.

"So how has living with Nanny been so far?" I asked, breaching the silence, hoping to work up to what I needed to ask.

"The best so far. It's way nicer than the other foster homes."

"How's that?" I asked.

"Nobody here steals my things. My house doesn't move."

We paused for a long time. I knew how that felt. My house, where I lived, always had wheels or wings, or changed without asking first, but Capra, my home, it never moved, and usually never changed. Except for him.

"What did you mean when you said I wasn't using the typewriter right?" I blurted out. I couldn't hold it back.

"What?" Henry said, confused.

"Back when we first went to Popeye's booths," I prodded. "You said I wasn't using it right. What did you mean?"

"Nothing, forget it."

"Seriously. What do you mean?"

"You wouldn't believe me."

"Try me." I knew it. He broke it and now he wanted to cover it up. Maybe he had even tried to use it and failed. It belonged to me after all. Only I knew how to use it correctly.

Henry thought for a while, looking at me, sizing me up, deciding what to say.

"I guess you're not really a grownup... so it's okay," he said. "It's a magic typewriter."

The words stuck in my head like a shadow.

"What?" I said sleepily, trying to pull myself from the nightmare.

"It's magic. Let me show you." He looked around furtively, and unzipped his backpack. Inside I saw the case of the typewriter.

He had stolen it.

"I knew it!" I said. "You thief!" I ripped it from his hands as quickly as I could, and clutched it possessively. I had all the evidence I needed. I didn't need to listen to anything else. I didn't need to know that he had used it just like me, probably messing it up. That he probably discovered it in that dusty closet, thinking that he could steal it from me and keep it only for himself.

"Why won't it work anymore?" I said in an angry voice.

"It works fine," he said, looking confused. "You've used it before, haven't you?"

"It's my typewriter. Of course I've used it."

"Finders keepers. Besides, you've been away for a long time. Maybe you just forgot how?"

"I think I'd know how to use my own things," I snapped. But I felt the words that had floated in the back of my mind sting as he said them. For a long time before coming home I thought maybe none of my memories of the typewriter ever happened. Too immediately, everything became real again. I felt overwhelmed, groggy, as if submerged in water, ears full, hearing the muffled sounds of my own heartbeat.

"It's okay," Henry said. "I'll show you. If you still can. I don't know if old people can use it."

He reached for the typewriter but I pulled it away, getting out of the car. At the front of the lot I was vaguely aware that the film had started, a young Indiana Jones crawling through caves on the screen.

I took a few steps backward, scared of this four-foot menace in sneakers and jeans. I saw in him myself. I saw a eight-year-old me, and I absolute terror paralyzed me. As I clutched the typewriter to my chest, I felt the ground begin to sway -- no, it was rolling. Like waves, the ground began to undulate beneath my feet, and the world became much darker around the one bright light of the movie screen, like an underexposed photograph. Henry's eyes changed, seeing and understanding the changes I saw. I recognized the look even though I had never seen it in myself.

"Give it back," Henry said.

"It's mine. It doesn't belong to you. You stole it." I heard the still unfamiliar song echoing again. He had changed it, somehow -- I could hear it. I held it closer as the grass began to fizzle down between the gypsum rocks, and the cracks in the earth began to separate from each other, spreading further apart, only darkness flowing out of them.

"I didn't steal anything!" Henry shouted at me.

"You stole this. You're a thief. That's probably why no one wants you." There was silence. I had said the horrible things I had thought, and I couldn't take them back.

Henry suddenly lunged at me off of one of the rising crests of crackling ground, taking me to the ground. The typewriter flew from my hands as I landed on my back, losing the wind in my lungs. He picked it up and opened the box, looking intently at the typewriter.

"What did you do?" Henry asked.

"What did I do?" I said incredulously. "You're the one who broke it!"

"I didn't break it. Something's wrong."

The earth around us continued to change, crackle, separate. Dark chasms swallowed up whole cars, the stars began to explode and fizzle out, one by one, the darkness reaching out toward the moon slowly. Henry closed his eyes as if trying to imagine something, trying to hold on to the world and put it back together, but it would not come. The patch of earth we stood grew smaller and smaller. I stood up straighter as it began to drip into sand, falling into the abyss, the only light visible coming from the towering movie screen on a pillar of dark gray concrete. The dirt began to melt away under the toes of my sneakers, and I heard a small yell come from behind me.

I turned quickly -- Henry dangled from the edge, grasping desperately at the remaining ground, and finally, onto the typewriter. I forgot the argument, all the words and anger between us, and dove for him. I grabbed the sharp metal edges in between the keys with both hands.

"Hold on," I said, trying to stay calm.

"Why won't it stop?" Henry pleaded.

"I don't know. Imagine it gone. Just imagine it gone." I repeated the phrase like a mantra, but I knew we would soon fall. I couldn't imagine it gone. Almost nothing existed to imagine gone anymore. Everything I knew, everything I took for granted, melted away at the hands of a power I never fully understood.

Henry suddenly slipped further down, pulling me and the typewriter with him, halfway over the edge. He held on to the back end of the typewriter desperately, and I to the tendons of the keys, feeling the metal dig into my fingers, starting to bleed. As if pulled by a force stronger than gravity, both began to creak, and finally, the typewriter snapped. Henry fell.

He disappeared into the dark void, gone. Everything gone.

The Earth disappeared beneath me, and I fell too.

Only dark remained. Not just darkness, but an enveloping absence of sound, light, and shape. I couldn't feel air moving around me, or see my own hands in front of my face. Only darkness. I didn't feel weightless as I fell. I couldn't move, like waking up in the middle of the night and feeling every limb shot through with terror and paralysis. I felt a shimmer of terror deep down in my gut as I existed in the nonexistence. I wondered whether I had died.

Then, as if opening my eyes for the first time, I saw light. Blinding light, heat on my face, and something itchy and rough at my back and down the backs of my bare arms. I clutched at something on the ground. Grass, I thought. Green, warm grass. My eyes began to adjust, and I found myself looking upward, the blue sky framed by grasses a foot high, and wildflowers. I sat up quickly. The world stretched for miles in all

directions with nothing but grass and flowers, and a brown line on the horizon. I squinted at it, trying to make it out. Behind the growing brown edge rolled dark storm clouds and lightning. I thought I could hear the sound of thunder, but different-- a constant low rumbling. I began to feel the rumble through my feet and in my legs. The brown line grew ever bigger, moving, undulating with the rolling of the soft hills of the field. I could finally see them then.

Bison. A gigantic pack of thundering bison, seemingly bringing with them a dark swirling storm of lightning and rain. The storming stampede seemed to be coming directly my way. I took off running in the opposite direction, not sure whether I could escape them anyway. I looked back as I ran-- they rumbled, only a stone's throw away now and gaining, and the rain began to fall suddenly, as if appearing from nowhere. I stumbled over a berm and fell into the dirt, shielding myself. I could hear the thunder of their hooves coming, their breath snorted through their noses. They would trample me, I knew it. Just then, I felt the sensation of cool plastic under my outstretched palm on the ground, not dirt. My eyes snapped open. Sound left the world for a second or a century as I clutched the object, and opened a hand full of dirt, seeds, and one shining "A" key from my typewriter. I brushed the dirt away, made a fist, holding the piece of my typewriter tightly, and imagined the Bison gone. Please let them be gone, I pleaded to what remained of the typewriter. Please be gone.

The shimmering sound of locusts in the grass came to my ears, but no thunder. No rain. I could hear the wind passing through the grass, but I couldn't hear hooves trampling it down. I opened my eyes again, and stood, looking over the small hill. Nothing. Nothing for miles but the grass, and a cloud of dust still settling over it. The bison had vanished. I

wiped leftover rain and sweat from my face and breathed again, looking down at the piece of the typewriter. Where did the rest hide? What had Henry and I created?

Henry. Henry must be lost here somewhere, too, I thought, although there no one and nothing else seemed to exist for miles around but grass, bugs, and flowers. I closed my eyes again, but as if drowning out my thoughts, the sound of locusts in the grass buzzed in my mind. As I opened my eyes again, I saw nothing had changed. The world hadn't vanished. It didn't belong to me. A familiar feeling of control always came when I entered worlds of the typewriter before, worlds of my own creation and imagination. This one felt different. I hadn't even really felt like the bison disappeared because I imagined it. I had begged for it, and something happened, but I never did something like that with just one piece before. Everything felt off.

I had to find Henry, at least. I needed to make things right, and bring us both home. I began to walk. I clutched the "A" Key of the typewriter tightly, and walked on, hoping I would find something, someone in this vast field. The heat felt like a tomb, and although the wet from the sudden rain started to dry, sweat and dirt, mixing together quickly replaced it. The world began to blur together as I stumbled onward after hours or minutes or days. The thought of Henry's face came to mind as I moved forward through the grass. His fear as he fell down into darkness. I wanted only to sleep, to lie down in the grass. My eyelids felt heavy and the heat pressed down on my chest. My throat constricted and my lips cracked and stung. I tripped, falling toward the earth.

I slammed down into metal. Cool metal, compared to the heat I had just felt. I opened my eyes to a completely different place. Rivets in the metal pushed up into my palms as I pushed myself up from the floor. Everything looked smudged like a botched

painting. I thought I saw some men running toward me as I slumped back down onto the cool surface and let go.

CHAPTER FOUR

The New Story

Breath. The heat of breath on my face in utter darkness. I felt the sensation of something too close to my face, some animal, some monster, some thing hovering, breathing, but always out of reach. I waved my hands in front of my face, shuffled backward in the inky dark, and yet I still felt the creature exhale hot, wet air all around, heard the snort of steam, felt the rumble of thunder.

Then, as if waking up from a bad dream or a long sleep, sound and light snapped into the world again. I sat bolt upright in a tiny room, a cell made from riveted metal and corrugated steel. The dark still clung to the edges of the room, but the light had all but erased my dream. A small amount of light came from above, a small hanging bulb of glass filled with glowing water swung above my head as the room rocked softly to and fro. I suddenly felt the weight and pinch of large metal shackles on my wrists, connected by a small chain in between. A small hatch opened at the bottom of something in front of

me -- a door that seemed to blend in with the other walls -- letting in a stream of light, and a tray with a cup of water and something resembling soup.

Sense and feeling came back to me in waves, and I felt pain in my lips and the dry, gritty feeling in my mouth and throat. I grabbed for the water and gulped it down quickly, trying hard not to spill any, but I still felt a few rivulets cut down the side of my face past the corner of my lips. I put the cup down and breathed in heavily. The room smelled disgusting, perhaps because of the food, stinging my nose. I picked up the soupy brown liquid in the metal bowl and gulped it down too, despite the taste and smell, attempting not to breathe.

"Don't eat so fast. You'll get sick," a quiet voice came. A yell tried to escape my throat, but I only coughed on the soup in my throat and dropped the still half full bowl. Sputtering, I looked to my right and saw two green eyes looking at me through a small metal slat in the wall.

I wiped my mouth and managed "Who are you?" The roughness of my own voice surprised me as sound escaped my throat for the first time in a while.

"Name's Virgil," The voice said. His eyes sparkled through the slat. "I'd shake your hand, but these cuffs are too big to fit. What's your name?"

"Jonah," I managed. "Where am I?"

"Very funny," Virgil said. His eyes disappeared for a moment, and then were back. "They're coming with my slop. Quiet!"

The slat between the walls darkened and turned to metal again as Virgil slid something in between them. I heard a gruff voice and the clanking of metal next door, and a sigh. I sat silently, waiting for some noise. I heard the muffled sound of the

invisible man giving food to, I assumed, other prisoners like me. For a long time after that, I could only hear the creaking of the metal around me, nothing else. Finally, the metal panel on the other side of the slat moved, and the hole reappeared, along with Virgil's eyes.

"Spilled my food again. How careless of me." His voice sounded dejected. "Well, at least I like a little grit in my soup."

I looked at my bowl, food still swirling in the bottom. I felt my stomach shift in hunger, but I felt sorry for the man next to me, even if I didn't know him. I picked up the small bowl of grime and held it up to the slat, just barely sliding it through.

"I'm not hungry anyway," I said.

"Thanks, friend," came Virgil's voice. I heard him slurping up the soup for too short a time, and again his eyes came back to the slat in the wall. "So you're a stowaway?"

"What?"

"You're a stowaway. Were you hoping to find some treasure or something?"
Virgil said. "Because this is a boat of dead men, friend. Convicts."

A boat. I suddenly realized everything was rocking gently, and I didn't like it.

"How do you know I'm not a convict too?"

"Suppose you might be. They execute kids your age sometimes. These roughnecks don't seem to care much about age, anyway, as long as they get their bounty."

"Roughnecks?" I said, groggily.

"Hired guns, bounty hunters, what have you." Virgil paused, and his eyes looked thoughtful. "Let me see your hands."

"Why?" I asked, defensively.

"Just out with 'em. It's not like I can touch them, is it." I stretched out my palms. Virgil nodded as if satisfied. "Not enough scars. Not near enough. So you must be a stowaway. An affluent one at that. Your hands don't have a scar on 'em."

Speechless and exhausted, I didn't know how to respond.

"Anyway, you'd better get a good night's rest, haven't you? We'll be working come morning."

The slat closed, leaving me alone again, and I heard the sloshing from the lamp orb above. I remembered, as I propped myself up against the wall, the piece of the typewriter. I had it in my hand when I came here, I thought. I searched my jean pockets quickly, but came out empty. I lost the only thing I had left to protect me.

...

More food and water sliding in through the slat in the door woke me the next morning, soupy mess sloshing in the bowl and onto the small tray. I drank up half my water and half my soup, and waited to hear the doorman come by with Virgil's food, spilling it again. I didn't know quite why I saved part of my food for him, whether because I felt sorry for him or because I knew I needed an ally in this unknown world. Still, after the sound of the doorman left, I knocked on Virgil's slat and waited. It slid open and his eyes appeared again.

"Morning, friend."

"Is it?" I asked. I held up the food bowl to him, and he gladly accepted without question again, slurped up the food, and handed the empty bowl back to me. I held up the cup of water this time.

"I'm not a stowaway, you know," I said, holding the cup just out of reach. My mind felt clearer with the morning, and the world didn't seem so different anymore. I could sense some of that familiarity again, I thought. I sloshed the water in the cup. "I came here on purpose. I'm looking for someone. Is there another kid on this boat?"

"Fine then, you're not a stowaway," Virgil said. "But you might be crazy. How about some of that water, then?"

"Another kid." I said slowly.

"Not that I've seen. You're the only one."

"Dammit," I said. I had been thinking about Henry when I was walking through the fields, thinking I'd find some trace of him, as we had created and come into the same world in the same way.

"I won't be much help, friend," Virgil said slowly. "They execute people like me."

For a second I rethought asking for his help. The word "execute" stuck in my ears. What did he do? What kind of world did we create? I only knew the cell walls around me.

"Look," Virgil started. "You keep splitting food with me, I swear I'll help you with whatever you like, assuming I live through the next month."

I hesitated for a moment, but my arm was outstretched with the water before I could finish making the decision. The cup wouldn't fit like the shallow bowl, so Virgil put mouth up to the slat and I tipped the cup for him, spilling only a little as he drank.

"Thanks, Jonah, was it?"

"That's right," I said.

"So if you came here on purpose, why don't you leave on purpose too? Your friend isn't here." Virgil's eyes narrowed slightly. "You obviously have some sort of magical power, to have just appeared on a boat without being a stowaway."

He laughed at his joke, and I laughed at the truth in it. I felt confidence brimming up inside me. I wouldn't just escape. I would do it with style. I controlled worlds before, and I could do it again. I erased an entire herd of charging bison. I just needed some time to warm up, and I'd find my chance.

A loud screech ripped the air, and the door to my cell opened, flooding everything with a brighter light than before. A big, dirty, burly man in rags pulled me up from the floor by the shackles, and outside my room, into a large, rusty, grimy metal hallway with more doors to more cells. He held a bigger chain that ran the length of the hallway, linked up to other prisoners all the way down toward a stairwell and a wall at the end of the room, where the chain's last link hinged. He linked my shackles to the chain with a metal clasp, and my arms fell down, heavy with the weight.

Another set of downcast men stood bound on the other side of the hallway, skinny, some wearing rags, some wearing what looked like gray military uniforms, some in nicer clothes looking more frightened. The burly man went from door to door, chaining up another inmate, crossing the hallway each time, opening only one door at a time with a large key. He came back to my side of the room, and opened up Virgil's door. I couldn't see him chaining the man up from behind the door, but I heard the clanking of his shackles, and a sound of a fist making contact with a body.

The large man shut the door and Virgil finally came into view. Virgil stood taller than the other prisoners, wearing a dirty, khaki military uniform, popping out from the

gray ones some of the other men wore. His had a patch that looked like an emerald on the collar, his open and showing his white shirt. He had brown hair and freckles, and a messy beard. He looked at me and nodded, raising his shackled arms in greeting. I opened my mouth to talk, but Virgil raised both hands and put a finger to his lips. I stopped short, and he pointed backward at the large man, and shook his head.

After the man had finished shackling up all the silent prisoners, he unhooked the ends of the chains at the back of the hallway, and yelled for everyone to move up to the deck. As we shuffled up to the deck, the light stung my eyes. I squinted, slowly raising the weight of the shackles on my wrists to block the sunlight with my hands. As I reached the top of the stairs, behind some other bedraggled prisoner, the ship, and the sea - if you could call it that - came into view. I blinked, and my eyes slowly focused, adjusting to the light. The sea, an odd, glittering gold color, hissed as waves hit the metal hull of the ship. We walked on the deck, following the large sailor, closer to the edge, and the golden waves came into focus. The hissing noise issued not from the churning of any water, but from wind flying through the tops of a gigantic, undulating sea of wheat. It moved to and fro, rippling like pools of molten gold, light glinting off of the heads of the stalks. I could hardly believe my eyes. How?

"All right you convicts, time for another day of work," came a voice. From the deck came a skinny, tall man wearing a long coat that didn't fit him very well, with brass buttons and a rifle at his back. His hair waved with the wind, and he commanded some sort of presence, if only because of our chains. He came toward me, stopped too close in front of my face, and stared intently with a curling grin of decaying teeth. I smelled liquor and rot on his breath, and stench on his body.

"And you, stowaway. Don't make any trouble, or you'll--"

"Or what?" I said. I stood up straighter, and looked him in the eye. I saw my chance. A clear villain in this created world. I imagined him losing his clothes, in his underwear, humiliated. I closed my eyes for a moment, and thought hard.

"What the hell are you doing, you stinkin' brat? Are you crazy or something?" The captain laughed. I opened my eyes, feeling shame well up in my stomach. It hadn't worked. He stood, perplexed. I closed my eyes again, hard, imagining him away, imagining he didn't exist. I opened them again, and he had started laughing, along with the whole crew. He slapped me hard in the face, and I stumbled back. I felt my face heat up, and I looked down at the deck.

"Careful or you'll end up like the deserter over here," the captain said. "They don't give pardons to cowards like that. And neither do I."

"I didn't desert, friend," Virgil's voice came. I looked up. "I merely found myself in need of a vacation on this honey of a ship. Tell me, did you get the parts from Cassel? I only ask because everything smells like cow crap. Great livestock down there."

Virgil stood with a grin on his face that lasted a second too long for the Captain and a second too short for himself, as the captain waved his hand, and the big man who had led us up smashed him in the face with one of his massive fists. Virgil stayed standing, wavered, but grinned again through the blood and bruise. He looked at me, and winked. I tried my best to thank him silently, nodding at him and looking back down at my feet.

"All right, to work. Lead the princesses on, Jory!" the captain barked to the man who led us from the cells.

Jory came up and made sure our chains were tight, waking me from my haze. Another came by and handed us large, brown scrub brushes. Virgil and the other men in line dropped to their hands and knees and started scrubbing forward. I followed suit, feeling the ache of the captain's slap on my cheek. The ship was large and the stairs had gone down far, closed now by a large hatch. The entire deck of the ship looked slapped together scrap metal, pipes lining the edges of the deck, and rivets holding together mismatched, rusted, rough lengths of metal. Stairs led up to what looked like an old steering wheel from a car at the helm, and in place of a mast loomed a giant wooden wind mill, creaking slowly in the low wind. The wood became metal again half way down the tower holding the windmill up, melding with the deck.

I kept following the others, scrubbing, as the other half of the prisoners' hallway threw buckets of water down onto it. They would lower their buckets on ropes, and after a long time, would come back up with buckets of dark, brown, dirty water, throwing it onto the deck, the same water I assumed I drank over the past day. I wondered, briefly, where it came from, but kept my head down and tried to keep working like everyone else, just to stay alive. We scrubbed for what seemed like forever, and then another sailor came back and ordered us up again. I dared not talk to Virgil, only looking at him every once in a while, to which he would respond with a nod and a reassuring, albeit bloody smile.

"Drinking water duty. Those of you with buckets, hold, those with brushes, hand them to the sailor walking by. No drinking."

A sailor came by and picked up our brushes, and yet another came by and shoved old, misshapen, but heavy metal buckets into our hands, attached to long lengths of coiled

rope. Messy, rusty welds held heavier metal plates on the bottom of the buckets. I stood, dumbly, trying to figure out what to do by watching. The prisoners next to me dropped their buckets over the side and into the wheat sea, whirling them around until they passed the waving surface, and then slowly let out more and more rope. Some were quicker than others. More men came by behind, hefting large wooden barrels, one for every three prisoners.

"Get to work, boy," the man behind me said, shoving me in the back with something hard, metal, and blunt. I stumbled forward, terrified, and dropped my bucket into the wheat, holding on to the length of rough, old rope, a longer coil coming down at my feet. It sat there, bouncing around on the moving waves, hitting the patchwork hull. I looked at Virgil for guidance. He swirled his hands around in the air, miming the motion for me. I swirled the rope, moving the bucket a little, jimmying it in between stalks of wheat, till finally it dropped down more, and the rope became taut. I lowered it down for what seemed like ages, and finally felt it hit something as I reached near the end of my long coil. I looked at Virgil again. He mimed moving the rope up and down with his own, and I again did the same, stopping once more to look back at Virgil. He slowly pulled the rope back up, and shrugged as if to say "that's all." Again, for what seemed like ages, I pulled the rope back up and brought out a small bucket of water, full of particles of wheat. I started to pull them out, but I heard Virgil whisper.

"Good for digestion. Fast work over good work, here, anyway." Virgil said conspiratorially. He paid for it, as a sailor walking by jabbed him with the butt of his gun in the back. He yelled to everyone who would listen, "no talking, scum."

I turned and dumped my bucket into the barrel of dirty water, and continued to work, getting faster with each dip. I felt the jab of a gun in my back a few more times that day.

...

We walked back down into the hatch in chains again as the sun began to set, and the guards threw us back into our cells against the wall. I fell down, aching all over, bruised from a few hits from the crew as work continued. I felt sick and dehydrated as the bulb of water above swung and modulated like a jar of fireflies. I sank down to the back and felt my eyes get heavy with sleep. I raised my shackled hands to my face and rubbed my temples. How did this happen? Why couldn't I control anything anymore? My stomach dropped as I thought of every time a gun was pointed at my face that day. If not for Virgil, I might have died.

As if on cue, Virgil's slat slid open again.

"You're a stupid one, huh?" he said. I said nothing back, staring at the same spot on the floor. I felt his eyes boring into me. "Why are you here?"

"I'm lost, and someone else is too." Because of me, I thought to myself. "I didn't mean to come here, but I'm here because I was looking for him."

"I don't understand."

"You wouldn't," I said back.

"Try me." I stayed silent. "Friend, I ran my mouth and took a hit in it because of you. My mouth is a job tool. You break it and I'm more out of work than I am already."

I looked up at him, and I saw he only wanted to help in his eyes, or at least mild amusement -- perhaps I only really wanted to believe that he wanted to help me. I blurted, "I was brought here by a magic typewriter."

To my surprise, Virgil didn't laugh. A peep didn't issue from his mouth.

"How do you know about that?" Virgil said. A flurry of questions started to issue from his mouth. "Are you with the government somehow? Are you a political prisoner? Is someone trying to keep your mouth shut? Blink once if you're the bastard child of the Leader."

All I could manage through all of this was a weak "what?"

"You don't have the slightest idea what I'm talking about, do you?" I could barely see and hear Virgil leaning back in his cell and sighing.

"I'm nobody, all right? Forget I ever said anything," I said. Now he sounded insane, I thought. His eyes reappeared in front of the slat, wide and serious.

"You say a magic typewriter brought you here, right?" Virgil asked. I nodded. "A physical object, not just some metaphorical junk?" I nodded again.

"Have you seen one?"

"No." Virgil said. "But I knew it was real. Where are you from?"

...

I sat and told Virgil the whole story of what happened to Henry and me, start-to-finish, leaving out that the world he lived in had been created in those moments, saying instead the typewriter transported me there. I don't know quite why I trusted him with the story, but everything and everyone else seemed hopeless, and nobody else in the world had an ear to listen. He nodded for a while after I finished, as if evaluating, and said "It's

a good story, but it could use a little meter or something. Maybe some embellishment. Well, after all, it's not finished I suppose."

"So you don't believe it," I said. I sighed and sat back. "I knew you wouldn't."

"No, no, it's not that," Virgil said, chuckling. "I'm a storyteller by trade, or at least I was, when that was still a position one could hold in the Capital. It's in my blood to critique. That's not the point, though. Look, why don't I tell you a story. Then maybe things will make more sense."

Virgil sat back without waiting for me to say "okay" to his storytelling proposition, and his voice echoed into my room with a somewhat larger presence than before, despite being quieter and calmer. It seemed deeper, omnipresent and personal all at the same time. He began the story like this:

When time was blank as sheets of printer's paper,
and the sky was dark like ink that dries on glass,
there was the writer. Letters broke and burned
the glassy sky; they fell and smashed into
the land and wrote out the first words.

The falling lettered constellations warped
the earth and forged the mesas, burned the sand
into alabaster crags. The stars were buried
and watered with a drop of ink from the sky.
The first of man grew tall and tough that day.

He broke the rocks and tamed the wild hills
with a sledgehammer that weighed a thousand pounds
and stood a hundred foot. He tilled the valleys
deep, and grew the oceans tall, and built
the cities wide; the first story was told.

"That's a piece of the first story," Virgil said. I must have looked confused, because he continued, saying "it's like a poem. It's about the first people. What did you think?"

"It was good," I said. His voice had been mesmerizing, and when he finished, I wanted the story to go on. "Is there any more to it?"

"Lots. I've been working on this version for a long time," he said. "It's based on all the old tales, but that first part mentions a creator. The writer. Some call it the author, some call it the first storyteller."

"You think that's my typewriter."

"Well, I don't know if it belongs to you, but you say it brought you here?"

"Yes."

"Where exactly are you from? You down from the stone colonies past the east border? Nobody hears about them anymore."

I didn't know how to answer. I sat for a moment, thinking -- how would I explain it? How could I say, "I created this place by accident, and got brought here," without sounding like a lunatic?

"Look, you don't have to answer. Maybe you don't remember, maybe you're not even from around here. But I believe you. The old stories, ones like mine, they talk about an author, a writer, words coming down from the sky and writing out our story. Making things out of nothing, putting things where there wasn't anything before. Doing magic."

"But you can't possibly believe what you're writing is all true, can you?" I asked. Most of his story seemed built from what I knew of the truth, at least the part about the typewriter creating this world, but I wanted to know why he believed it so strongly.

"Well, all good stories need a little embellishment," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "But stories used to be what kept our people together. They tell us who we were, where we're going. Sometimes there's more real in a story than there is in everyday life."

"So you believe me?"

"Mostly."

"That's good enough, I guess."

"Beyond all that starry eyed dreamer stuff, there is something else."

"This." He held up his hand through the slat, and I saw, held in between his dirty fingers, the "A" key of my typewriter. I felt anger well up in my stomach, but before I could grab for it, he held the piece out through the slat in the window.

"Hold out your hand," he said. I did, and he dropped the piece in my hand without hesitation. "When they found you on the deck, this had rolled out of your hand. I pretended to trip so I could get it before anyone saw."

I looked at him thankfully.

"Now, don't thank me. Those go for a pretty penny on the black market," Virgil warned. "I don't suppose I'll have anywhere to sell it, though, after I'm executed."

We sat in silence for a while, waiting for a dinner that wouldn't arrive.

CHAPTER FIVE

In Chains

For the next couple of days, Virgil and I continued sharing the one meal a day that still came intact. No one ever said a word, but we knew the missing dinner served as punishment for talking back like we did. My hunger grew and grew as the days wore on, and I felt my body becoming weaker. I continued to do the work, but more slowly at times as I became more and more dehydrated. The only water I drank came from furtive sips taken from my bucket during water-duty. Virgil taught me how to wait for the men to turn their backs so I could sneak a sip while hulking the bucket up over the edge. It tasted disgusting, and the flavor of dirt wouldn't leave my mouth.

I began to regain a little strength from the water, and from the stories Virgil told every night. Sometimes he told stories that followed structure like the poems of the First Men and the Writer, and other times he told tales of life before.

"I had a room of my own in the Capital Ruins. I was personal storyteller to one of the richer families down there," Virgil had said wistfully. "I told stories to his children, tutored them in meter and song and penmanship. But I'd go tell stories in the streets just

for fun on off days, out in the city square with all the apprentice storytellers and street artists."

One morning, the door opened without breakfast. I had heard the doors opening down the hallway before, and pressed my ear up to my door to hear. A commotion rose in the hallway, hushed whispers and clanking chains. The guards brought us up in our chains, but as we walked up, I saw wooden docks, green grass, and a small town made of reddish brown bricks of clay and wooden planks in the distance. The ship came in to the wooden docks, and the sailors lowered a metal gangplank. The captain walked down first and into the wooden dock-house, and the sailors jabbed and poked all the chained prisoners down the rusty gangplank.

We walked past the dock house, guided by a sailor holding the chain up front, and into town, where four open carriages sat, tied to oxen. Men in clean gray uniforms, armed with shotguns and long rifles, sat in the front of each of the carriages, with one driver to each. We were jabbed again, prodded to pile into the large carriages, as they removed us from the chains. I thought briefly about running as he removed the chains, but nobody else made a move. The men with guns looked at us severely, and I knew they wouldn't hesitate to shoot us if we decided to run.

The captain came out of the dock house with a bag of something heavy, and Virgil leaned over to me, whispering "I guess you've gathered he's no soldier." I nodded. "That money is what we're all worth. Doesn't seem a lot, does it?"

At that, the carriages began to move, and we traveled down the white rock roads of the dusty village. Green hills stretched out lazily on the horizons of the town, above the brick buildings. People came out of their houses and stared and children ran by in

shorts and dirty shirts, waving, unaware of our destination, or what it meant. Some parents came out and held their children back, looking on sadly as we passed. Their clothes looked homemade, most wearing white and gray shirts, tanned leather and tweed. We passed out of the small town to its outskirts, where cows grazed freely, and the smell of manure mixed with the fresh smell of grass. As we passed over a hill, the town disappeared behind, and the world opened up before us.

The land in front stretched, green and rolling, streaked with patches of wildflowers, grass that grew taller as it got further from the road, and small fenced areas with grazing cows and oxen. The sky seemed to go on forever, and the pale moon hung persistently in the sky even as the sun trekked further upward. As we rode longer, we came by a few small towns like the one near the docks, and what looked like ruined towns with broken-down stone walls and collapsed wooden buildings everywhere. They looked vaguely like places I already knew. They came from parts of my mind, I thought, so that made sense. There were street signs bent into the ground, broken barns, grass and vines growing over everything and pulling it to the ground. I looked to Virgil, who spoke, as if hearing my thoughts.

"There're ruins like that everywhere. Some look worse because of how the state archaeologists --" Virgil said this word like it tasted foul on his tongue, "-- leave them after a scouring. Some say they're where the first men lived. The Capital Ruins are built on a place like those. Buildings made of all kinds of things, every street like a different city. I wouldn't call it a ruin at all, really."

"Sounds like you miss it."

"Can't say I'm excited to go back, this time."

He looked sadly at some of the ruins on the road. The sound of ox hooves crushing the rocky road beneath echoed in the air, mixing with the sound of wind and hissing locusts. The air burned hotter as the day went on, and the sun rose higher. It must be summer, I thought. Just like at home.

"Why did you desert?" I asked.

"Because the military wasn't what I remembered anymore."

"You enlisted?"

"Yes. The military hired storytellers at one point. We were teachers. Men to be respected."

"What happened?"

"They outlawed my job."

Virgil held a finger up to his lips as the soldiers up front seemed to take notice of our conversation, or at least the rumblings of speech, in the back.

The heat began to become oppressive as the sun lowered to the west, the hills more rocky and pronounced. As we passed over yet another and higher hill, the Capital Ruins came into view, visible from the horizon, seemingly sprouting up from nowhere down in a steep, rocky valley. What looked like skyscrapers shot up from behind a giant stone wall, and the town came to a point and sat flat against a huge line of gray, rocky mountains.

The city shone in the evening sun, basking in an orange light, and more farms, and now several lakes, dotted the rocky valley. A haze hung around everything in the late afternoon heat, and I could feel my skin burning, the hot sun scorching through my jeans and sneakers. The soldier drank deeply from a canteen of something, spilling some on his

cheeks as he gulped. My throat felt like gravel as I swallowed and licked my lips. I guessed that the men driving the carts didn't care whether the doomed prisoners died or not on the way to the city.

As we got closer and closer to the city, the farms became denser, with different livestock. Cows, sheep, oxen, and even horses began to become common on the farms, each with a small house somewhere on the land, dwarfed by larger outbuildings and barns. The Capital itself became huge, towering into the air, surrounded by a now visible stone wall as tall as twelve men, closing the city off in an undulating shape, larger where jutting buildings demanded, and smaller where the city line came in. Grass grew up into the sides of the wall, sticking out of cracks and overtaking the top at some points. Small children, probably from the farms, played outside of the city, throwing balls against the wall, and coming to look at us, the passing prisoners.

A few of the children came too close and vaulted rocks up at us. None hit, but the soldier in front raised his gun and issued a shot in the air. The kids scattered in all directions and disappeared back to the farms, to safety. The empty road ahead swirled into the gate, leading us finally into the city. The caravan slowed to a halt as we reached a large wooden gate in front of everything.

"Enjoy the view while it lasts," Virgil said, perhaps to himself, and the gates swung forward.

As the gap between the gates became bigger, the city opened itself up. A giant street running the width of the gate ran down for what seemed like forever. The wall towered over us as we passed into the city. Virgil had told the truth -- a mishmash of all different types of architecture made up the city, a single giant street lined with alleyways,

shops, and buildings that seemed to rise higher and higher as we rode. Brick, stone, metal, and even glass buildings stood together in a close grid. The street bustled with activity as we drove along, people running this way and that, doing errands, staring at the passing prisoners, carrying boxes or walking to other, unknown destinations down the many side streets that stretched out past the main road.

Vendors had booths set up on one section of street, selling food and what seemed like piles of junk, at least for the moment I got to see them, and others had bottles of the same glowing liquid I saw in the bulb hanging in my cell on the boat, although it seemed less bright, perhaps because of the daylight. The city overwhelmed all my senses. People dressed in all kinds of clothing, some women in extravagant, flowing dresses, some men wearing nice vests and collared, starched white shirts. The street vendors dressed in rags or more loose-fitting clothing, with big-legged pants that tied at the ankle, and worn, thin cloth shirts that looked well used. The air smelled like bread and spice and dust in the air.

We reached a town square, or rather, a town circle. A large fountain sprung out of the middle of it all with a statue of a man in a sharp military uniform, with a short coat, a band across the chest that held a saber at the side and a rifle on the back. Six water jets in a circle surrounded the statue, shooting up in to the air, letting droplets of water hit a little garden planted around the fountain. The circle sat virtually empty, only a few people walking through, giving furtive looks at us prisoners. Pathways on the left and right of the circle led back into town. Up a huge set of stairs at the front of the circle loomed a gigantic building, seemingly carved out of the side of the rocky crags shooting up from the ground, stony and imposing on the horizon.

The soldiers stopped the oxen after circling around the fountain and stepped down off the carriages. They came around the carts and opened them up and began shuffling us off and toward the stairs. I heard my shackles clink as I felt my arms and hands shaking. I licked my lips as the spell of this imagined city broke, and the reality of everything came crushing down on me. I pretended I could feel the piece of the typewriter in my pocket, something real I could hold on to as the soldiers prodded us down the pathway toward the building. I looked back toward Virgil as we walked up the stony steps, and he nodded, grimacing. The building towered and passed over us, and we stepped through the doors, leaving the bright, afternoon light outside, behind us, gone.

A teeming mass of people flowed down stone hallways covered in burgundy and gold carpets. As we walked forward, the mass of people froze and parted for the soldiers in front of us, pausing in silence. The vaulted ceilings held lines of large, ornate bulbs of the golden, glowing liquid I saw on the boat. A single soldier in the company leading us to judgment left for a moment to go through a cherry wood door at the end of the room. We waited, and I felt my stomach churning. Scratches on the ceiling obscured old, chiseled writing. The soldier came back and the company forced us all into the room. A sound of chains hitting the ground rang out, and one haggard man broke out and tried to run past us-- a soldier turned and drew his pistol in one smooth motion, and with a thunderous, terrible flash, the would-be-escapee fell to the ground in a bloody heap. The soldiers silently forced us forward as we passed the crumpled, bleeding mass on the ground. The crowd stayed completely still. I felt hollow with shock as I stepped over the pool of blood soaking into the carpet. We walked into an enormous auditorium with seats on both sides of us, going farther back behind, the hallway in a cut out in between. Stern

men sat at the end of the room behind a stone wall with stairs leading up to their benches, wearing similar gray uniforms to the soldiers, only more ornate, with gold accents and ribbons lining up their chests and shoulders. The gray-suited killers roughly pushed us down onto benches in front of the empty auditorium seats, the chains clanking as we sat. Virgil looked down at me and gave me a look not at once comforting, but steely and resolute. All joy had left his eyes.

The men at the tall podium wall looked down at us, and finally spoke.

"You are all of you cowards," one of them said, although I couldn't tell which -- their features were darkened by the bright lights coming out behind them. "You have all betrayed your uniforms. I find it disgusting that one of you still wears those tan rags, but at least you don't disgrace the Gray further by wearing it on your coward's body."

He meant Virgil, who sat up as straight as he could and stared up at the darkened podium and silhouetted figures. I couldn't tell whether Virgil's height really surpassed the others, or whether his pride and courage made him seem taller. But everyone there had committed desertion or worse. Not me. Maybe they would believe I stowed away on a roughneck's ship. I tried to come up with a good story.

"We will hear each of your last stories before you are sent to the cells to await execution."

"Wait!" I shouted, desperately. "I'm not a soldier."

"You dare interrupt these proceedings?" came one of the voices.

"I'm not a soldier. I'm a stowaway."

"On a privateer's ship? I suppose you hoped to steal something?"

"No. I was looking for someone. My brother, Henry." I blurted out something like the truth, the easiest explanation I could think of.

"What did you just say?" asked a younger, but still deep voice.

"My brother, Henry, he's only eight. I thought he had..." I trailed off, trying to think of something. "...escaped to that ship."

"You there, take that one to the hold immediately," came the younger voice again. A soldier came to me and unhooked my chains as I looked on with wide eyes. It didn't work. They were going to kill me anyway.

"You can't do this! I don't belong here!" I yelled.

"Sir, he's telling the truth!" Virgil's voice came. I caught only a glimpse of Virgil standing, and another soldier sitting him back down with a punch to the stomach before they carried me, thrashing, out of the room.

...

The men threw me into a barred cell alone. I hit the ground hard, and felt my face scratch on the rocky ground. I pushed myself up, my breathing shallow, and fished my piece of the typewriter out of my jeans pocket. I looked at it and thought hard, trying to imagine all of it away, desperate to dismiss this new reality. When I opened my eyes again, predictably, nothing had changed. I looked around outside my bars-- I saw no other cells near me. There was just this room, a chair outside, and a door leading out to freedom just close enough for cruelty. Maybe they would question me before they killed me, I thought. Then they'd take away all I had left, this piece of the typewriter, and I'd never get back home to Nanny and Poppy, to the antique store, to the low drone of

cicadas in the summer, to riding my bike down a dusty side street, to reading a book in my favorite corner of the store.

The door to the room opened again, suddenly, and a man in one of the more fancy uniforms came in. I thought I recognized him, perhaps from the brief moment I had view of the judges in the auditorium. He had jet black hair, closely cropped to his head, and a dark shadow around his shaved jaw. He had dark eyes, and his uniform was straight and clean.

"Your name?"

"Jonah," I said quietly.

"A stowaway, eh?"

His expression changed. His stern eyes became happy and his mouth curled into an amiable, understanding smile.

"You'll have to excuse the roughness of the men, but I needed to talk with you privately. This is where we keep people we question, but I can see you're no soldier. You're far too healthy to be a street boy, despite your odd clothes."

"What?" I said, confused.

"Come with me," he said, unlocking the cell door and swinging it open. "We'll be more comfortable in my office."

He motioned for me to follow as he walked toward the door, leaving the cell door open, standing straight and not looking back. I followed. We walked out into the main room again, but this time past the wooden door and down another hallway toward a set of red and golden doors set into the stone. The doors opened as he walked toward them, a gold panel at the right of the elevator door had a small hole in it. He fished in his pocket

for a moment, and brought out a globe of the golden liquid on a silver chain. Three silver bands wrapped around the globe and held it to the chain. He inserted the globe into the hole in the panel, and the doors opened to a small room-- an elevator. Inside, a panel like the one outside ran up the edge of wall next to the sliding doors. He inserted the small globe again into the lowest of another of a set of holes on the panel, and the elevator began to move up.

We stood in silence as the elevator moved. The man smiled at me as I looked around, dazed. I slowly realized I wasn't going to die. But Virgil still faced execution downstairs, especially after standing up for me. The elevator slowed to a halt, and I followed the man out the doors and straight into his office, circular and opulent. It had bands of the liquid light running down the walls on a curved ceiling, a wooden desk, and weapons of all kinds in a large glass cabinet. He sat behind his desk and motioned for me to sit down in one of the wooden chairs in front of it. I did, feeling myself drop farther than I expected into it. Windows looked out on the city from high up on one side.

"So, this Henry." The man leaned back into his chair. "Would you like a drink, by the way?"

"I came here to find him." He started pouring me water out of a carafe sitting on a table near his desk. I took it and gulped it down gratefully, finally slaking a little bit of my thirst. My lips stung as I wiped them, and I felt my stomach rumble as the water coated it.

"You came here? Or you were a stowaway on a boat?"

"That's what I meant," I said. "Could I have some more water please?"

"Yes of course," he said, and began pouring another glass.

"What's going to happen to Virgil?"

"Who?"

"The man in the tan uniform. What's going to happen to him?"

"He'll be executed with the rest of the deserters. It's the law."

"He saved me. He doesn't deserve to die."

"You know nothing of him," he said, still smiling lightly. I saw something behind his eyes like anger, but he masked it well. I drank another glass of water in silence. "You put much trust in a man you've known all of a few minutes."

"He's my friend."

"You're not from here, are you?" He said, bluntly. I choked on the water a little, and sat down the glass gingerly.

"What?" I said, pretending not to know what he was talking about.

"I've met your Henry before," said the man. I sat completely still, hoping he hadn't done something terrible to Henry before I got here.

"Where is he?" I said.

"I don't know," said the man. I felt half-relieved, for a moment, that they didn't have Henry lying dead somewhere. I waited for him to offer more information, but the man sat silently, as if waiting for me to ask more questions.

"What do you mean? How do you know him?"

"He arrived and left six months ago. Much like you, he was scared, alone, and generally out of place," he finally continued. "Come with me."

He got up from his desk and went to a door opposite the window in his own office. This time, he inserted the globe into the hole and gave it a quarter turn, and the

door opened to something incredible. In front of me lay not a room, but a hallway of glistening rocks, like an opening to a mineshaft. We walked forward. As we walked, I felt warmth in my hands and face. Perhaps, I thought, he would destroy me then and there, but something in me trusted him, or wanted to. The ground felt hard and uneven under my feet, and from the ceiling hung lanterns filled with the golden liquid. As we moved on, the lanterns became sparser and finally disappeared altogether, but the light in the shaft itself did not. The shaft descended with roughly hewn, hand carved steps, and light seemed to shine out of a wider opening down the hole. Glowing veins of gold began to streak the walls, and we reached the opening.

The enormous room yawned out before us. Grass, trees, and plants grew all around a huge, stretching pool, or perhaps river, of golden, glowing water. The domed ceiling let light in through small skylights running up the sides, man-made and built over this cave. In the middle of the rushing pool of golden water sat a rocky pedestal, and on top of it I saw something I recognized immediately.

The typewriter.

It lay on the rock, half missing as if torn or cleaved in two, rusted, as if it sat there for centuries, undisturbed. Sound left the room. The typewriter whispered to me weakly. The sound of all the stories I had ever heard issued forth in an indistinct, but unmistakable whisper. A metal walkway crossed over the water and to the pedestal and other platforms that looked like workstations. The water seemed to flow out of the room by some pathways in the rock, to and from where unclear. Glowing tubes full of the water flowed upward toward the ceiling, through it, and to other unknown locations.

"What is this?" I asked.

"I'm an archaeologist, Jonah," the man began. "This is my life's work."

"A typewriter?" I said, careful to not call it mine.

"The typewriter, Jonah," the archaeologist continued. "It has been here for centuries. This liquid has been touched by it. It kills a man when he ingests it, but we have found throughout long and arduous research that it is fuel. It powers our ships, our lights, our vehicles. It is our lifeblood. It is the heart of civilization."

"I know all this," I fabricated. I tried to hide it, but the desire to jump for the typewriter burned in my feet and hands. "I just want to find my brother."

"What's it called?"

"What?"

"The liquid." He looked at me with a skeptical smile. I had no answer. "As I said, Jonah, I know you're not from around here. The typewriter brought you here, didn't it?"

I felt my stomach drop. He knew everything. Henry must have told him.

"Don't be afraid," he said. He must have seen my face when he said it. "I only want to help you."

I hesitated. He must have sensed this as well, saying, "Well, that's not all. I think you can help me too. The typewriter is broken, as you can see. My archaeologists have searched far and wide through the ruins of our world to find the rest of it."

"Why?" I knew why-- the same reason I wanted all of it. To fix it. To use it again.

"You see, it's an important cultural artifact. The way Henry described it, you two had possession of this typewriter before you came here. I must only conclude you come from the world before," he held up his hand, sensing my question.

"Before?" I asked, beginning to trust his words. They flowed more freely, and with more friendliness. I couldn't tell sincerity from self-interest, but he seemed more endearing, at least.

"This world, hell, this city was built on ruins from something before. Some called it the civilization of the first men. Henry was here, and we let him go because we thought he was just a silly orphan child -- or at least the rest of the council did. But I believed him. I believed he could help us find the rest of the typewriter by extending beyond the ruins here, but across the sea, where we in the Capital have feared to tread because of the old superstitions of this aging council."

"What else?" I said, sensing he held something back, even though what he said sounded truthful and forthcoming. "What else does the typewriter do for you?"

"You're very intelligent, aren't you?" He said, pausing. "We have a crisis, in this world. Lightwater is running out. We have to ration it. Vendors on the streets sell it half used or worse, diluted with boiled and cheesecloth-strained wheatwater. We hope that collecting the rest of this artifact and making it whole again will fortify the energy source, turn even common wheatwater into energy for all our people."

"What makes you think I can help?" I said. The whispers grew, but his voice overpowered them.

"You can feel it, can't you? The energy of this place? The energy of your typewriter?"

I can hear it, I thought.

"Won't you help me find the rest of it? Help us, and perhaps you can get home again?"

The whispers stopped as I made my decision.

"I'll need help. And I need to find Henry, first."

"You may have any of our finest soldiers, and a ship to sail in."

"I choose Virgil."

"That just isn't possible, I'm sorry," the man said, putting regret on his face in place of his amiable smile. "We deal with deserters very quickly and harshly, I'm afraid."

He sounded somewhat melancholy about something, if not the truth.

"I'll take Virgil, or I'm not helping you. Besides, he has something important to give you." I stood, after my statement, unsure of whether or not it was wise to say, but I couldn't let Virgil die.

"Fine then. Let's go see him."

I sighed in relief, and followed him to the elevator. Another quarter turn, in the bottom hole, and then he put the glowing orb of lightwater into the one next to last. The elevator rose for a long, long time, and the doors finally opened up to a dark, open room. The prison. Drips sounded on the rocks, and the sounds of breathing and pain seemed to emanate from the walls. The cells stretched on forever, and dozens of hallways led to many more cells on the floor. A surly, swarthy man in uniform greeted us with an odd salute, raising his right fist to his chest.

"What can I do for you, sir?" the guard said.

"Prisoner in a tan uniform. Former storyteller."

"Yes sir?"

"Bring us to him," the archaeologist said impatiently. I wondered why he commanded so much respect. I guessed that archaeologists held high positions here for some reason, especially because of the typewriter.

The guard fumbled with his words for a moment, and managed a "yessir," before leading us down the dungeons. We came across cell after cell, holding mostly silent dejected men. Finally, we stopped in front of a dark cell.

"Come to whip me some more, cupcake?" came Virgil's voice. I breathed easy for the first time in days.

"Someone wants to see you, scum." "Not in front of the kids," Virgil said. Virgil got up and came to the bars of his cell, and looked through. "To what do I owe this honor, sir?"

Virgil's voice dripped with sarcasm. He seemed to have lost all pretense of silence or respect in the face of execution. Then his eyes darted to me.

"Kid! You're okay!" he exclaimed. "I thought for sure they'd string you up after that one."

I extended my hand for a handshake. "You said you'd shake my hand earlier. I've come to collect."

"Yes... of course," he said, confused. He squinted, and stuck a shackled hand through the bars. I took my hand out of my pocket, along with my piece of the typewriter, and clasped his. He smiled a confused smile at me, grasping the piece surreptitiously as he brought his hands back into his cell.

"This young man tells me you have something I want," said the archaeologist.

"Yes, indeed. I found this in my..."

"Desertion?"

"Travels. Adventures. Lovely return trip," Virgil said, but saw anger in the eyes of the other man. "Whatever you want to call it is fine."

"Hand it over."

Virgil stuck his hand out, and dropped the piece of the typewriter on the ground. The archaeologist was dumbstruck.

"There's piece one," I said. "I... sensed it on him on the boat ride over."

"Oh, wonderful job, Jonah," said the man, not looking at me. He bent over and picked up the piece slowly, staring at it intently. He stood there, silently, an odd smile on his face.

"He comes with me, or I won't do it." This seemed to snap the archaeologist out of his stupor. He looked at me quickly, eyes narrowing, but his face turning to a smile almost too quickly to notice. "Of course. You'll need a guide, after all," he said, smiling.

"Unlock the cell."

CHAPTER SIX

The Capital Ruins

Virgil stretched his arms as we walked out of the large, imposing stone building into the sun. The fresh morning air reminded me of opening a book for the first time, knowing by the smell of the paper that it's going to be good.

Attendants gave us food, water, and a place to sleep the night before, in the Capitol. We had talked little, delirious from hunger and thirst, eating what looked to our starving minds like a feast crammed on to two small trays. The food tasted delicious-- they had given us whatever we asked for. I thought breakfast foods sounded good, so I asked if they had sausage and biscuits, remembering what Nanny would make every morning, and they brought out the works: sausages with spices I had never tasted, biscuits with globs of butter, and hard boiled eggs with salt, with yolks yellower and tastier than I ever had. After we had both lain down in our beds, certainly more comfortable than metal and stone, Virgil spoke from across the room.

"Thanks, Jonah. I promised I'd help you find your brother, and I'm going to keep that promise."

"Thanks," I responded. "These pillows are insane. I think they're made of clouds."

"You don't even know how long it's been since I haven't slept near human waste. I'd take a pillow full of hay."

We both laughed before falling asleep.

I took the A key out of my pocket the next morning and stroked it with my thumb. It glinted in the early sunlight. I made the archaeologist believe I needed it to find the other pieces, and he bought it. I tried hard to hear something from it, but it had fallen silent. I really just wanted a piece of the typewriter to keep with me, a token that reminded me of its existence, even when the object itself lay buried behind walls and soldiers, broken to pieces.

"So you handled the Leader, eh?" Virgil said.

"What?" I asked, confused.

"That scary guy with the beard he can't shave off," Virgil said.

"He said he was an archaeologist."

"More like emperor, king, dictator...take your pick."

It made more sense then, why he took me aside, why he allowed Virgil to leave. I felt ashamed at how easily he manipulated me. He held the power-- why wouldn't he have the power to pardon someone?

"So why did he let us go?" I said out loud, not quite meaning to.

"Why indeed," Virgil said. "I'm a little more interested in why he let you keep that trinket of yours. The Barons must think you're mighty important."

"I'm not," I said.

"Whatever you say, Jonah." Virgil took a step back, as if to concede. "What did he ask you to do?"

"Find more of them. He said it was important."

"I'm sure he did."

Virgil stood there for a moment. He looked different, now that we were fully in the light. His uniform hung just slightly too large on his skinny frame. His hair looked dirty and greasy in the light of morning.

"You said you'd help, right?" I asked after a long silence.

"At your service."

"Then we need to find Henry first. I'm not going anywhere until we find him," I said. Henry knew the typewriter too, and I knew he'd help us find more of it. He may have even collected a few pieces on his own, if he had survived, I thought. I put the thought quickly out of my mind. Henry seemed like tough kid, from what little I knew about him. He'd be alive.

"I think we've got a few other concerns, first," Virgil said.

"What's more important than someone being lost?"

"Well, for one, you look like... I don't know. Strange. I mean, blue pants? Really?"

I paused, thinking. "Jeans? You mean jeans?"

"Whatever you call them. You look ridiculous. And malnourished. We need to hunt down some new clothes, and some breakfast."

I looked down at my hands, blackened and filthy, and wiped them self-consciously on my dirty jeans. I supposed he might have been right.

"Come on. We've got lots of government money to spend, now!" I felt the weight of the coins the "Leader" had given to me when we left; he said they were more than enough to buy a boat and hire a crew to take us across the ocean.

As we walked along, we saw the city wake up from a deep slumber. People began hanging clothes out their windows from one building to the next, men hammered nails into makeshift wooden stands, holding carts full of bottles of lightwater, others coming in on ox-driven carts like the ones that carried us in, carting in food and vegetables from outside the city. Still others, dressed in rags, sold clothes. Soon, the main road was full with people, brushing up against the edges and spilling commerce into the side streets.

Virgil picked out some clothes he thought were stylish, and a man in dirty clothes took me behind the booth to a small dressing room made out of wooden rectangles and loosely draped cloth. I got in and took off my dirty clothes, and changed into roughhewn gray pants, and a white shirt with three buttons at the top. I kept my black sneakers on. I stepped out of the enclosure. The clothes sagged a bit, but the soft fabric felt comfortable and clean, and my old belt kept the pants from falling down. Virgil loudly approved, but stopped for a moment, squinting.

"Well it could be because I'm not wearing my glasses, but I think the ensemble lacks something," Virgil said. He pulled a pair of thick, round glasses from his tan jacket, and slipped them on to his face. "Yep, definitely missing something."

"Oh yes, agreed. He needs a jacket," said the vendor, churning out only the most sincere agreements for the man who decided he needed to spend more of the steadily shrinking pile of gold pieces in my pocket.

"No, that's not it," Virgil said, stepping back and stroking his thin stubble. "I've got it!"

Virgil threw his hands up in the air and went to the table to pick up one last garment, flopping it out with a flourish like a matador. He revealed a small black vest. I tried it on, and it fit nicely over the loose fitting shirt. I rolled the long sleeves twice, and pushed them up to my elbows in a futile attempt to get the ends to stay above my forearms.

"How do I look?" I said.

"Like you belong here, Jonah. A little like I did when I was your age, just starting out as an apprentice storyteller," Virgil said, smiling and putting away his large glasses.

"Except taller. And skinnier. And your hair is black. And you're tanner."

"And I'm cleaner than you," I said.

"That's true."

"Twenty-five bits, please," said the man at the booth. I looked at his clothes and wondered why he dressed the way he did if he could make better clothes-- but I stopped myself short of asking him.

"Twenty-five bits? You're talking gold here?" Virgil said. "This stuff better be made out of dragon skin at that price."

I heard the word dragons and immediately lost track of Virgil's haggling with the booth owner. Eventually I handed out some amount, not really knowing how much,

imagining the dragons that might inhabit that world. Were they like dragons I had imagined before, I thought, like ones I had slain in my old adventures? I felt a rush of excitement wash away the past few days. I followed Virgil and peppered him with questions as soon as we left the shop owner.

"Let's find some food first, eh?" Virgil said through my questions. "Then we can see if we can find some of my belongings before we leave town."

"You said there were dragons?" I asked, ignoring him. "What kind of dragons?"

"Say what now?" Virgil asked, looking back at me with a raised eyebrow.

"Dragons," I said resolutely. "You told the clothes guy that the clothes should be made out of dragon skin, because they were so expensive."

"Ah, yes, that's a good story," Virgil said. "You know, it's nice having an audience who hasn't heard the old tales. I rarely get the chance to spin one of the taller tales of our past. People got jaded by them, hearing them so much. I've had even less chance since the Barons put me out of work. But they're my favorites. Always have been."

"So there are real dragons, here?" I asked, earnestly. We moved through a crowd and found a vendor cooking meat over a small fire, shouting at every passerby, shoving loaves of bread out at them. Virgil picked up a loaf of bread and split it, and the man held out his hand. The sign said two bits, so I dropped two small, shiny gold pieces into his hand.

"What other kind could there be?" Virgil asked, but then frowned. "Though, I'm afraid you won't see many dragons around here, Jonah," Virgil said, splitting the bread

and handing a piece to me. I felt instantly deflated as I chewed on the crust. We kept walking.

"See, dragons used to be all over the place, like bison," Virgil said. He paused a moment. "Bison are big hairy monsters that-"

"I know what a bison is, actually," I said, telling a half-truth. I had only seen one or two briefly in my time in Oklahoma, and I had only seen the ones I had disappeared for a few seconds before they were gone. I suddenly felt a little guilt for their disappearance.

"Oh, they've got those in your world?" Virgil said. "We can trade stories on that."

"But the dragons?" I said, reverting the subject back.

"Yes, yes, the dragons," Virgil said, weaving through the crowd. "Once, dragons ruled over the mesas and in the desert across the sea. The sun rises first in the west, and the first sunrise put fire in the earth, and made the clay red. The dragons were born of the earth, formed by the swift waters underground, and molded by the first men out of the shapeless, fiery-red clay. They were given the lands of the mesas and the desert by the first men, and ruled over them for many years. But the dragons became greedy for more, and betrayed the first men. The dragons attacked the cities of the Valley-Under-the-Moon, and burned them into ruin. But the first men fought back -- they cut down the dragons and ground them into powder, and drove them back into the clay where they came from. Some say the dragons still live deep in the mesas, waiting to come back for revenge."

He stopped for a moment, seemingly pondering his own story, deep in thought.

"What happened to the first men?"

"They crossed the ocean for the New Territory. Where you're standing right now."

"Is it true?" I asked.

"Doesn't matter whether it's true or not. It's got truth in it."

We both paused in the middle of the crowd. I wanted to ask more questions about the dragons, but I suddenly remembered Henry, who had apparently vanished into the mist six months before. We had no idea how to find him or where to look.

"How are we going to find Henry?" I asked Virgil.

"I've got that covered."

Virgil suddenly started walking again, and turned down a thin alley, and I followed. The light came down and bounced off the walls from above, peeking over the edge of the building to my left. Less light made it to where Virgil and I walked, the concrete cracking and turning to dirt and grass that seemed to want to grow up the sides of the walls, but couldn't quite make it.

"Where are we going?" I called after Virgil, but he didn't answer, merely pressing on further ahead of me. We turned again behind another building, and the sun shed less and less light on where we walked. It seemed as though our feet ran through pitch, and the shadows might move up to consume our legs and bodies. Finally, we reached a dark wooden door in the back alley, and Virgil stopped in front of it. He looked at me. I could still see his toothy grin coming out from underneath his thin stubble.

"What the hell are we doing back here?" I demanded.

"To see a few friends." Virgil opened the dark door that led to a similarly dark corridor made of stone, lit only by the occasional globe of lightwater embedded in the

ceiling. I followed along, groping the stone walls in the low light. I bumped into something-- Virgil's back-- and stopped.

"We're here."

Virgil knocked on something wooden. My eyes had begun to adjust, and there it appeared. I heard a sliding noise, and then two barrels came out of the top of the door, pointing straight at Virgil's head.

"Business," came a voice.

"It's Virgil, you idiot."

"Virgil?" the voice repeated back. "You scared the hell out of me, you idiot."

The barrels retracted back into the door, followed by another sliding noise, and the portal swung outward into the hallway, revealing a fat man in a dirty apron. He had large sideburns and a balding head, a smile right next to his double barreled gun.

"Come in and have a drink, buddy."

We followed the man into a dark, sparsely populated pub, tables dotting the room, wooden stools and a stone bar at the right. I gave Virgil a look, mistrusting the fat man walking around with a shotgun on his shoulder, making drinks.

"Huey has a lightwater well in the back. He tends to be a little overcautious."

Virgil must have seen confusion in my face, saying "That's illegal around here."

"Not to mention I take in storyteller bums like yourself."

"Don't say that too loud, the Toolpushers might hear you and come get me,"

Virgil said. I couldn't tell whether he was joking.

"Toolpushers?" I asked.

"They make sure nobody has unauthorized lightwater sources," Virgil answered. He grimaced. "They also liberate you of anything they find questionable."

"Questionable," I said.

"Valuables, vehicles, people," Huey said. "Anything they don't think is up to the standards of their perfect little city. They'd confiscate ol' Verge' here if they found him in the bar. I'd give 'im up too."

"No, that's not likely," Virgil said. "I'm on the government dole now, Huey." Virgil smiled. Huey stopped for a second, dirty water still pouring from his pitcher into dirty glasses.

"You're joking. Not you."

"Nope. They've got me on a mission, now," Virgil said. Huey seemed to grasp his gun a little tighter, but Virgil held up his hands. "Not like that, Huey. Don't you see the uniform I'm wearing? I'm helping this kid find his brother, that's all."

Huey exhaled and finally set the gun behind him on a small stone ledge in the wall. He didn't seem a trusting man.

"Sorry, Verge," Huey said, handing us the glasses of water. "Things haven't been good since you left. Ain't many storytellers still around who haven't taken up other professions, with the Barons or street thugs."

"It's okay. All I need is a little information, the old uniforms I left with you, and the old cycle."

"You can have two out of the three, but you can't lay a hand on my cycle."

"Come on, I'll buy it back from you."

"No." Huey crossed his arms.

"Okay, that's fine," Virgil conceded. "At least let me see it. I miss it."

"No," Huey said again. He opened up a cupboard down below the stone ledge that held his gun behind him, and pulled out a dusty but neatly folded and pressed uniform identical to the old one holding onto dear life on his body then.

"You can change in the closet, then we'll talk." Virgil took them, nodded, and walked into a door behind the bar. He came out a few minutes later wearing the same clothes, but this time buttoned up and clean, his belt sitting right under his high, tan jacket with the emerald lapels. He actually looked like a soldier this time, if a bit skinny. He adjusted his large glasses and smoothed back his hair out of his face.

"My shoulder harness?" Virgil asked. Huey reached under another cabinet, this time under the bar, and pulled out a set of two thin leather straps attached with a small silver rivet that held a holster with a short barreled gun with a wooden stock, and a straight short sword in a black sheath with silver tips. Virgil draped it over his body diagonally, and fastened the lower strap to his belt.

"Thanks for saving my things," Virgil said. "It feels good to be back in proper clothes again."

I scratched at my belt, realizing I didn't have a weapon-- and seeing Virgil wearing a sword and a gun, I wanted one too. I kept my mouth shut, though.

"So, what do you need to know?" Huey said as Virgil sat back down. I absentmindedly sipped on the water Huey had given us, tasting the disgusting mix. I muscled it down as the taste invaded my senses, and I tried hard not to spit it out. It tasted much the same as the awful wheatwater we had on the boat, and probably was the exact

same thing-- but even one night and day of drinking clean water again cleansed my palate and made drinking that soupy mixture of dirt and water awful all over again.

"Well, we want to know if you've heard anything about a boy named Henry.

Probably looks like an orphan," Virgil said bluntly. He is an orphan, I thought.

"I wouldn't know anything about that."

"With your connections? Come on, Huey. Every criminal in town comes through here to gamble and drink. Don't lie to me."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Huey, don't make me embarrass you in front of your customers," Virgil threatened. There didn't seem to be many customers to embarrass Huey in front of, I thought.

Huey seemed to stiffen, and he picked up his gun again.

"Come upstairs," he said. He walked around the bar and under an archway into another room, finally turning down a small hallway with a lightwater bulb shining in the wall. A ladder led up from the floor to a hatch far above in a tunnel that ended at the ceiling. We followed up. After a while climbing, I saw light appear above Huey and Virgil, shining down into the tube. Huey seemed to struggle with the climb, barely able to fit through the hole. Virgil poked him.

"Hurry up fat ass!"

"Damn you, Virgil, give me half a minute. I'm not as young as I used to be."

Finally he squeezed through the hatch at the top, and Virgil followed easily through the hole. My arms began to ache with the strain of climbing, but Virgil offered a hand and pulled me up and out of the hatch. As I got to my feet, I found myself in a small

room that looked like a garage with a wooden door on one side and bottles of lightwater lining the walls on shelves. Then I saw it.

Inside the garage, two bottles of lightwater sat in harnesses attached to what looked like a three wheeled motorcycle with two seats in tandem, only the seats sat recessed down into an old fuselage of a small aircraft, with the top cut off. I kicked the large front tires, attached to the fuselage with thin rods of metal: small, triangular cosmetic wings, retaining the look of a plane that the cycle might once have had in its past life.

"Don't get any ideas, kid," Huey said as I eyed the beautiful vehicle.

"What do you want from me, Virgil?" Huey said, sweating. "Those guys in there could kill me if they know I tell people about what they do. Everyone who comes in here anymore is someone looking for privacy. Don't screw with me like that!"

"Look, we just want to find an innocent kid," Virgil said. "Have you heard anything in the past six months?"

Virgil looked pleadingly at the fat man. Huey sighed, and put his hand up to his head.

"Yeah," he finally gave in. "Yeah, I've seen him in here a couple of times. He was running around with some pirates for a while. I think he got in a bad way with some Toolpushers in Switchlock bay, last I heard."

"That's all you had to say," Virgil said. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

"That's all you get. I don't want any Roughnecks breathing down my neck."

"I won't tell a soul."

"Now let's go back down, and you can get out."

"At least let me get a little air, up here," Virgil said. "It's been a while since I've seen the city from up here."

"Fine. Just a breath."

Huey kicked a switch on the ground, and the wooden wall fell outward and down, revealing a beautiful blue sky. The city stretched out from the edge of the building outside. Huey walked out first, rubbing his arms as if cold in the high altitude. I felt a little chill in the wind, but mostly warmth came from the opening, and the air smelled clean. I followed Huey and looked out over the city on the top of the stone roof.

Suddenly, I heard an engine start, and the car inside suddenly burst out of the door, knocking Huey over. Virgil sat in the front seat, cackling like a child who had just pulled his best prank on a hated teacher.

"Jump in!" Virgil shouted. "Sorry about this, Huey, but it was mine first!"

I jumped in the back seat and found a strap at my shoulders. I pulled it over my head and found a clasp at the bottom of the chair between my legs. I clipped it in as Virgil sped up along the roof, and my feet vibrated on the back of his seat. Huey yelled obscenities from behind us. I looked up, and I realized Virgil had pointed the speeding cycle straight toward the edge of the roof ahead. It came to me in waves that we had nowhere to drive on a little roof, nowhere to go in a small three wheeled motorcycle. A thin wooden ramp led from this roof to the next, and I breathed again for a moment.

"Virgil," I shouted over the din of the wheels. "What are you doing?"

"Getting us to Switchlock Bay in style!"

With that, Virgil hit the ramp and took us to a higher building, not lower. We drove across the roof of a brick building and then to another ramp. I could see alleys

below where no one walked. We hit the next roof hard, and Virgil drove straight for a huge opening at the end of the roof-- the main road. No bridges connected the buildings, only a ramp. Virgil hit the final ramp and my bowels turned to liquid. I felt my stomach rise up as we fell in slow motion, further and further toward the ground.

Then, something squeaked, and out from the little triangular wings on the side of the fuselage sprang giant canvas and metal wings, and we burst forward with speed. I looked back, and fire flew from out the end of the small vehicle propelling us forward. We glided across the street and banked, flying straight down the middle of the main road. I looked over the side, and saw people looking up from the street below, pointing up from our shadow, some smiling, some in awe.

We were flying.

Our small ship flew easily above the walls of the city to the world outside. Suddenly, I heard a few gunshots from behind and ducked instinctively at the noise, but we seemed far enough away, and no others came. The ship, seeming to lose only a little altitude very slowly, flew over the farms and ruins outside the capital ruins. Virgil looked back for a second, smiling, then handed back a pair of goggles. I took them and pulled the band over my head, adjusting the goggles to my nose. I looked down at the world through scratched lenses and everything seemed close enough to touch.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Henry's Return

We flew for a long time before the ship hit the road again, the ride becoming a little bumpier. Virgil retracted the wings but we seemed even then to fly across the ground. We drove for hours before we reached Switchhook Bay. The small bay town looked much like the port through which the roughnecks brought us to the Capital Ruins.

"Small towns and ports like this used to be hubs for different kinds of trading and shops," Virgil had said. "You could go out into the ruins any time you wanted from these places, and find all kinds of people adventuring about. Now it's all prisons, and the ruins are empty, except for soldiers. People who have farms near the ruins can't go a day without seeing a uniform."

"What are they looking for here? There's no ruins around," I said.

"This place is a lightwater reservoir. It's even worse when that happens. Used to be you could get rich easy if you found a spring or a well of it in your backyard, but the Barons control all of it now. There was a shortage, and they used that to seize up a whole

lot of land. The Barons don't wage wars, they rob using the law. Every city was built around the best farmland or a big reservoir of lightwater, and now everything's rationed and orderly. Bit too much for my tastes."

It quickly became evident how Switchhook Bay earned its name-- the sea came into the town in giant hook, a curling river of water flowing into town. Some of the houses stood built on stilts that went down into the ocean, and boats docked in the large hook of ocean that cut the land. We drove through houses made of clay bricks and wood. Huge cedar trees edged out the town on the north, giving way to a hazy, dusty forest. In the center of the town stood a large, fenced-off well with soldiers lazily milling about near it, giving us dark looks as we passed by. Virgil stopped the cycle near the jail. A man in a gray uniform sat in a chair next to the front door, snoozing. The sound of the engine on Virgil's bike startled him awake, his squat, cylindrical hat falling off his head. He stared at it with awe.

"Go see if your brother is in there. I'm going to go find us a boat to hire."

"Okay," I said, uncertainly. I didn't know quite how to feel about being left to talk to the jailers by myself. It must have shown on my face, because Virgil reached a hand back and patted my shoulder.

"You're working for the government now, remember?"

"Sure, right," I said, getting out of the motorcycle.

"Move along, sir. You can't loiter here," the soldier said, breaking out of his trance.

"I'll need the gold for now, too. These hired ships don't pay for themselves."

"Right," I said, and I handed him the bag from my pocket.

Virgil zoomed away and left me in a cloud of dust in front of the jail, coughing along with the soldier.

"Excuse me," I said after I finished coughing, raising my hand awkwardly.

"Your business here?" said the soldier.

"I'm looking for an orphan named Henry," I said. "I heard he was around here?" I tried to be polite, but the man's face didn't seem to change much. He seemed to scrutinize me as I stood there, considering my question, frowning a bit as he squinted in the sun.

"You're not associated with him, are you?"

"Maybe?" I said, shrugging. I didn't know quite what to say. It sounded odd to call Henry my brother, but it at least made my purpose sound more important and saved me from explaining further. But the way this man looked at me after I said Henry's name made me cautious. After another moment's scrutiny, the man's hand moved to the wooden handled pistol at his side. I took a tentative step backward at the gesture.

"Are you associated with the prisoner?"

"I'm on official business from the Leader of the Barons," I said, pulling the sentence out of thin air. I knew he wouldn't believe me the moment the sentence left my mouth, and I had nothing to prove that I had business from the government. I cursed myself for not asking more questions before, and cursed Virgil for leaving me there alone, as if I had some power just to get what I want.

"The Leader?" the man said, still squinting. Then he suddenly eased. He stood up straight and gave an exaggerated salute. "Right this way, sir. The Leader sent word about you."

I stood still, flabbergasted for a moment, but I composed myself and managed a meek "Yes, of course." I followed the soldier into the small jail.

"He's right through here," he said, gesturing for me to go ahead of him. I nodded and stepped forward, but almost immediately felt a rough shove at my side, sending me tumbling into the ground. A barred cell door shut behind me with a clank.

"Official business," the soldier said in a mocking tone, laughing as he walked away. Dammit, I thought. Not again.

"I'm serious! The Leader has a serious mission for me! If you don't let me out you're going to be in big trouble!" I yelled myself hoarse.

"Jonah?" I heard a voice come from the side of me. Through a small barred window in the brick wall next to me, I finally saw Henry's face, or at least part of it.

"You're working for the Barons?"

"Henry!" I said, scrambling to my feet. "How the hell did you get yourself in jail?"

"How did you get those stupid clothes?"

"Wait, what?" I said, dumbfounded for a moment. "You jerk. I came here to bust you out."

"You're doing a great job."

"Shut up!"

"You shut up," Henry came back. "I made some bombs. I was about to escape."

"Bombs?"

"Yes," Henry answered, and disappeared from the window. "Now give me a second." His voice echoed this time as he shuffled around in his room. For a second, I heard something muffled, like Henry was talking to himself, but then nothing. Then, the

wall to my cell crumbled down behind me. I stumbled back onto the floor, away from the crumbling wall, and Henry stood on the other side, fists on his hips. He looked a tiny bit older, a tiny bit dirtier, and even a little taller, but he wore the same worn shirt and jeans I had seen him in the night all of this had started.

"Well, come on, stupid," Henry said. I followed him outside.

"How did you do that without making a sound?"

"Special bombs," he said, but changed the subject quickly. "What are you doing working for the Barons?" "What are you doing in jail?"

"What are you doing wearing a vest?" Henry said, laughing at his own joke.

"I'm looking for the other pieces of the typewriter," I said bluntly.

"That's great, but I'm doing fine by myself," he said. "Thanks for coming to find me, though."

Suddenly, I heard a noise of shock. I looked over to the hole in the wall where Henry had broken me out, and there stood the sleepy guard who had thrown me in next to Henry, looking at us with wide eyes.

"I have a ship," I half-lied, starting to run.

"Sounds good," Henry said, running next to me. We darted behind another building, and I could hear a shot coming from the man's gun behind us. It hit the wall, sending dirt and stone toward our backs. We ran as hard as we could through the streets of the town, the world becoming blurry. As we ran, I couldn't bring to mind a second hole in the wall-- the one Henry must have used to escape his own cell. I couldn't picture it. I thought for a moment it never existed.

...

We finally reached the bay and found Virgil standing out on a pier next to a boat much like the others docked there-- by that, I mean that they all had the look of being pieced together from junk salvaged from somewhere else, some with large, patchy sails, and others with tall windmills coming from their decks. Virgil shook hands with one tall, balding man, while another behind him pushed his cycle up a gangplank and on to the boat. We ran up to Virgil at full speed, stopping short of running in to him.

"Hi Virgil," I said, breathing heavily. "This is Henry, he's eight. Let's get on the ship now."

"Hi," Henry managed through a few labored breaths.

"You're being chased, aren't you."

The man beside him looked worried for a moment. "Now wait a minute, I don't take fugitives, unless I'm taking them back for a bounty."

Virgil dug a handful of coins from the bag, and slapped them in the man's hand. "May this be a bountiful trip, then," the man responded, and gestured for us to go up the gangplank. We ran aboard, and Virgil followed. Virgil showed us to our quarters below the deck and sat us down, letting us catch our breath.

"It's not much, but it's better than a cell," Virgil commented. The cramped room had three hammocks hanging from the ceiling, and a small barrel for a chair on one end in front of a shelf that looked something like a desk. I sat next to Henry against the wall gratefully, and breathed in the stale air in big gulps.

"So this is Henry. Jonah's told me a lot about you." Virgil said, extending a hand to Henry. Henry didn't take it, looked at me dubiously, and jumped in one of the hammocks.

"What's your problem?" I said.

"Nothing. I just don't quite see the difference between where we are now and where we were."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"We ran away from one Toolpusher to another, as far as I can tell."

I started to protest, but Virgil stood and put his hands in his pockets.

"I have some more to work out with the captain," Virgil said. He pulled the bag of gold out of his right pocket and threw it to me. "I think he's satisfied with his two bits though. We should be fine to go now. I'll see you in a bit."

With that, Virgil left the room. I felt anger gurgling in my stomach at Henry. He acted so ungrateful. Sure, he saved me, but I came to save him, I cared enough to look for him.

"Seriously?" I said, looking hard at Henry.

"So you trust that guy? A soldier? They're the bad guys, Jonah."

"Yeah, of course I do," I said. "He deserted because he's a storyteller. He doesn't like these 'barons' any more than you do."

"Oh, he deserted. That makes him such a better person."

"You're an idiot," I said firmly. I felt sorry for him before, but now that I saw him alive, all guilt faded from my mind. He looked at me angrily, but I didn't let him talk.

"He's a good person. He wants to help me find the pieces of the typewriter so we can go home."

"You told him about the typewriter?"

"Yeah, of course."

"You're the idiot, then," Henry said, lying back down. "All these people want to do is steal that from you. When I showed up, The Leader showed me the typewriter. I bet he showed it to you too, right?"

"What did you tell him?"

"Nothing. You said you were on an important mission from the Leader, right? I bet you told him everything."

"How was I supposed to know? I was just trying to help you!" I wanted so badly to punch that little jerk.

"Well, I know when a grown-up wants to take something that's mine," Henry said, crossing his arms and turning away from me in the hammock. "I made him think I was just a stupid orphan so he'd let me go. I told you, Jonah. I've been here six months now. I can take care of myself."

"I didn't know he was some bad guy. I was just trying to find you so we can go home," I said, feeling my heart sink. I had revealed quite a bit to the Leader, and that world didn't seem to like him too much. He seemed nice enough, but what if I was wrong, I wondered. Of course, Henry knew just about as much as I did. He hadn't seen the Leader any more than I had. What more did he know than me? It wasn't like he had a plan, or knew where to go or what to do next. He was just scared. I took a deep breath, but Henry spoke first.

"But now that you've messed everything up, like usual, I guess I'll have to go with you," he said.

"Whatever," I said, leaning my head back against the wall. "Virgil saved my life, okay? He saved me when he could have just saved himself."

"Big deal," Henry said.

I pulled the A key from my pocket, remembering what Virgil had given it back to me. I held it toward Henry.

"Turn around," I said.

"Make me," Henry said.

"Well I guess you won't care that I've already found a piece of the typewriter then, huh?"

Henry shifted weight and turned around on the hammock at that, and looked at it intently. His eyes narrowed at me.

"Virgil found this when I showed up on the boat he was a prisoner on. That's where I landed," I half-lied. "He gave it back to me. We can trust him."

"Fine," he said. "Are you sure it's the real thing?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"There's no voices or anything."

"So?"

"So, it might be fake. How do you know it's real?"

"It came off in my hand back at the drive-in," I lied.

"Okay." Henry turned around again and I think pretended to sleep. I leaned my head up against the wall behind me and closed my eyes, just to rest.

I remembered the wall of the jail. The entire situation came back to my mind in a confused blur of light and dust. Henry stood outside the jail, free, the wall crumbling in front of him without any explosion or noise. I racked my brain, but the sound of thunder in the distance broke the trance. I could feel the rocking of the ship disappear, and only

the sound of distant thunder, the hot breath of a southerly summer storm on my face. I remembered the bison. I remembered how it felt right before I woke up on the roughneck's ship in the cell, the memory of the bison on the tip of my mind, faded but haunting like a half remembered dream.

...

The next few days on the ship passed by quicker than they did staying on the roughnecks' ship. Virgil, Henry and I worked on the ship, and Henry seemed to have better knowledge than me about the jobs onboard. His hands worked proficiently and quickly with knots, and he tried to hide his hands when I saw callouses that no eight year-old should have. Virgil tried to be friendly and help out, but Henry tended to keep to himself when he wasn't acting like a jerk. At the end of each night I saw him cling to his jacket like a teddy bear. He would lay out his baseball cards on the floor sometimes when he thought I had fallen asleep, and mumble the names and statistics of his favorite players for a while before wrapping the rubber band back around them and putting them back in his jacket.

By day, the wheat sea seemed to gleam in the mornings, as though glass hexagons had replaced the grains, made specifically to catch the morning sunrise. During the day, the sea became a solid yellow gold, shimmering more like a mirage on a hot asphalt road. The crew was only marginally nicer than the one on the roughnecks' boat, and the Captain seemed more interested in money than anything else. He would constantly come up with new reasons to extort money from us, asking for a bit here to keep his mouth shut about fugitives to the crew, and another bit there for more than a crust of bread and wheatwater for dinner, but we survived.

About a week after we had left port, a storm grew on the horizon. In the distance I saw lightning streaking through the sky from cloud to cloud, like a dolphin breaching the water. The clouds fell in dark grey streaks on the sky, down to the sea which grew duller and choppier as the clouds rolled in. Henry, Virgil and I stopped and looked over the side of the ship toward the storm, which the captain showed no interest in turning away from. A few specks of rain fell on my face, a welcome break from the intense heat of the past days, amplified by the metal hull of the ship.

"Looks like we might be running into a stampede," Virgil said.

"A stampede?" I asked.

"He means a storm," Henry said. "That's what people call storms here."

"Do either of you know that story?" Virgil asked.

"I don't," I said. I got the feeling Henry didn't either, perhaps simply trying to act cool, but he said nothing. "You should tell it anyway, even if Henry has."

"I'd tell it even if both of you had," Virgil said. "I have a very big mouth."

Henry snickered a little, and Virgil seemed to take this as a sign to start, almost sounding emboldened by the supposed approval of Henry the stone-faced.

"There was a time when giant monsters used to roam the plains and the wheat. They were called the bison."

I felt my stomach churn as he mentioned them by name. Maybe it's just a legend, just a dream, I told myself. Maybe none of this exists at all. As much as I told myself these things, the feeling in the pit of my stomach still wouldn't go away. The guilt ate away even as Virgil continued.

"Before the dragons, and before the first men built the first cities, there were the bison, the Stormbringers. One thousand feet tall and just as wide. They were giants and monsters. A pack of bison could hide under the wheat and churn through a mountain, or eat all the grass in a valley in one bite. They'd blow away villages with a breath and shoot lightning with a snort. One day, the first men picked up their hammers against the bison in a final raid, to try and root out the monsters that were eating their crops, killing their people, and destroying their ships. But one of the first men was too eager, and he ran out to get the glory for himself. The bison stampeded, tramping the ground and everything else under their feet. The men chased them far away, across the wheat sea to the other side across the plains. As they ran, their breath became the clouds. They snorted lightning and breathed tornadoes. But the first men ran on behind them, chasing them as fast as they could, never letting the bison get too far away. They chased them until the bison couldn't run anymore, and died where they stood. The Buffalo Crags stand where those Bison died. Those old bones are the mountains behind the ruins today."

I sat, mesmerized by Virgil's story. The ship rocked less gently, and the rain fell in thicker sheets, but the cool feeling of the rain gave us respite, and the rocking of the ship seemed to fall in beat with Virgil's words. He spun a beautiful tale, even if I knew it wasn't true. I held on to it, trying hard to believe it.

Suddenly, a worried voice rang out behind us.

"Pirates! Pirates off the starboard bow!"

We all three turned around to see another ship gaining on us from the other side, one with a small windmill that span quickly on the very back of the ship, propelling it forward, as if powered by something other than the wind. The ship became a chaotic

mess of people running around, trying hard to make the ship go faster, I assume, but nothing seemed to work. The smaller ship still seemed to gain speed, and became bigger and bigger as it grew closer to us. Henry, Virgil and I held on to the ship as it began to rock and sway with the stress of changed motion and the increasingly strong storm. The wheat slapped up against the hull, and we braced ourselves against the slippery rails. Henry squinted at the boat coming closer, as if he saw something.

"What is it?"

"I know that ship."

"How on earth do you know that ship?" I asked.

"I uh..." Henry paused. "I was part of their crew for a little while." Henry seemed unsure of the last part of his sentence.

"Okay, so maybe you can reason with them?" I asked.

"Um. Probably not."

Just then, a huge ball of flaming metal came barreling toward our ship, signaled by a sound that almost blended in with the thunder of the storm. It hit the stern of the ship, hard, and the violent heave threw me to the ground with a slam. I crawled across the deck to try to find something to hold on to. Another sound of thunder came, this time closer. I heard the squeaking and crashing of metal and an explosion. I looked up -- the windmill gave a vicious crack and plummeted above me. Virgil's hand appeared and jerked me up quickly -- we ran. The windmill smashed onto the deck hard behind us, and I felt the heat of the fire on my neck. I saw men flying off the deck into the wheat, still others into small liferafts, some still at the edge, fighting for a place on a boat.

The captain ran for a place on the life boats too, looking for his own way off as the smaller ship sidled up against ours.

"Don't you have guns?" Virgil asked. "You said you have guns on this ship!"

"Rifles and hand arms. We don't have cannons!"

Virgil angrily grabbed the man's coat as if to punch him-- or at least it looked like that at first. He reached inside the man's coat angrily, and searched his pockets, pulling out a small bag -- the captain's wallet. For a second, I could have sworn I saw Henry digging in his own coat for something.

"Give me that," Virgil yelled, putting the bag of gold in his own pocket.

But then guns appeared in our faces. The pirates had boarded, and everything, for a moment, seemed to stop. A man with an ragged, ill-fitting military uniform that had gold pins, medallions and ribbons that didn't seem to belong on it walked up to Virgil and tipped his small hat.

"Give me that," the man said, and held out his hand with a gun pointed at Virgil in the other. The other pirates began to search everyone on board for gold. The stinky, bearded man in front of me reached into my pocket and took my bag. I keeled over, acting sick for a moment, and reached in my pocket to retrieve my A key, and put it into my mouth. The metal tasted dusty and old, and felt strange in the back of my cheek-- I prayed the pirates hadn't noticed.

Henry stood with his face down as the man holding a gun to the back of his head searched his jacket pockets, and turned him around. A look of recognition passed over the pirate's face. He knew Henry, just as Henry had said they would. Maybe he could talk to them, and get us out of this mess, I thought.

"Look boss!" yelled the pirate excitedly. "It's that scab! It's uh..." He struggled with the last word, Henry's name. The Captain, who had taken Virgil's bag of money, walked across the deck with loud, clanking footfalls as his boots hit the metal. He stopped next to the man who had called out.

"Henry," he said genially, pulling out his gun and pointing it toward Henry's head. "You'd better not have sold those things you stole from us, or somebody might lose their head."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Flying into the Stampede

Everything stood still for a moment, and I looked at Henry. I held my hands up as the bearded man held a gun to my cheek and looked for gold in my pockets, pulling out the small bag I had. Henry smiled awkwardly at the accusation, but didn't even raise a hand in his own defense. He stood with his back straight, and he didn't seem to fear the gun up against his head. His lip finally curled in an unsure, if defiant snarl. As I felt and tasted the bitter metal in the back of my right cheek, I thanked God that Henry had been recognized, realizing that my ruse probably would have gotten me killed otherwise.

"Henry, Henry, Henry..." The Captain in the old military uniform trailed off.

"You didn't think we wouldn't notice that some of our loot was gone, did you?"

"I didn't take it," Henry said, one of his fists balled up. "Have you checked under the bed?"

"You were always a funny one," the pirate Captain said. Quickly and without so much as a facial expression, he smiled as he slapped Henry in the face with the barrel of his pistol.

"Leave him alone!" I said, almost automatically. A dark red streak marred Henry's cheek, and the barrel of the bearded man's gun pressed a little further into mine. I felt butterflies in my stomach and the taste of fear (or was it metal?) in my mouth as I experienced the business end of a gun for the second time in my life. My father never kept weapons in the house. He had never used more than an open hand to intimidate me or to keep me in line, but guns, I found, made me freeze in fear.

"You know, you do travel with pirates," Virgil piped in. "Maybe one of them took it? This kid is just an orphan. What can he do?"

"We know damn well what he can do," the Pirate Captain said. "He's a good little look out when he's in line, and he can fit in places in the ruins that most of us can't. But some of our loot showed up missing and I had to kill a few of the crew because we didn't make enough to keep a full ship."

"You had to kill them?" Henry asked sarcastically. "That sounds like the stupidest business plan ever." Henry's knuckles turned white as he balled his fist tighter, but he seemed to move something around inside his fingers, rubbing something with his thumb. Lightning and thunder crashed, and the rain began to fall down heavily on everything.

And then he disappeared.

The pirate Captain's eyes went wide, and the rest of the pirates stood around dumbly. They lowered their guns for half a moment-- the one in front of me lowered his gun too -- and looked around to the empty space where Henry should have stood. The Captain shot his pistol into the deck, and flecks of shrapnel flew through the air, sparking against the floor and flying up at one of his crewmen. The man clutched at his side and began rolling around, and then it happened -- a sword flew up out of the crowd of pirates

and roughnecks and spun -- and I heard Henry's laugh as it did. Shots went up in the air, but the sword flew back down into the crowd. Cries of pain issued from the crowd, and pirates jumped out holding their behinds or arms. Virgil drew his small sword and knocked the gun away from the pirate, stabbing at him and poking him in the side. The roughnecks stood motionless and stupid for a split second, and then chaos broke out. I ducked as Henry's laughs seemed to fill the air around us. I crawled to the edge of the deck and looked over the side. There, Henry had reappeared and flew like a bolt of color through the rain, above the mooring lines that kept our ship tied to the smaller ship of the pirates.

The lines broke as he flew over them. Cutting through the rain, I saw Henry's small form flying straight toward me. He stopped in front of me, and outstretched his hands

"Come on, you dip! Before they notice we're gone!" Henry yelled. I looked back behind us at the chaotic deck, foggy thick with rain and fighting. I couldn't see Virgil. I looked back at the other ship again. Only one line still left it connected to our ship, and it slowly began to float away from ours.

"Virgil is still in there!"

"You've got that piece of the typewriter, don't you? Use it!"

"What?"

"Use it to fly like me!"

I worked the key back from my cheek and spit it into my hand. The rain pelted the little metal circle, and water welled up in my palm. I couldn't hear anything but the

commotion of the ship. No song, no whispers. I closed my eyes and held the piece tight, thinking hard about flying, but nothing would happen.

"God, just let me do it," I heard Henry's voice come. Then I felt his small hands grab my body for a second --

"What are you doing?" I said, opening my eyes. But the ground had already shrunk beneath me, my limbs flailing as I felt my stomach and other organs moving slowly with inertia as my body moved into the air too fast, rain pelting my face. Then down again, organs shifting upward. The deck of the other ship became clear in the foggy rain and choppy waters of the storm. In slow motion, it grew closer and closer, and with a slam I fell onto the other deck, the metal warping underneath me with the impact.

My whole body began to hurt and time sped up again as I rolled around, soaking on the deck of the pirate ship. Through the fog and storm, I could barely see the other ship's windmill poking out of the fog, and the din of battle only just reached my ears. I heard a faint yell, the word "oops," and then sputtering out of the fog came Henry's small figure, and then another moving downward from it. The yell got louder and louder as the figure fell toward the deck. With a slam, Virgil's wet, tan-uniformed body hit the deck and rolled over.

"I'm sure I didn't break any bones," Virgil shouted over the loud rain pelting the deck. "Thanks."

Henry floated down to the deck slowly and ungracefully, as if he had run out of fairy dust or happy thoughts. As he finally touched the deck, his feet slipped and he fell on his butt. I thought it poetic justice as my entire body ached and stung, especially my left shoulder. I could barely move, just letting the rain wash over everything. I wiped the

water from my eyes more times than I can remember, trying to see as Henry tried to rise on the deck. The only sound now was from thunder and the metallic machine-gun noise of water droplets on thin sheets of metal.

"You're all welcome," Henry said, tired and coughing.

"Much obliged," Virgil said.

"What are we supposed to do now?" I shouted through the loud storm.

"You two get below deck and search for a compass!" Virgil yelled. "I'm going to keep this hunk of junk from capsizing in the storm!"

My mind scrambled with pain, and I couldn't think. I managed a weak "okay." I limped forward, feeling a sharp pain in my leg with every single step. If Virgil felt any pain, he didn't show it, climbing rusty, rickety looking stairs up to the quarterdeck. I began to remember my nautical terms from reading so many pirate books, and my mind began to clear, despite the background pain.

"We need to get to the captain's quarters," I said to Henry, pointing toward a metal hatch recessed in the quarterdeck, nestled between the two sets of stairs. We walked forward slowly through the wind, and I continued limping. Henry glanced back, and look of recognition passed over Henry's face as he saw me limping.

"Are you okay?" he asked. I merely nodded and moved forward. At least I could think. Large screeches of wood against metal came from the stern, where the two large windmills began to slowly turn as Virgil grasped the captain's wheel in his hands. Huge steel cords and chains tied the windmills to the deck, whipping to and fro in the wind.

Henry reached the hatch first and pushed hard on its large metal handle. It turned slowly with a loud metal squeal. I reached Henry and grasped the handle too, and we

finally forced the handle down with a satisfying click. The inside of the captain's quarters was shadowy, lit only by a rear window made of glass held only by a prayer. A small bed sagged in the corner across from a large metal table with maps, charts and pencils strewn all about, cascading down the side onto the floor as the ship rocked back and forth in the wind. Wheat and rain pummeled the outside of the ship and streamed down the window, leaking through the seams. Henry immediately began looking for a compass, but I stood there, shifting my weight to my right leg, trying not to hurt my left anymore. I fumed in silence with my hands stuffed in my pockets, even though Henry had just saved us. He had powers. How come I couldn't do anything? I wondered. When I had needed it most, the typewriter had let me down. I felt powerless. I began to hear the telltale song of the typewriter as he searched, and sounds of the outside world became muffled and indistinct.

"You're using the typewriter," I said. I knew I probably looked angry and jealous, but I didn't care. Henry had lied to me. He stopped looking for a moment, looking back.

"Not technically," he grinned. He stood and unzipped a small pocket, hidden inside his coat, reached in, and pulled out a handful of keys and bits of metal that I knew belonged to the typewriter. "Just a few pieces."

"Why didn't you just tell me?" I said, stepping forward. I wanted to grab them from his hand, but I held myself back.

"Because I thought maybe you were with the bad guys," he said matter-of-factly. "They just take what they want, though. That big fat guy kept taking your money, so I figure you're both okay. I kinda felt sorry for you, too."

"How did you get them?"

"What do you think I stole from those pirates?" Henry said. "They come in handy in situations like this." Of course he stole them. A thief through and through-- exactly the reason nobody wanted him in this world or the last.

"Then why don't you just send us home right now? Or at least stop the storm."

"I wish I could," Henry said, but I got the feeling he really didn't mean that. "I can only change me. They run out, too. You can only use them once." Henry separated a few of the pieces from the others and held them out to me. I hesitated.

"Here. Take some. Try one out."

I grabbed them from his hand and thought hard, trying to dispel the world and get us home. I heard the song of the typewriter get louder in my ears as I shut everything else out. I opened my eyes, and nothing had happened. The deck still protected us from the raging storm outside. I had hoped that Henry's new pieces would do something, but still nothing happened.

"Nothing," I said.

"You'll get it," Henry said unconvincingly. "Keep them."

I was already going to. I shoved the pieces deep in my pocket, and nodded.

"So if you can't leave, and I can't do anything," I said, hands in my pockets, protecting the new bits of the typewriter I had. It felt comforting at least having a little bit of it back, even if all the pieces were technically mine. "What is this all for?"

"I figure if we put the whole thing together, we can go home."

"What if it doesn't work?" I asked.

"At least it's a plan."

We went back to searching after that, and eventually, I reached my hand under the bed and grasped a small circle. When I pulled my hand back out, I saw that I had found the captain's compass, a small brass trinket whose needle spun as I turned it in my hand.

"Found it!" I said. The ship's rocking became worse, and I stumbled on my bad leg. Pain spiked through it like a nail, and Henry stretched out a hand to me. I took it, and we trekked back out into the rain and wet. I climbed the ladder slowly, only ever putting weight on my arms and right leg. Every step brought another wave of hurt. Still, somehow I scrambled to the top and handed Virgil the compass. As he wiped the rain from his eyes, he held a hand over the compass to shield it from the rain as he looked down.

"We're going southwest!" Virgil said excitedly. "With a little adjustment, we just need to weather this out and get to shore!"

The windmills creaked as Virgil muscled the wheel in the right direction, and the ship began to turn into the wind. He reached for a big brass lever next to the wheel, and moved it forward all the way, and the windmills abruptly stopped moving.

"Oops!" Virgil said, and cranked the lever again, this time backward, and the windmills started up again, creaking and then whirling fast against the storm, propelling us forward. Virgil let out a whoop, and the ship lurched forward. I held on to the railing, feeling my leg pulse with pain, and the ship cut like a knife through the wheat.

...

Henry and I slept in the rocking forecastle that night, finding a few small hammocks to sleep in. We fought over sleeping in the Captain's Quarters, but neither of us wanted to sleep in the same bed, and neither of us wanted to seem like a wussy. The

next morning, I felt my leg throbbing as I got down from my hammock. I pulled back my pant leg and found purple and black all over my left calf. I could barely walk without wincing in pain. I scanned the room, but saw no trace of Henry. I saw fog and light rolling through the open hatch above, and I walked up the stairs slowly, placing my hands on the steps in front of me to help me up. As I walked up, the ship bobbed lightly. The storm had ceased. Fog crawled over everything, and the sun peeked through in a small white dot above.

"Good morning, Jonah!" Virgil called from the quarterdeck. His feet hung over the side, and to my surprise, Henry stood manning the wheel. "Or afternoon. You've been asleep for a while."

I limped forward and waved, and Virgil looked concerned.

"Your leg? Are you okay?"

"No," I said. "I think it's broken."

Virgil jumped down as I came closer, and took my arm, propping me up and helping me walk. He sat me down on a small metal bench near the edge of the deck, overlooking nothing but muggy, steamy fog coming up off the wheat.

"We'll get that fixed up, huh?"

Virgil went below deck for a while, and I sat there trying not to move my leg at all, just holding it out and wiping sweat, or condensation, away from my face. I looked up at Henry at the wheel, hoping he could handle it. It didn't seem like we needed to turn anywhere. It felt almost the same as riding on a foggy morning in Popeye's car, not knowing quite the destination, nothing visible more than ten feet out. The fog spilled over the bow as we churned forward slowly.

Virgil's head popped up out of the forecandle hatch again, and he returned with some splints of wood and a length of thin ochre rope.

"I learned a little bit when I joined the military," Virgil said. "But I was a schoolteacher before I left. Left leg?" I nodded. Virgil rolled up the leg and I braced myself for the pressure as he laid the wooden pieces around my shin and wrapped the thin rope around my leg tightly.

"Is there any job you didn't do?"

"A few. Storytellers do all sorts of jobs. Teachers, historians, performers. A storyteller was a man perhaps not of means, but of mind."

"That's so deep I can't even see you anymore," I said in a pained voice.

"Very funny," he said, finishing a knot. My leg at least felt stable now, but the pressure made the pain constantly throb lowly in the background of my mind. I stood, and it seemed at least a little easier. I hoped my bone hadn't fractured, but I had never broken a leg before. In my adventures, even, I had only pretended to break bones if the story called for it.

"Try to walk on it a bit," Virgil said, standing up next to me. I took a few tentative steps toward the bow and gingerly made my way to the edge to look over. Virgil followed and stood with me. I could feel the droplets of water hitting my face, and I could smell the heady scent of wheat baking in the heat.

"Did Henry tell you about what he did?"

"He didn't have to. I assume it has something to do with that typewriter. It's magical where you come from, isn't it?"

"I guess," I said. I stood silently for a while. "I can't do anything with it. I used to, but..."

Virgil interrupted me. "You'll get it," he said. His voice sounded sincere, unlike Henry, but how would he know? His words still made me feel better.

Then, I saw something out in the distance. The color of the fog in the distance had changed, getting darker and darker as we moved forward.

"What is that?" I asked.

"What?"

My stomach dropped. "Henry! Slow down! We're going to crash!"

"What?"

Virgil grabbed me and I hopped forward as fast as I could with him, yelling "We're going to crash!"

I looked back too late. At incredible speed, the ship crumpled into the side of a red cliff, rending metal and sending Virgil and me flying to the deck. The world moved in slow motion for a moment as we crashed, as the slipshod metal panels of the ship went flying and bending and smoking, and red dirt from the cliff clunked on the deck. Finally it stopped, and we sat underneath a looming red cliff, stretching hundreds of feet above us.

"We're here," Virgil said, pushing himself up from the deck. Henry came running up the deck, and looked up at the high cliffs.

"Cool," he said, and then caught himself, saying "sorry."

...

The next few days, the fog cleared, and we stayed on the ship, preparing and trying to find a decent way of scaling the cliff. Its high edge cut the sky now, almost seeming to stretch forever. I collected food and supplies from under the decks, finding some fruit, salted meats, and a few hunks of pale yellow cheese. Virgil told us stories of the dangers of the land across the seas, the Half-Moon Mesas, even though he admitted he had never traveled there. We rationed out the food and stuffed supplies, canteens and rope into empty packs we found. My leg felt less pain every day, but the problem of the climb loomed over our days. We thought perhaps Henry could fly us up, but he didn't think he could make it up the sheer cliffs with the few pieces he and I had together.

"I'd have to fly, and haul your big butts up there too. I only did that for a second on the ship. I used up three pieces just doing that," Henry explained. "And what if we run into some kind of monster later?"

Part of me felt glad I didn't have to give any of them up.

Eventually we decided to string together as much rope as we could find, and Henry would fly that up. With my leg, I couldn't climb, so Virgil offered to climb up on the rope, and then pull me up on the rope. I felt useless, but I agreed. We spent a day stringing all the rope together, testing every knot to make sure it would stay, and Virgil made a loop at the bottom big enough for me to sit in.

The next day, Henry stood with the end of the rope in his hands, staring up at the cliff with a determined look in his eyes. He pulled two pieces of the typewriter out of his pocket, and I struggled to hear their song as he rubbed them in his fingers. They became so much more than a key and a small cog, then. I felt hate and admiration mixing in my gut as I remembered how it felt to fly in his shoes, to hold that kind of power in my

hands. Even though I could hear the song, it still sounded wrong, off, out of key. The leather of Henry's jacket curled in the wind as he crouched down, and took off like a bolt toward the sky.

The rope came up with him and quickly uncoiled, and finally slowed as Henry became like a dot on the horizon. He disappeared over the edge of the cliff. The rope lazily turned in the wind, and finally stopped. After a while, the loop at the end of the rope moved up and down a few times, and we knew Henry had secured it at the top.

"I'll pull you up after you give the signal, all right? Pull the rope tight, and hold on," Virgil said. He patted me on the shoulder reassuringly. It helped little. I wondered, with shaking breath, if I would have decided to climb if my leg healed faster. I put it out of my mind and nodded at Virgil, and he slowly began scaling the rope, planting his feet on the side of the cliff. He stopped to breathe a little every time the ropes met, tied together, standing straight on top of the small junctions.

Eventually he grew smaller and smaller too, and disappeared over the edge of the cliff. Finally came my turn. I pulled the loop over my head, and down to the seat of my pants. I tried to loop some more rope under my arms, but realized I might fall out that way, and resigned to just hold on to the knot and hope for the best. I pulled the rope tight a few times, and after a few seconds, it began to rise. I held on tight, and closed my eyes. I felt the rope rising and rising, a little at a time, and I kept my eyes closed, hard. I could feel the desire to look down tugging at me, and I gave in, opening my eyes and looking down for half a second.

I felt my bowels turn to liquid and my stomach became an empty hole. The ship looked tiny now, and I smelled the heady red dirt of the wall. It inched closer and closer

as the cliff's diagonal ascent continued. I closed my eyes again, but it didn't help. I adjusted here and there as I felt the rope changing positions, cutting into my upper thighs, deathly afraid that a single pull from above would push me out of the rope and falling to my death. Finally I felt my shoulder brush dirt. I tightened my grip, hugging the rope with my whole body, hoping I wouldn't slip and fall.

"Give me your hand, Jonah," I heard Virgil say. I looked up and saw him looking over the side of the cliff. I reached up one sweaty hand, and he grabbed my forearm. I kept a tight grip on the rope with my other.

"Other hand too," Virgil said, and I reached up, feeling the rope lose hold on me. I panicked for a second, but saw Virgil's white knuckles holding the rope. My body scraped uncomfortably on the side of the cliff, but I soon felt the ground under me, stable and warm. I crawled forward for a bit and breathed heavily for the first time since Virgil took my hand. I felt like hugging the scrubby red earth underneath me, but I heard Henry laughing. I opened my eyes and scrambled to my feet as quickly as I could, brushing myself off with what little dignity I had left. I felt ashamed of being so afraid. But Henry had the typewriter on his side, I thought. I didn't. I told myself that I had a right to it, but it didn't help.

"It's okay, Jonah," Virgil said, patting me on the back as I brushed the dust off me. "You made it, didn't you?"

"Only just," came a sinister voice. I felt sharp claws in my back, pushing me to the ground, and glimpsed blurry shapes pushing the others into the ground right before something dark came over my eyes and face and turned the world dark.

CHAPTER NINE

The Half-Moon Mesas

I struggled, but the claws only dipped further into my back, and something else gagged my mouth as I heard Virgil and Henry probably getting the same treatment. I felt my bad leg ache as the heavy something on my back turned me over and held me down, and something else tied my legs to what felt like a pole. I could feel the breath of the thing on my face while the other something tied my legs, smelling of grass, meat, and heat. Suddenly I felt my body lifted off the ground, my leg screaming at me in pain. I bobbed up and down, feeling my clothes scrape the ground as we moved.

The bobbing continued and I felt drool leaking down the sides of my face as I chewed and struggled against the gag. I felt I could barely breathe, and my tongue moved, trying to push out the intruding cloth. I struggled to breathe through my nose, trying to keep calm. I heard Henry's muffled anger through the dark black cloth, and for awhile, nothing else happened but the lulling, bobbing movement, the heat from the sun, the fear in my throat, and the throbbing in my leg.

Then, we stopped. I could feel that the sun had gone down as my body cooled and my fingers numbed from the tight ropes around my wrists. I heard clacks of wood against wood, and I hung on the pole, suspended on something-- a rack, I thought. I felt bile rising up from my stomach, and I could taste the fear in my mouth, given back to me by the now soaking cloth. Padded footsteps sounded all around, thumps I heard on the ground and felt resonate in my body, and then voices. I thought, at first, that maybe I was hearing pieces of the typewriter, but the sounds quickly morphed into clear howls and yips, sounds of laughter and jeers coming from someone around us -- or just me, I couldn't hear the others anymore.

Then, suddenly, the cloth and gag slid off my head. The pinkish red light from the afternoon sky hurt my eyes for a split second. My arms and legs stretched to a pole above me, held tightly by rope. The pole sagged with my weight between two dead trees. My eyes darted around and caught sight of Virgil and Henry hanging from similar trees across from me, partially hidden by a huge, unlit pile of firewood between us. Tall, red mesas topped with green turf stretched up to the sky and cast dark shadows on the grassy clearing. Dark holes that looked like they led to homes dotted the walls of the dirt.

Lining the ground around us and the carved walkways twirling up the mesas sat furry, howling, laughing, mingling animals, dotting everything around, covering most empty parts of the ground. A solitary beast circled the unlit bonfire that Henry, Virgil and I hung about, passing by me, and howling his own tune. He stood bigger than the other animals by a little, and wore a bandana around his neck. Then he spoke to the rest of them loudly, yelling a command for them to quiet down, and his command brought quick silence.

"You're... coyotes," I said dumbly, not able to think of other words quickly.

Before I could stumble out another half-formed thought, he had dashed three inches away from my face, snarling. I felt his spit hit my face as he bared his sharp reddened teeth.

"Call me that again, if you'd like to die painfully, two-legger," he growled. "We are Waya. You would do well to learn it before your end."

I held my tongue, the fear boiling up again inside me. I felt like vomiting. The large coyote slowly walked away, giving me an evil look, and then began circling the bonfire again. I could hear his voice echo through the mesas.

"You've all been gathered to witness something," his voice came. "An intruder has landed on our shores. Soldiers, no less, by the look of this poor specimen." I heard the large coyote spit. His voice echoed with authority. I struggled with the ligaments around my arms silently, but the rough ropes cut into my wrists. I saw blood seep out from underneath them, down my forearm in a bright red line. I imagined an escape, quickly dashed from my mind by the thousands of shining, sharp teeth around me.

"Since the Barons came, we have kept our shores with watchful eyes for intruders, scum, and anyone else who would further threaten our land. Those who would push us further into the mesas, who would feed us to the dragon or to the ruins without a thought." The crowd cheered for him and jeered at us as he circled, coming back around to me again. I looked out on the crowd pleadingly, and thought for a second I could see at least one set of sympathetic black eyes coming out from it, a small one wearing a satchel, but it disappeared as soon as it had come.

"Now, before we mete out justice, and feast on our victories, we will give these, who do not deserve it, last words before justice, and dinner, is served."

He stopped before me, and looked at me straight in the eye. I saw anger and hatred in his eyes, but something else I couldn't quite place.

"You," he said. "Do you have anything to say?"

I gulped, but gathered courage.

"Speak!" he barked.

"You don't understand," I said. "We're not from here!"

"Don't try to reason with them, Jonah, they're savages!" Virgil shouted, finally. I heard a thump, and Virgil grunted. Still, I pressed on -- I could see something wanting to listen in the large coyote's eyes.

"Shut your mouth, two-legged scum!" he said.

"Please, just listen," I pleaded. I licked my dry lips and tried to choose my words carefully. "We didn't come here to do anything to you. Our ship crashed here. We were looking for something we lost."

"Empty words from full mouths," he said. "Justice will be served."

"Wait!" I yelled.

"There is no waiting left," he said.

"Begin the feast!" the large Coyote yelled, and I closed my eyes. I heard them coming. A slashing noise -- and I felt my legs drop to the ground with a thump, and then my shoulders and head. The wind flew out of my lungs and I coughed, opening up my eyes.

Laughter and howls erupted from all sides, many of the coyotes rolling around on the ground in the dust. The large coyote walked up, heaving with laughter, almost falling. I sat up and dusted myself off and looked around as laughter spread through the crowd. Virgil, Henry, and I grouped together defensively.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"You should have..." the large Coyote from before could barely speak through the laughter. "You should have seen your faces! You really thought we were going to eat you!"

"What are you going to do then?"

"You're going to tell us a story, and we will decide if it is good enough."

"If it is?" Virgil asked confidently. "What then?"

"Then we decide whether to let you climb back down to your ship tomorrow, or to shove you off the cliff tonight."

...

The bonfire now burned brightly in the night, and made the mesas and dirt around us seem even brighter and redder than in the daylight. The fire almost seemed to be inside the clay on the ground, dancing around the small homes as several Waya walked this way and that, eating and talking. We sat with the leader, who finally introduced himself as Yotl. He stood me up in front of a nearly silent audience of thousands, and commanded us to tell our stories. He sat down next to a line of regal looking Waya, all seated near the main bonfire. Several other bonfires blazed around the clearing, and Waya sat all around, some listening, some speaking amongst themselves.

I told my part of the story, how we got here, what we sought, and why. I almost stumbled into talking about the Leader of the Barons, but Henry elbowed me hard, and I remembered how Yotl had spoken about them in his speech, how Virgil had called the Waya savages. I bit my tongue, and redirected, finishing with our capture in the mesas. I told the story awkwardly, leaving out details at random as my mind caught up with me.

"Well, tell the rest of it," Yotl insisted after I had finished. I looked down at Virgil, confused, as if he would have some sort of guidance.

"I have," I said.

"Not you, them. Don't you know how to tell a story? Your friends need to tell it too."

Virgil and Henry both got up in turn, and told the same story a little awkwardly, but still with feeling. They seemed to love the parts where Virgil defected, as he told it. Virgil's story, though, seemed somehow incomplete, even though I knew every part. For the first time I had heard, he stumbled through his story. He seemed uncomfortable the entire time.

Henry's story went over the best -- although he set himself as the hero and us as his tagalong sidekicks. The crowd laughed and laughed as he recounted how he had run away from the Barons, how he had escaped prison and saved me, how he had saved us all from the pirates. He stopped short of congratulating himself for all of it, and sat back down to howls of approval from the large, captivated crowd.

"That's a good story," said Yotl. "You are no friend of the Barons, so tonight you may eat with us. Tomorrow you have to return to your ship and leave, though."

My stomach dropped. We had to stay. He knew that. We had told him in the story. He knew we had to find the pieces to get home. We had no other choice.

"Why?" I asked, pushing my luck. The fear had left, replaced only by hunger and a desire to go home again. A desire to find the rest of the typewriter so that we could at least have a chance of going home.

"Let us now tell you a story," Yotl said.

We all sat, and attendants brought platefuls of food in clay dishes, filled with spiced roasted chicken that dripped from the bone, and sweet rolls of bread that tasted like honey. All three of us ate as much as we could, and my stomach felt so full I thought I would burst. Virgil still looked around tentatively as he ate, keeping an eye on things. I knew he didn't trust them at all.

The rest of the Waya around us mingled and ate at their leisure, coming up to a huge, low table made of clay, decked with many roasted chickens, more bread, and fruits, sparkling in the firelight.

First, Yotl stepped up to the fire and faced the looming crowd of mingling Waya. Then, two others walked from the crowd and joined him. One looked short and squat, and his fur hung too long for his own good, and another stood taller and thinner than Yotl, his ribs visible through more patchy, unkempt fur. The taller one howled, and the crowd fell silent and still, and he began telling his story.

"Many years ago, before the earth had color, our people fought in a war against the Dragons who swim in clay. My grandfather's ancestors took up tooth and claw with the Two-legs to beat back and destroy the dragons. The Waya of the Sky Mesa tribe showed bravery in the war, and crushed many of the ground-swimmers to powder. By our

blood shed on the earth in those battles, the earth turned red, and reminds us still today of those lost."

The taller Waya solemnly bowed his head, and seemed to have finished his story. The shorter Waya smiled, and he jumped at the chance to tell his own part, giving a few short yips that echoed in the dark.

"You left out some of the best parts, Kinta," the short one said, laughing. "That's got to be the most boring version. You've been over at Sky Mesa too long -- the thin air must have suffocated your brain!"

The crowd began laughing at this, and the taller Waya didn't seem to enjoy the joke as much as the small one, who laughed and howled at his own joke long after the crowd had stopped laughing. I felt the heat of the fire die down a little as everyone settled down and the small Waya stepped forward and poised himself.

"The Summer Island Waya, since the beginning of time, have been the most cunning and best hunters. Our noses can smell the different types of dirt if they have to, whether they've been walked on by Waya from Sky Mesa, Men from the Valley, or chickens from Half Moon Meadow. When the first two-legs were still wetting their silly clothes as the ground-swimmers stole their treasures in the night, we put claws to earth to find them. When the Sky Mesa tribe was still talking about what to do, we found the dragons and brought home a prize from their horde. It's the Summer Islanders who took the first strike and brought back the first dragon's head!"

Some in the crowd erupted in praising howls, and others yelled a bevy of insults back. The short Waya practically bounced around as he spoke, jumping at points he seemed to think most important, excitedly telling the story with animation and life. I

thought it much better than the first one. I looked over at Virgil as the howling continued, but he didn't seem to be very happy with the telling. His brow furrowed, and he looked through his large glasses resolutely, not moving so much as an eyelash.

As the short one took his place again, the other Waya in the crowd began to settle down, much slower than before. Their laughter and howls seemed to continue to echo even after everyone stopped making any noise. Then, Yotl stood up, and everything -- even the echoes -- seemed to fall silent. He walked slowly as he spoke, with a kind of resoluteness and surety. Each step seemed to be weighted with purpose.

"Half-Moon Meadow has always been the heart of the Waya. Some may give us hell for raising chickens or using our claws to till instead of hunt, sometimes." Yotl chuckled as he said this. "But the meadow has always been the center of our culture, the place where all tribes, what few are left, could meet and feast beneath one sky. We were the first to take the brunt of the ground-swimmers, but it was the two-legs of the Valley-under-the-moon who awakened their greed. When they had their fill of the plunder of the two-legs, they came for us. The two-legs offered help, but only after the damage had been done. No grass grows in Half-Moon meadow because the ground-swimmers scorched the earth and left no seed unburned. When the two-legs came, Half-Moon Valley was all but gone. Together, we pulverized the ground-swimmers, but by then, it was already too late. We fought a bloody war with the two-legs, and every tribe banded together to drive them out and across the wheat.

"The three tribes were all that remained of the once great nation of Waya. The two-legs stayed across the wheat and left us alone. For thousands of years, the Waya thrived. We grew strong, we rebuilt our nation on the three tribes. The Summer Islands

provided us with fish and bread. Sky Mesa gave a watchful eye to any who would do us harm. The Meadow, still, was our heart.

"After many years, the two-legs came back with promises of trade and mended hurts. We accepted, but we never should have let them past our borders again. As we had been rebuilding, so had the two-legs. We had peace for many summers, but then the Barons came. This summer past, they came in ships and with weapons, and they destroyed the Summer Islands, drove many of our people back into the mesas, taking out settlements in the plain, pushing us into the mesas where they can't see or smell, where they are like teething infants. We stained the clay red again with their blood, and Sky Mesa keeps an ever watchful eye for their kind, should the Barons come again."

Yotl paused in palpable silence for a moment. Then, he howled, and the rest of the crowd followed suit, sending up a lonely, sad song into the dark sky. Everyone sat, listening in anticipation as Yotl took his place among the two other important Waya.

"You see why we can't let you wander here. I trust your story. It has the ring of truth. But the people would go mad if I let your kind look for your treasures here."

"Unless we find these things, we can't go home," I pleaded with him. "We have no other place to go."

Yotl looked away, as if contemplating. I could see in his eyes something he didn't want to say, something he was holding back, but I couldn't place it.

"You simply can't stay here. We, the tribes, will not allow you freedom to wander in their homes looking for something we simply do not have. The only place you could search is deeper in the mesas."

I felt a rush-- he was giving us an option. This was our chance.

"What? Where should we go?"

"There is one place," he said seriously. He looked toward the end of the meadow where the moon hung, where the mesas created a large line around the meadow. "Deeper in these mesas, the cliffs get taller and the sun smaller, and they say the treasure of the ground-swimmers is hidden somewhere deep beyond where Waya fear to tread. A place where you may find what you are looking for."

I looked up toward the deep end of the meadow, where the darkness cut between the walls of the valley. I could feel the darker spots drawing me toward them, as if calling to me.

"Why are some afraid to go there?" I asked.

"Because they say that the ground-swimmers still live there today, waiting for some unsuspecting pup to go searching for their treasure, so they can awaken again and feed."

"We'll go." Henry's voice came. "We'll go tomorrow."

"Fine," Yotl said, with an odd smile.

Yotl stood and faced the Waya in the crowd again.

"It is decided! The two-legs will search for the lost plunder of the ground-swimmers!" Yotl howled. We had one triumph, at least. I remembered the trip up the rope, and how utterly inept I felt, even with someone experienced like Virgil at my side. Henry exuded confidence, but I still felt a cold pit of fear in my gut. We needed help.

"We will need some food, and a guide," I spoke quietly.

"Jonah," Virgil said, giving me a hard look, as if to say "don't."

"We don't know anything about this place," I continued after a pause, undaunted.

Yotl turned to us with a flash of severity, and the Waya all around spoke out in protest of the idea, barking insults at us. But then a voice came from the crowd before he could speak. All fell silent again.

"I will guide them," the voice spoke. It was the voice of a girl, shaky, scared, but determined as it echoed out in the daunting silence. She walked out of the crowd, a small Waya with matted, dirty hair and dark eyes.

"How dare you," growled the serious, tall Waya from Sky Mesa, baring his teeth at her. "Know your place, Kala!"

Kala, as she seemed to be named, put her ears back, but stepped forward anyway, not budging backward or flinching.

"Your brother was much the same way," Yotl said in a dark voice. "You should remember him."

"Wait," said the Summer tribesman. "I think she should go."

"What?" said the tall one incredulously. "What female, let alone a Kala, can track anything? Not that these intruders deserve more than we've given them. They've already gained food, a place to sleep, and free passage in our lands. Why should we give them this?"

Yotl looked at the squat Waya, and seemed to share an idea. His eyes went a little wide, and then he turned, attitude completely changed.

"Yes," he said slowly. "I'll allow it. Perhaps you will find and join your brother, out there."

Her eyes went angry, and her ears stayed back. The rumble of a growl came from her gut, but she snorted, and sat.

"I'll not have the two-legs harmed," Yotl said, looking at the tall Waya, giving him a dark look. "Everyone back to eating! This is supposed to be a feast!"

The tall Waya snorted and stormed off without a word, and the short one laughed and cackled his way back to his food. Everyone seemed to disperse, leaving only us three and Kala in a large clearing by the big fire. The Waya seemed to ignore us completely.

"Thank you," I said to the girl. But she huffed and walked into the crowd to the sound of a few pockets of laughter, leaving us without a word.

And with that, Yotl and the other Waya left us sitting next to the fire, all looking at each other with uncertainty at what we had gotten ourselves into.

CHAPTER TEN

A Dragon's Horde

The next morning, I woke to the sound of a rooster's crow. It would have been pleasant, I think, but the rooster's beak hung three feet in front of my face. I sat bolt upright with a shout, and saw the rooster hanging from the mouth of a Waya, sniggering as it watched everyone else wake up to the noise. Henry wiped his eyes, and Virgil fumbled with his glasses, slipping them over his ears, and squinting at the one who had just woken us up.

"Rise and shine, two-legs!" She had a girl's voice, one that sounded at once confident and unsure. The Waya laughed and let down the rooster, who looked glad to be let go. The Waya's giggle seemed to pierce the cool morning air. I pushed the roughspun blanket given to me by some nameless Waya the night before off of my legs. Everything ached from sleeping on the cold ground the night before, and the fire had burned down to embers next to us. They put us near the outskirts in a rough patch of fenced-in ground with a bunch of chickens. Yotl had fed us some line about "our safety," but it seemed more like another joke. Lying down for sleep, I could see dark, suspicious eyes looking at

us as everyone settled down and went to their homes for rest or left the meadow altogether, going to the north and south, none venturing to the west where the dragons supposedly survived.

The air smelled faintly of the dead fire from before, and my leg ached a little, but no more than the rest of me. I could feel it healing.

"You're going to need those blankets, so bring them," the little Waya said. She pointed to two packs she had on each side with her nose. "We have no packs made for your kind, so you'll have to use the blankets to carry any food and water for yourselves, and they'll keep you warm at night."

"We know how to use blankets," Virgil said, irritated. He then muttered under his breath, "savages."

The Waya girl seemed not to notice, or did her best to ignore Virgil's comment, and walked forward. I couldn't understand Virgil's anger at the Waya, but I kept my mouth shut. He and Henry both radiated anger and the remnants of a bad sleep, and my mind wandered to the stories from the previous night. Dragons. Real dragons. I felt my stomach churn like a blender in fear and excitement. I didn't know what I'd do if we really found a dragon, but perhaps, I thought, that day I'd figure out how to use the typewriter again. Everything looked a little more hopeful in the light of morning.

As we walked, I heard other Waya getting up, and saw them walking out of their dwellings to watch us leave. The sun cast a pink light on the sky and lit up the mesas from the back, causing huge beams of light to flow through the spaces in between and into the meadow. Chickens clucked and we heard chuckles coming from some of the Waya around, some sitting outside little dirt huts I hadn't noticed the night before. The

huts had fences and kept in chickens and small gardens. Some of the chuckling turned into outright derisive laughter, and finally, as we walked west and the village began to wake, some yelled insults. I heard them insulting our clothes, the blankets we had draped over our shoulders, but then I heard them say "Kala," like the name before. I realized they were talking about the Waya girl leading us -- but she seemed again to ignore all other sounds, walking forward resolutely.

Finally, we reached a small hut on the edge of the village to the north, where no other houses seemed to be, and "Kala," walked inside. The little clay building had a circular window and a half circle hole for a doorway. It seemed much too small for anyone but Henry to crawl into comfortably. Kala disappeared behind the dark doorway and a burlap bag flew out after a few minutes. She appeared behind it soon after.

"We'll split up the food in here between bags. Put it in your blanket," she ordered. "There are some skins for water, too. Take one."

Henry and I did as ordered, Virgil starting hesitantly. I didn't feel free. I could still feel the eyes of the other Waya behind us, the cackles as they laughed out the words "they sent the Kala." Animosity in the air mixed with the scent of burnt embers. Yotl had believed us, perhaps, but to the rest, we still looked like intruders. The optimism I had felt waking up retreated a short distance and waited for me beyond the western edge of the meadows. As I packed up food and a water skin, I saw to the north a huge mesa that almost looked like a mountain, tall above the others. Sky Mesa, I thought, where the thin, shaggy Waya from last night hailed from. The sky lay empty beyond the west, at least from where we stood. I tied up my blanket around my shoulder, copying Virgil, and Henry did the same.

"Let's go," I said.

We followed Kala again, and began walking out past the border. I felt my stomach tie itself in excited knots as we passed the border and walked out into the unknown. The mesas closed in tight, and shrubs and patches of grass lined the walls of the thin pathways.

"So you're Kala?"

She stopped dead in her tracks and I heard a growl come from her throat. "Don't you ever call me that again."

"I'm sorry, I thought--"

"My name is Una."

"I didn't know. I'm sorry."

"Save it. We can talk when we find a place to sleep," she said. "I can't focus with you blathering."

She spoke with some authority, or at least bravado, and never stopped walking forward. She only looked back occasionally, eyes darting back and forth as if counting.

The sun peeked over the mesas at noon and shone straight down into the pathways where we walked, and the heat became intense. It only lasted a little while, and the sun eventually became invisible past a fence of tall, flat outcroppings. The air felt cool and the ground uneven, but the trail passed easily. Una walked ahead of us most of the time and occasionally disappeared down a path and told us to wait for her while she put her nose to the ground for a scent; of what, I didn't know.

"These savages are probably sending us to our doom," Virgil said gloomily.

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

"Did you see the way they reacted when she 'volunteered' to come with us?"

Virgil asked. "I know a little about Waya. She's an outcast. Kala means "dog" in their tongue, I think. That means she doesn't have a name in the eyes of her tribe. She probably doesn't even know where we're going."

I felt grit between my teeth, fumbled for my skin full of water, and drank deeply from it.

"You guys are the most boring people ever," Henry piped in. "We're going to slay a dragon. We're being led by a talking coyote. This is the coolest thing ever."

Henry sounded confident as usual, but as I felt the pieces of the typewriter in my pocket rub against my leg, they reminded me of how little I could do. Their song faded to quieter whispers every day, and every night I was visited by visions of the bison I tried and failed to convince myself never happened.

When the sky started to turn pink, and the light bouncing off the walls of the uninhabited mesas began to fade, Una told us to stop and ran off down a corridor again, searching for something. She came back, and ordered us to follow.

"I found a campsite. We can sleep there tonight and keep moving tomorrow."

We followed her down the dark corridor she had just come from. Fallen wood littered the pathway. Eventually, it opened up into a clearing with a small brown pool and flat places that looked good for laying out our rough blankets.

"I'll collect some wood for a fire," Henry said excitedly, and left us to throw down our blankets. Henry came toddling back with a huge pile of broken, old branches of wood and some shrubs and dropped them down on the ground. I dug a pit for the fire, remembering camping trips with Popeye when I was a kid, and soon we had a small fire

lit, casting everything in an orange light. Una flopped down near the fire, looking tired and lonely and sad.

"Are you an outcast?" Henry said matter-of-factly as we warmed ourselves by the fire. Surprisingly, Una laughed, and so did Virgil, but in a different way.

"You could say that," she said. "They don't trust women to track. We are supposed to stay and tend the chickens."

"That's stupid," Henry said.

"Yes," Una said, looking at him with a softer look than I had seen on her face before.

"So why did they send you?" I asked, pulling my blanket over my shoulders.

"They thought it would be a funny joke."

"Why?"

"Because of my brother," she said quietly. She didn't seem to want to go on.

"Your brother came to work for the human archaeologists, didn't he?" Virgil said bluntly. "He left you to go find fortune."

"He left so he could save us," Una said angrily. "We are poor. Our parents were killed when the Barons came, on the Summer Islands. I was too young to remember, but Lee always did. He remembered when your kind slaughtered us. And for what? But we have always been dogs to them. He thought he could bring honor back to us by working for the humans and finding out their weak points, their strategy. It was a silly dream, but he followed it. He had faith in it."

"I'm sorry," Virgil said, and for the first time since the Waya dragged us to their fire, he sounded sincere.

"Why are you helping us?" I asked her.

"I know what it's like not to have a home. I have never had one. And I'm sure I'm the only one who believes you."

"What do you mean?" I asked, confused. Yotl had seemed to believe us just fine, otherwise he wouldn't have let us out into his land, I thought.

"Do you see anything of value out here?" she said. "All there is here is dirt and the smell of burning, if the ground-swimmer is real. It's all a joke. All of this. They sent you into a wasteland with a disgraced female. They think you won't make it hours. A fine joke, isn't it?"

"What do you believe?"

"I believe in me. I have the best nose of any of those Kala back in the meadow, raising chickens. My brother taught me how to hunt and handle a knife, how to track and fend for myself. We often traveled outside our borders to the edges of the valley. There are ruins there that the Waya would never tread upon for fear of the ground-swimmers."

I believed her, but I still didn't know why she would help us.

"Of course I've never gone this way. We always went north past Sky Mesa. Nobody has really ever gone west, not since the days when there were seven tribes," Una said. "Lee and I always talked of going past the grass and into the ruins, or seeing the wheat sea, but we never got to it before he left."

"Thank you for helping us," I said. Still, she hadn't answered why she helped.

"Why do you believe us? About the typewriter? What if we were just soldiers trying to trick you?"

"The big one might be, but you two are a bit small."

"So are you," Henry said.

"True. Well, I have other reasons," she said, and began to open her pouch. She nosed in it, and eventually brought out a small button with a "B" on it, dropping it onto the ground. It tinkled as it fell, and it sparkled in the firelight. A piece of the typewriter. I heard its faint whisper as she dropped it.

"How did you get that?" I said, getting up with Henry.

"This is my treasure, my brother's, from the Summer Islands," she said, putting her paw over the object. "I will let you use it to get home when the time comes. I know what it is like to have no home. I have never had one. But it stays in my possession."

"Fair enough," I said, and Henry and I both sat down. After that, everyone tried hard to sleep. I stayed up for a while as visions of the ruins flickered in my mind. Ruins made of things I knew-- gas stations half sunken into the ground, rusted windmills, old metal signs, grass grown over places that I might have seen a million times. My home ran through this one like streaks of ore in rock. I yearned for magic. Una and her brother had never run into any dragons in their travels outside the normal borders. I imagined them dancing in the dying fire as I drifted to sleep.

...

We all woke early the next morning, and a crick stuck in my back from sleeping on the cold ground. We packed up the remaining food and filled up our water skins with the water in the small brown pool, which tasted disgusting, then we began walking again. Virgil walked alone that day, behind all of us. He said he wanted to make sure things stayed safe in the back, but it seemed a little silly. He walked with a slow, melancholy

pace. Una walked quickly up ahead, and Henry and I walked alone in the middle, trying to catch up without losing Virgil in the rear.

"Do you think we'll ever see a dragon?" I asked Henry. I felt a little silly even asking. I started to feel the excitement of adventure in my gut the moment I woke up.

"Maybe," Henry said. "I hope so. I want to be the one to slay it."

I hope we don't have to, I thought to myself silently.

We walked on for a while, until the sun was high in the sky again, and the mesas seemed more like a solid canyon, filling up with heat. Then, Una stopped up ahead. We kept walking up, but her tail went up and she turned her head backward to us. Virgil caught up to us, then.

"What's going on?"

"Stop, I smell something."

"What is it?" I asked.

"It smells like a fire. There might be someone else out here," she said. "Be quiet and stay close to me."

We walked forward slowly, and Una sniffed the ground and occasionally the air while moving forward. The pathway twisted, and the ground all around became free of shrubs of any kind.

"I can't smell people. Just dirt and the smell of burning."

"I hear you," came a loud, booming voice suddenly. "Leave now, and I will not destroy you."

Then, fire shot from the walls of the mesas in huge jets from the dirt, throwing hot, burning clay down at us. We ran, and the fire continued to shoot in jets from above,

twisting in the sky and smoking as bits of fiery clay hit the ground. Everything exploded at once, but nothing hit us. I could feel the heat above, but nothing touched me, not a single burn.

I stopped, and Henry did too, taking out a fistful of his pieces of the typewriter and standing at the ready.

"What are you doing?" Virgil yelled, stopping as a jet of fire nearly singed off his hair. Una stopped too.

"I hate to agree with the two-legger, but now isn't the time to stop!"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Virgil yelled back at Una.

Henry and I ignored their arguing, and turned back toward the fiery pathway in front of us. The heat made me sweat, but I knew it wouldn't hurt me. I had to believe it.

"I've got an idea," I said.

"Me too," Henry said. I doubted our ideas matched up.

I planted my feet, gulped, and wiped some sweat from my brow as the flames seemed to whip ever closer to my face.

"We don't want to hurt you!" I yelled.

"What?" Henry said.

The flames got closer and closer, almost against my clothes, shooting from behind, forward and above. Then, they suddenly stopped.

"You promise you won't hurt me?" the voice came, this time, not booming or angry, but almost scared. A voice somewhere in between a boy and a man, unsure.

"I promise!"

"What are you doing?" Henry asked urgently. "We were supposed to--"

"I don't think he wants to hurt anyone. He could have burnt us to death by now, but he hasn't."

"But we were going to --"

"Don't say it!" I said. "He still could, and I made a promise."

"Are you coming?" the voice came again, this time hopeful. "I hope I didn't scare you away!"

We all paused for a moment, and I looked at everyone else for approval or guidance, I'm not sure which. To tell the truth, I was excited. I could feel the anticipation rising in my stomach. A dragon. Please be a dragon.

"Lead the way," Una said, looking unsure. "You're the one who promised."

I walked forward and heard the crunching footsteps of the others behind. I stepped tentatively down the path. The scent of burning clay stung my nose, but eventually gave way to something familiar. It smelled like home.

As we passed around another twist, the smoke receded to a huge clearing, walls carved full of caves and shelves and nooks. Books. Antiques. The scent of stories and objects that belonged nowhere but hoped for a home. And in the middle of it all, there was a real live dragon, more beautiful than anything I imagined before. His reddish brown skin looked like the dirt around him, with jewels and crystals embedded in his chest and belly. His eyes shone like glass marbles, and a smile spread on his face as he finally saw us pass into the clearing.

His long nose gave a snort of happiness, sending out a little smoke. He had no wings, but as he crawled closer to us, I saw bright glass marbles literally sparkled in place of eyes, and his skin looked more and more like real, kiln-fired clay. His arms and legs

shone with blue jewels similar to the ones that covered his chest and stomach and that lined the rest of his body unevenly. His tail curled around his body as he came closer and sat down.

"Hello, my name is Clyde. What's yours?"

"My name is Jonah."

"Oh, like the story? Have you ever seen a whale?"

"I saw one once, when I was on a boat to a place called Germany."

"Ach! Mochtest du wasser?"

"What?"

"I thought maybe you knew German."

"How do you know all of this?"

"I'm sorry, am I being rude? I read about etiquette once. It's just... there's nobody else out here. I can't practice. What are all your names?" Clyde looked at the others excitedly.

"Una," came the Waya's voice, dumbstruck.

"Virg-" Virgil stumbled with his words, staring without blinking at the huge dragon, the size of a bus. "Virgil."

"Please say you'll come have dinner with me? Oh please?"

"Of course," I said.

...

Clyde sat near a clay table he made for us, simply by slamming his foot into the ground, and morphing the dirt. He breathed fire on it and baked it, and we sat on the

warm chairs in the cooling night. He set out a huge number of plates with rocks on them, some gold, some black and spotted with white, and some that looked like clear glass.

"Please eat up! These are my best rocks."

"Dinner looks lovely, I'm sure," I said, delicately. "But we can't eat this. Our teeth would break."

Virgil still looked in awe at Clyde, but he had now pulled a small notebook from his pack, and wrote furiously in it, only looking up every once in a while from the little notebook.

"Ahh, yes I remember. I'm so sorry! I'm such an idiot," he said. "I'll go get some more food that you can eat."

He stood and walked back a ways into the clearing, to a clear, flat patch of clay, and looked back at us.

"Virgil, if you need any more paper or pens, I have some lying around here somewhere. Help yourself!"

With that, he jumped into the air, and dove straight into the ground, melding with it or pushing it away, leaving only a little disturbed ground behind him. I felt a fly buzz in to my open mouth.

"Still wish we could have gotten to slay one," Henry said. "That's what happens in all the stories."

"It looks like the stories were wrong," Una said.

"Yes, but they'll make one whopper of a new tale when all this is over. This is absolutely incredible. I'll be the most famous storyteller in history when I come back with this one."

After a while the dragon hopped out of the ground again with a great clamor, and landed next to us with some fruits and vegetables for us to eat, from where, I didn't know.

He cleared away a few plates clumsily, and replaced the rocks with some of the fruits he had just found, filling up only a fraction of the very large plates. We all began to eat, and I pulled some chicken I had left over from my blanket. Everyone looked at it hungrily, having eaten most of theirs before. It tasted dry and old, but I savored it just the same. Food had been scarce since Henry and I had come to this world, but Nanny always cooked more than anybody needed. The most I had eaten in days came from the feast. Still, after a few days of traveling, the dry chicken and glistening fruits seemed like a lot.

"I have so many questions," I said through a mouthful of food, fascinated by the jewels encrusting his arms and clawed fingers. "I've never met a dragon who could talk before."

"I don't know any other kind," said the dragon, chewing on a rock. He must have seen the excitement in my eyes, because he finished by saying "I'm afraid I don't know many other dragons at all, though. I'm the only one left, I think."

"Our people have legends that you were many in number once," Una said.

"I know. I listen to your stories from the ground sometimes," Clyde responded sadly. "You tell very good stories, but I'm afraid to come out. You see, I don't really remember anything like that. For as long as I can remember, I've been alone here. People talk about me like they're afraid."

"There are those of us who say they see you in the night or in the reflection of a flame," Una said.

"I'm around here and there. When I was very young, I found the ruins outside this place. There were so many shiny and beautiful and smelly things there. I learned language by listening to the Waya in the ground and by reading books I found in the ruins. I know French and Spanish, and I'm working on learning German."

"What is German?" Una said, mispronouncing the word.

"It's a place from my world," I said. Clyde looked down at me and smiled wide.

"Have you been to Germany?" he said excitedly.

"Yes," I laughed.

"Really? What is it like?"

"I don't know, I didn't see much of it," I said, sadly. I really hadn't ventured out much during my time on the base. My father had home-schooled me in the loosest sense of the word, letting me make my own reading lists and giving me workbooks he had ordered in. I couldn't remember anything from that place vividly. I stayed to myself, not because of my father I thought, but more for fear of leaving.

"Come with me!" Clyde said suddenly, and grabbed me by the arm like a little kid. His hands were dusty and hard, but his grip felt gentle. I ran behind him and the others followed as we weaved down a huge corridor of books that looked as if Clyde had carved it out himself, and finally came to another clearing with books lining the walls, the other empty spaces filled up with pictures from magazines ripped out and plastered to the walls, showing locations from all around the world. Some framed huge waterfalls, some held back the green waves of the ocean, and some caged up a zoo of elephants, pandas, and lions. I thought they had probably come from National Geographic, as I began to

recognize a few of the photos. Clyde plopped down on the ground like a cat, and blew a little fire out his nose to light a candle, as the light began to leave the canyon.

"This is my room. All my favorite treasures are here," he said. He picked up a little device that looked like a zeppelin from a shelf full of other little toys and books. "I built this one. It's a flying machine, like in 'Around the World in Eighty Days.'"

"What is that? Is that a story?" Virgil asked.

"It's a good book. You can borrow it if you want," Clyde said. "My favorite books are ones with treasure hunts."

He pulled the book off the shelf and handed it to Virgil, who immediately became engrossed. "Have you read that one, Jonah?"

"Yes, actually," I answered.

For hours, Henry and I sat talking to the dragon about all the things from our world that he knew. Virgil sat reading and Una listened intently, interjecting a question about our world from time to time, her eyes growing wider. We told him our story, about the typewriter and how we had come to his world, to the Territory. Again, we left out the parts about lightwater and the mission I had been sent on. The stories conflicted in my mind.

The night grew and he lit a few more candles around his room, and drew in the dirt with his claws as he listened.

"I might have a few typewriter parts lying around here somewhere," Clyde said after we had finished. "I'm not sure they'll be the ones you're looking for though. Wait here."

Clyde got up and delicately walked around all of us, and rounded the corner for a moment. I heard digging noises, and the sound of clattering. Clyde's voice came saying "sorry," and then he rounded the corner again, carrying a small leather bag. He set it down in front of Henry and me, and then sat back down on the ground. I thought maybe I could hear something, but Henry immediately grabbed for the pack and started digging through it. He definitely heard something. I felt a flash of jealousy as he dumped out the bag of pieces onto the ground. Clyde issued a quiet "be careful," but Henry was already digging through a large pile. I heard parts of the song of the typewriter a little more clearly now, tinkling as Henry placed a few tines and gears in his hands and held out a few to me. I took them, thankfully, but strained to even hear a single, faint whisper.

"I thought I heard these when we came in," Henry said excitedly.

"So those go to your typewriter?" Clyde asked.

"Yes," I said. "We think if we find it all, we might be able to go home. You said you've been out to the ruins? Could you help us find more of these?"

"That might be a problem," Clyde said. "I haven't been out there for a while. There are people in the ruins."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Finder's Keepers

The ground rumbled as we rode on Clyde's back through the dirt. He swam through it like a person (or a giant lizard) would swim through water. The grinding noise wasn't loud, but it made enough racket that we had to talk a little louder. Virgil looked unsure, and Una looked as if she would fall or attack at any minute, not comfortable on the back of the giant monster.

"I will not be held," Una proclaimed, even though none of us had offered. I would be lying if I said I didn't think about it though-- my instincts toward something like a furry animal told me to hold her so she wouldn't fall. But she thought, breathed, and felt pride like any of us.

We had spent most of the day before trying to convince Clyde just to go out there. He refused and refused again, afraid of what might lay out there. He barely ever ventured out to listen to the Waya stories through the walls anymore, afraid that any slip-up, any accident might cause them to venture out, deeper into the mesas, and try to hurt him. With the ruins, he seemed more afraid that he would scare someone away. I had stayed

up with him that night, in his room, going over his favorite books. He asked me all sorts of questions about my world, what the ocean smelled like, how it felt to fly. He seemed especially interested in that.

"I can't fly," he said when I asked. "But I've always wanted to. All the dragons in the books I read can fly."

We kept talking for hours, and by the time the stars started to fade out of the sky in the early morning, he felt like an old friend. We played chess on an old, taped together cardboard chess board with some pieces missing, replaced by small rocks, coins and checkers, and talked each other's respective worlds, both totally fascinated. He couldn't remember where he came from, just that he had always lived in the mesas by himself. He couldn't even remember his name. He had named himself after a favorite dime novel series called "The Adventures of Clyde Stewart in Indian Territory." I had never heard of it, so he handed me a few to keep. I put them in a bag that he had taken out of his collection for me, earlier having given Virgil and Henry bags to replace our worn-out blankets. Clyde gave me a worn, green canvas messenger bag with the National Geographic symbol on the side. The embroidery frayed and came loose at the top right corner, and a big dark stain covered the corner of the front flap.

I put the books Clyde gave me in the bottom, and stored my bits of the typewriter there, hearing an echo of their song. We both eventually got too tired, and Clyde blew out the little lantern he had with a snort, and curled up with his large, well used teddy bear. Even then, it seemed to be tiny compared to him. I finally gathered up the courage to ask him why he didn't go to the ruins.

"Are you awake?" I asked.

"Yep."

"Why don't you go out to the ruins anymore? How do you know what's out there?"

"I'm scared. Ever since I started hearing voices out near the ruins, I've been too afraid to venture out too far," he had said. "I've never met a person before you, only read about them in books. Every time someone ventures out too far, I turn on my fire traps to try and scare them off. I can hear steps coming in the dirt."

"How come you haven't listened to the people near the ruins?" I asked.

"There's a lot of concrete underground. It's hard to hear through and I can't swim through it," he responded. "All I know is that there're people out there. I hear all the stories. I know what people think of me. I can't go out. People would be afraid of me. People would want to hurt me."

"We didn't," I said. "I wouldn't hurt you."

"I guess you're right," he said. There was a long silence. "What are a mother and a father like?"

"I don't know," I responded. "I know what my Nanny and Popeye are like though. They're great people. They've taken care of me."

I thought about how much I missed home right then, but sitting there that night talking to Clyde felt like a little bit of home, like sitting back in the Antique store again with Popeye in the wee hours of the morning, listening to and telling stories.

"What about a brother? Henry seems nice."

"He's a jerk." The image of home vanished before me.

"Oh," Clyde said quietly.

After a while, I sighed. "I just feel sometimes like I'm being replaced."

"I don't know," Clyde said. "Seems like it'd be nice to have someone else around to have adventures with. I've always wanted to go on an adventure."

"Then go with us," I said. "Come to the ruins with us, and we can see what's there."

We paused again, and I could hear him hold his breath.

"Alright," he finally said. "Now let me go to sleep."

I could feel some of the clay and dirt spraying up into my face, but Clyde's speed amazed me. As we rode along, I could see an opening out front that led to something green and huge. The horizon, even from that small opening, looked gigantic.

"Hold on!" Clyde said excitedly, and a few handholds and footholds sprouted out of his back, knobs near our hands and feet.

"Hold on to what?" Una shouted. She flattened on his back, right in front, trying desperately to wrap her front paws around something. "What are you going to do?"

Suddenly, a ring of clay shot around Una's shoulders. She struggled and yelled, and then we flattened as Clyde jumped into the air. My stomach dropped out as Clyde jumped, and I held on tight to the small knobs that Clyde had grown for handholds, and he hit the next wall. We jerked to the right as his feet partially merged with it, and slid as he jumped to the next mesa wall. He shot up the wall and we went vertical, pressing my feet onto the clay footholds. I laughed as we shot up like a rollercoaster, and finally into the air. We landed on top of the mesa with a thud, and the ride was over.

I slipped off Clyde's smooth, dusty back, and he extended his arm to help me down. I jumped off his knee onto the ground and looked over the edge of the mesa. The huge blue sky turned white as it reached the edge of the ground and seemed to go on to infinity, and a gigantic plain went in all directions from the sheer edge of the red earth, dotted with ruins and a giant lake in the misty distance. The tall grass reaching out to the distance seemed to turn into a flat, white desert, far far on the horizon. The warm wind carried through the grass as we stood up so high. It felt good to see the whole sky again. I realized how suffocating the close walls had felt, taking in a deep breath of the sweet, grass scented air. I wondered how Clyde felt.

"I've never been up this high," Clyde said, sitting up on his hind legs and breathing in. "It almost feels like flying. At least I think so."

He reached into a large messenger bag and pulled out a rusty telescope, on a tripod, handing it down to me. Virgil helped me set it up, and it squeaked as we swiveled it toward the ruins. I looked through the old lens and saw some of the ruins close up, a maze of concrete, fallen buildings, and brick walls half sunken in grass and vines. The grass at the edges of the ruins grew up through the concrete and lapped against the borders of the place in waves. Then, I saw movement. I tried to move the telescope to follow it, and it squeaked and jerked forward. I thought I had lost the moving figure for a second, but stumbled on to more. A few gray figures walked out from behind a brick wall, smoking, chatting idly, and toting what looked like guns. Fluttering above the brick wall was a tarp, tied down to the ground by small lines.

"There's soldiers," I said, looking up. "There are soldiers camped out there. Look."

Virgil leaned down to the telescope to take a look, and moved it again with a couple of squeaks.

"What soldiers? Human or Waya?" Una said.

"Toolpushers," Virgil said gravely.

A deep growl came from Una. "What are the Barons doing here? They have no right. This land is ours."

"What are you doing with it? You said your people never venture West because of the big scary dragon. No offense, Clyde." Virgil said. Meanwhile, Henry pushed his way up to the telescope, and peeked through, squeaking it this way and that.

"That makes no difference. You two-legs have no right on this side of the ocean."

"I'm not justifying what the Barons do, but those ruins belong to us. The dragons drove us out of the valley-under-the-moon, but we have always deserved to be there."

Clyde and I exchanged looks of concern, awkwardly trying to ignore the argument. This seemed neither the place nor the time, but neither of us wanted to butt in.

"You self-important ox. You think it's yours because of something that happened thousands and thousands of years ago? The Waya were here first, and the bison before even that. You drove out both."

"What? The bison were monsters. We saved you."

"Guys," Henry said, looking up from the telescope, stopping Una mid sentence before the argument could move on. "You've got to see this."

"What is it?" I asked, eager to distance us from the awkwardness. I walked up to the telescope and took a look, trying to adjust my eyes, and I saw it. More than just toolpushers milled about the ruins. People, both human and Waya, stood chained,

searching through the ruins with heavy shackles on their wrists, guarded closely by the Toolpushers with guns and swords. Suddenly, one of the Toolpushers reared back and hit one of the Waya down to the ground. He pulled his gun, then a cloud of smoke plumed and filled the lens. I jumped back from the telescope, and the gunshot sound reached us, a small pop barely audible over the wind. I felt sick to my stomach.

"Look," I said to Virgil.

"What is it?" Una said.

"Slaves," Henry said. "The Barons are using human and Waya slaves to excavate the ruins. I guess they couldn't wait for you to find them, Jonah."

"What does that mean?" Una asked, sounding confused. Henry kept his mouth clamped shut. He looked away awkwardly, I think realizing his mistake. Henry had only made a simple joke -- none of us could side with the Barons, not after all we had seen and gone through, but I hadn't told anyone about my meeting with the leader. The image of the dying Waya flashed before my eyes again.

"Jonah, what does he mean by that?" Una asked again.

"We don't have time for this," I said. "I just saw them... murder one of your people."

"What?" Clyde said, frightened and quiet. Una simply stood, mouth agape, eyes unbelieving. Virgil's eyes, which had stayed cold for much of the time we traveled with Una, changed then.

"We've got a dragon and a limited supply of magic powers. We can do something," Henry said.

...

Clyde's head popped out of the ground next to me, and he nodded, upturning a patch of tall grass. Virgil stared out at the ruins with a small pair of binoculars, and the rest of us crouched in the waving stalks of green, hoping the soldiers wouldn't spot us. Virgil suggested we watch the movements of their troops through binoculars, and wait for night to fall so we could sneak up. The night had now crept up the sky, and the moon behind us cast darkling light on the ruins. They seemed to have no lookouts, simply a few makeshift stables with oxen and a few bikes like the one Virgil had lost in the shipwreck. All evening, we had waited, and Virgil had scouted out many angles of the ruins, but eventually we all settled down in the tall grass, flattening out a patch for ourselves and waiting.

"My brother might be in there," Una said angrily, pacing through the small flattened space of grass we had made. "I still don't see why we have to wait."

"You are a tracker, Una, not a soldier," Virgil said. "But we can't take them all on alone. Our best hope is to have Clyde scare the soldiers away, while we free the slaves. I don't imagine they have more than about a squad of Toolpushers out in this ruin. But there might be more. We have to be careful."

Virgil had fallen into the role of leader quickly and started planning without stopping to think. He knew the most about their military, and he knew how the Toolpushers worked.

"I can fly in and take on some of them," Henry said, but Virgil looked over and shook his head.

"You need to use those pieces sparingly. I want you two to have enough to get home some day, too."

Clyde seemed to wade next to me, and I sat behind the group a little way, watching them plan.

"I'm scared," Clyde said, looking at me. The others continued discussing up front.

"I know, me too."

"I wish the people in the ruins weren't these 'Toolpushers.' I was hoping they'd be good."

"So was I," I said. "But I guess every adventure is difficult, right? We have to do the right thing."

"You're right," Clyde said. "Thank you."

I patted him on the head. I did believe that we needed to stop them, but I didn't know if I had the power to help. Every time I thought about going in, I thought about how much more experience everyone else had to offer. Virgil had been in the military and had a sword and a gun. Una tracked and nothing scared her. Henry, even if he didn't use the powers of the typewriter, had lived here six months longer than me, surviving with pirates. Clyde could breathe fire and swim through the ground. Our packs brimmed full of useful things for the danger ahead from Clyde's hoard-- rope, matches, a few road flares, even a knife that Clyde gave me-- but I felt useless. Then, the conversation stopped, and Henry crawled over next to us. Virgil kept looking out in the binoculars, sometimes lowering them thoughtfully and writing something down in his little notebook.

"Jonah, give me some of your typewriter bits. I don't want to run out in there," Henry said.

"You have enough. These are mine," I said defensively.

"You're not using them," he said. I felt my cheeks heat up. I held my breath, trying not to yell at him. "You don't even know how. I might need them."

"Well if you run out, find me," I said. I turned and took one of Clyde's dime novels from my bag and pretended to read it. Henry huffed and I saw him crawl back to the other two in my periphery. I scanned the same passage of writing a few times, gritting my teeth.

After a while, Virgil called out in a whisper, "Okay, I think the day watch is asleep. There are a few of them moving out to watch their slaves, but everything else seems quiet."

"What now?" I said.

"Clyde needs to go in and cause a big distraction," Virgil said.

"I don't want to hurt anybody," Clyde insisted.

"You don't have to. Just scare them, like you did us. Chase them out. Una and I will come at the same time into their barracks in the brick building to the south and try to knock out or fight the day watch, and Henry and Jonah can go break out the prisoners and keep them calm."

He said "Henry and Jonah," but I knew he meant just Henry. Henry could break the chains on his own. Any missed move, any stray gunfire could ruin everything, but Virgil's plans at least seemed to ease us.

"Virgil?" Clyde said.

"Yes, Clyde?"

"Could Jonah come with me?" Clyde asked. "I think I'd feel more fearsome if I didn't have to go in alone."

I looked at Clyde and he smiled at me. Even though he didn't know, I felt grateful that he asked Virgil. I didn't want to go in and watch Henry save the day, so maybe I could help Clyde somehow.

"All right," Virgil said. "That's fine. Just don't get burned. Let's go."

"I'll be careful," Clyde said, and with that, he dipped back down into the ground. For a second, I wondered where he went, but he rose back up again underneath me, lifting me up into the air on his back. I held onto the strap of his large bag, and we zoomed off, lumbering forward toward the ruins. As we got closer, the moon shone off of Clyde's clay skin, and I could see a soldier near the broken-down barn that we thought held the slaves leaning, smoking a cigarette.

The rumbles of Clyde's feet reached concrete, and the soldier looked startled, looking out at us only fifty feet away. He shook, and the cigarette fell from his mouth onto the ground.

"I'm scary! Roar!" Clyde said. The soldier shook, and fumbled with his gun, raising it into the air toward us.

"You're going to have to do better than that," I said urgently. "Try yelling from the stomach!"

"Like... Fear me, I am a scary dragon," he shouted in a deeper voice.

"Not quite," I said, feeling my bowels turn to liquid as a shot rang out from the man. I heard the whizz of his bullet as it missed us. Clyde ducked quickly, scared. "Just breathe some fire into the air and run at him!"

Clyde hesitated for a second, but barreled into a run toward the man, and shot hot streaks of flame into the air from his mouth. I felt his back warm up as the fire swirled around. The soldier finally screamed and dropped his gun, and ran for the barracks.

"Now rampage! Stomp!" I directed him. He ran into a clearing inside the town, where a small fire sat dying in the middle, and broken buildings and upturned concrete sprouted up everywhere. I heard fighting inside the brick building covered by the tarp, and suddenly Virgil and Una spilled out the front door, fighting a soldier each. Virgil's sword clashed against the sword of one Toolpusher, and Una's teeth dove firmly to the other's arm as he tried to shake her off. He pulled his sword and she fell off, dodging his swipes, and Virgil's sword drove into the belly of the man in front of him, dropping him where he stood.

Soldiers tumbled from the half-fallen barn that held the prisoners, and Henry came behind them, or at least so I assumed, an invisible force holding a sword that swung and poked them outward. They turned to run, but were met by Clyde.

"I am scary!" He said, and then threw another flame into the air, and another breath at their feet. They ran as fast as they could out of town, and with that, the fight ended. We cheered -- I at least felt a little useful, having helped Clyde. Clyde looked back at me and snorted happily, and Henry turned visible again.

"You go get the prisoners out here, I'm going to try to find a key on one of the Toolpushers in the barracks."

I climbed off of Clyde's back and walked quickly with Henry toward the fallen barn. Inside, the group of about fifty prisoners, human and Waya alike, were heaped on each other in chains, dirty, in rags or matted fur, clambering backward in fear as they saw

figures coming through the door. Henry found a loop of bent, rusted rebar in the concrete where the chain hung, and broke the chain with his bare hands, the metal snapping in two, almost glowing red on the ends from the friction.

"Who are you?" said a frail voice from the crowd.

"We're here to help," Virgil's voice came. I turned around to see him holding up a key. "The soldiers are gone, or tied up."

They rose slowly, some crying, some laughing, some breathing heavy sighs of relief, and we led them outside, one by one, unlocking their shackles. Then, a murmur ran through the crowd, and they saw him. A bus-sized dragon casting a huge shadow from the moon, over by the fire pit in the center of the ruined town, trying to start a fire. His crystal-encrusted feet and claws tinkled in the light, and a few people screamed, falling down or tripping over themselves. Henry came down behind them as some tried to run, flying, which made them yell louder in fear.

Una sent out a loud howl, and the crowd quickly fell silent and still.

"Straighten up, all of you. This is Clyde," she said, nodding her head toward him.

"He helped save you, and he deserves your respect."

"Hi," Clyde said. "I'm just making a fire so we can all cook."

The crowd stayed still, and one walked forward.

"Kala... You're the Kala from the Half Moon Meadow," one skinny Waya said, and Una immediately jumped forward with a growl.

"My name is Una. I saved your sorry behinds, too. You would do well to remember my name."

"I'm sorry," he said, cowering back. "I meant no offense. We are all Kala here. We have all been abandoned."

"Not anymore," she said. "What has happened here? Why are they having you dig in these ruins?"

Dozens of answers came from the crowd. Political prisoners, some Kala who had gone out to make a living for their family working as trackers for the government, storytellers who had refused to do what the government said and join the military, and even more men and families sentenced to die by the Barons told us their short, sad stories.

"We dig because they tell us to," one finally answered.

"There might be a lightwater source around here," Virgil said.

"Or chunks of the typewriter," I added. "Just like the ruins on the other side of the ocean."

"Lightwater," Una said, almost as a question. Her eyes widened for a moment, but she fell silent again.

"What is it?" Virgil asked. "Do you know of a source nearby?"

"No. Not since Summer Island," she said, looking away.

"There are more of us," a disheveled old man in the crowd said. "We work all throughout this valley. They sort us into different sets of ruins when we get here, and make us work with shovels and pickaxes all day. Those who speak out for more food or water have to dig with their hands."

"Can you take us to them?" Una said. "Will you fight for yourselves?"

"Yes," said the old man. And then another. A Waya barked, and walked forward to stand with the men. Eventually, all of them stood together, ready.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Brotherly Love

I climbed up from Clyde's back onto a small but sturdy old building on the edge of another ruined town, lying flat on the dusty surface, peering through binoculars. The town looked bigger than the others, lined with cinderblock buildings and upturned windmills, the streets as near intact as we had seen. It was unnerving seeing these places. I knew I recognized them from real life, but I tried to ignore the nagging feeling in my stomach that told me I might not be able to go back, that perhaps I had never left Oklahoma. The early grayish blue light of the sun began to peer over the eastern horizon over the mesas. I saw Virgil walk in with a few other people wearing gray uniforms, walking up to a patch of ground surrounded by a grass-infested cinderblock foundation where many prisoners laid, chained up just as before, guarded by more people this time. I directed my attention at a tall brick building on the corner of a cracked street where I saw through broken windows lots of men sleeping. The actions became rote. Exhaustion gripped my arms and legs in a persistent ache after fighting through many other ruins in the valley, making quick plans and taking out the guards before they knew what hit them.

Things seemed different this time. Fortifications and rebuilt structures circled the perimeter of the old town. The brick building that held the bulk of the soldiers had multiple floors and a lookout post at the top. Henry had the idea of dressing up as soldiers and surprising them, so they wouldn't see us coming. They must have seen the flames from the other ruins, because many men patrolled the streets and even the outskirts, and four men each stood atop the lookout posts.

Every new ruin posed a few more challenges, and with each one, I did less and less. Clyde became more confident as we went along and needed less of my help. Henry did more and more acrobatic heroics and used up all his pieces of the typewriter playing the hero. He needed a few more pieces for this one, so I had slapped them into his hand from my bag and stormed off. I felt like a side character in my own story. I now only held a few tines and the old "A" key that had been haunting my dreams since I arrived. So instead, I sat on top of that roof, and kept a lookout. I pulled a road flare out of my bag to signal everyone when to start, but that was the extent of my duties. Virgil tried to convince me of the danger, that the men could see me, and I knew they could. What I really wanted was to do something useful, to help. Virgil refused to give either of us a gun or a sword because we had no training, but Henry didn't need those anyway. I was tired of feeling trapped. I could no longer hear the songs of the typewriter pieces in my bag. No whispers, no noise.

When I saw Henry fly up behind the large barracks building and disappear, I got up from my stomach and knelt, pulled the cap off the top of the road flare, and struck it on the top. It wouldn't light, it wouldn't light. I struck it again, but again it wouldn't light. The road flare's 1972 expiration date stared back at me. I took the flare and ripped open

the paper on top with the knife Clyde gave to me, and lit a match. I dropped the match on the flare, and for a second, nothing happened. Then, suddenly, it blazed to life. The bright flame almost burned my face, and I stumbled back clumsily to the edge, falling over the edge. For a moment I felt weightless. Then, hands as hard as rock cradled my back, and Clyde let me down on to the ground easy. I felt humiliated as Clyde walked away toward the corner of the building. Without Clyde, I would have messed everything up. I could hear the flare hissing in the night, and the commotion had started, and I imagined Henry wreaking havoc inside the barracks. Without another word, Clyde rounded the corner, and I heard gunfire ring out in the night. I peeked around the corner of the shack I just fell off to watch, as the men started filing quickly out of the barracks. Gunshots cracked through the night, but the men stopped dead in their tracks as soon as they saw Clyde shooting flames up into the air, glinting and dancing on the everything around. Suddenly, the men in uniform everywhere took off their flat hats and pointed their guns or swords at the men next to them. All the able bodied men in the ranks of the prisoners stood and surrounded the the soldiers.

Henry toppled the guard tower, catching the four men, and lowering them down unceremoniously and quickly. It looked like he had nearly run out of energy, dropping a few ordinary typewriter pieces back into his bag, and stumbling across the ground. In an instant, the battle ended, and I wasn't fast enough or brave enough to do anything of value.

I helped tie up the soldiers and free the new group of prisoners, the biggest we had since the beginning. We had Clyde guard the soldiers, merely standing next to them and acting his particular brand of fearsome, and the prisoners finally all gathered near the

center of the city again, lighting a fire on top of a broken fountain of water. This seemed the last of them, or at least the last of the outposts that the soldiers would tell us about. The light began to color the sky a bright gold. The now freed prisoners filed in slowly, and then a loud voice came from the crowd.

"Una!"

"Lee?" Una said, and a larger Waya with the same color of matted hair and the same earnest eyes came bounding out of the crowd toward her. They cheered and laughed as they reunited, and wrestled each other to the ground, Una winning the fight.

"How did you know I was here?" Lee said, getting up. "How did you know where to find me?"

"I didn't," Una responded. "I thought you were dead."

"Nope, alive and kicking."

"Come meet my friends." Una brought Lee over to Virgil, Henry, Clyde, and me, all sitting near the fire. I laid on top of Clyde and looked up at the fading stars as they disappeared from the sky with the morning. I wanted nothing but sleep, to forget how humiliated I had felt as I lit the flare on the top of the building.

"You're working with two-legs?" he asked incredulously. "A soldier? And a... a dragon." His voice became hushed as he looked up at Clyde for the first time, truly seeing his sheer vastness.

"These are my friends. They're just trying to find a way back home."

"I never thought the dragons were real," Lee said breathlessly. "I never knew. He is... tame?"

"I can read, write, and understand, if that's what you mean," Clyde responded sharply, sounding hurt. "I'm not a pet."

"What did you just say to me?"

"He's not a mindless killer like the legends say," Una said. "I'm sorry, Clyde, my brother meant no disrespect."

"Did they help you get here?"

"Yes, of course."

"Of course," Lee said sarcastically, the argument getting louder. "I should have known. Females can't track by themselves, let alone keep from getting involved with the enemy. You always needed my help."

"I have had to provide for myself since you left on this fool's errand," Una said, voice rising. "I have had to hunt and track and scavenge on my own."

"I can't believe you would fall in with the same people who killed our parents."

"They are not the same people," Una shouted. "You will listen to me right now."

Her voice was grave, and Lee seemed to be startled, freezing and staring at her.

"These people have saved hundreds of Waya today, Waya who would be outcasts in their own homes because they needed to feed their own, because the higher class dogs wouldn't have them. They care when they do not have to. They are merely trying to get home, but they have helped anyway. You went out on your own, and for what? What have we gained from your little trip? Because I only remember years spent in the shadow of our ancestry, beaten, treated like garbage because of you."

I saw the scar on Una's cheek glisten in the light for a moment, a place where her hair wouldn't grow right on her muzzle, and I finally knew what it meant. It was the chip

she had on her shoulder, the memory she carried and the vision she had of her own people.

"After we finish searching these ruins for people and for the things that my friends are looking for, we are going back, and the tribe is either going to accept us, or not. But as much as I want you home, I will not let my brother give me or my friends any more abuse. Do you understand me?"

Lee sat down abruptly and seemed shocked his little sister's strength. I thought he must have been gone for a long time.

"Yes, Una," Lee said. "I'm sorry. It's just... you've grown from the little girl I knew when I left."

"You're damn right," Una said, laughing and nuzzling him. "Now let me introduce you to my friends."

...

All of us slept in the barracks most of the rest of that day, taking shifts to watch the outside of town and to make sure the soldiers stayed tied up and locked up. The free prisoners scavenged for food and game, and anyone who wanted to leave had that right, although I saw no one take us up on that offer. In that town, no one wanted for food, water, and protection, and it felt as safe a place as any to stay. That night, Clyde lit a huge campfire in the fountain again, and everyone sat around telling stories once more. We didn't know whether we had seen the last of the ruins, but we all needed a rest and some food, so it seemed a good time to stop and regroup, to decide what would happen next. Hundreds of freed prisoners packed the town, some sitting around the fire, some of them looking out of windows from buildings surrounding the square. Finally, the stories came

around to Una and Lee, who decided they would tell their favorite story, the tale of the Stormbison.

Una began. "Before the dragons came, no offense Clyde," Una began, to which Clyde replied 'none taken.' "There were the Stormbison, the creators of weather in this world, as the Waya are the creators of laughter."

"Not that anyone'd be able to tell that from you," Lee said under his breath. Una nipped at him, but continued her story. I saw Virgil's eyes soften a little, and he listened hard to the story and even had a little bit of a smirk on his face. Henry sat contentedly, counting the pieces of the typewriter he had left. I strained to listen, but I couldn't hear them from there, at least not over the fire and the storytelling. I don't know what I expected-- I couldn't hear my own anymore, not since he took most of them from me. I felt anger bubble up inside as I looked at him.

"The bison roamed free in the Valley-under-the-moon, as we first lived in the Half-Moon Mesas. We hunted the bison for food, rounding them up to the mesas and trapping them in the caves. For many years, the bison gave us food, leather, and armor against any attacker. But when the first men came to the valley, they hunted the bison until they were dead, or ran away. When we came to the Valley-under-the-moon again, they were all gone, nothing left but blood and bones. This is what caused the first war."

"My sister, of course, misses some of the best parts of the story, as usual," said Lee, starting into his own narrative, throwing out the traditional insults. "The Stormbison, see, weren't the creators of weather. They came in on a storm cloud and left upon one. It was hard enough for our people to hunt the Stormbison, and for the humans to have killed them completely, I have my doubts. No, the Stormbison ran and tramped and created the

valley itself, and when the two-legs went to the valley, they had a war before the Waya were ever the wiser. Every time you see a storm, every time a bolt of lightning hits the ground, every time the rain comes. They punish the evil with tornadoes, and they reward the good with healthy crops and water for the wheat. The Stormbison never wanted war. They left on a storm cloud and still tramp and stamp and snort in the clouds today, because they got sick of all the fighting here."

A howl sounded from some of the Waya in the crowd, and I knew I started to hear some fighting, some arguments, some grumbling among them. The Waya seemed to sit mostly on one side, but a few humans intermingled with them all, perhaps having become friends before we arrived. It didn't seem as if all of them got along, however. The stories of the two Waya seemed to incite the arguments, like kids arguing over their favorite superheroes. Nobody liked to hear their heroes torn down in front of them. They identified with the old stories, and to hear a different version verged on blasphemy to them. Virgil before hadn't seemed to like the stories about the wars with the dragons. That night, however, he seemed different. As the stories echoed in my head, I again remembered the bison. I remembered the one time I did something with the typewriter, to control something in my life, and it was only to destroy. None of them knew the truth, that as much as I wanted to deny it, I killed them. I stewed as the stories went on.

"We need a third story," Lee said, calling to Virgil for the first time. "My sister tells me you used to be a storyteller. I'd like to see what the two-legs have got!"

Virgil seemed to think for a moment, and then stood. "I can't back down from a challenge to my profession, now can I?"

"Very good," Una said. "You can't have a good Waya story without at least three storytellers."

Virgil sat next to the two, and pulled out his notebook, flipping through a few of the pages. Lee seemed to try to look over his shoulder, but he leaned too, and then closed the book. Una gave Lee an admonishing bite.

"Back when the bison left-"

"You can't do it like that," Lee said.

Virgil looked angry for a moment. "Like what?"

"You have to insult my story first."

"What?"

"You have to tell me it's not quite right, or make a joke about it. Then, you tell the end of the story. That's how the Waya do it."

"Well," Virgil said. I thought he was about to get angry, but he merely smiled, adjusted his glasses, and said "Okay then. Uh... you forgot the best part of the story."

Everyone seemed to wait intently as Virgil began, hoping for a version of the story that they liked better. He started talking again. "Now this may be because you don't have boats," Virgil started. A voice cried out that they didn't need them, but Virgil pressed on. "But there's something you all missed. When the bison left, for whatever reason they did leave, they left their mark. The bison were huge, two-hundred-foot tall monsters who could trample a mountain. When they left, they whirled up the biggest storm there ever was. When they crossed the wheat on their way out, they rumbled up a storm so bad, that some say it still roams the oceans to this day, burying ships down in the wheatwater. A monster tornado to end all tornadoes. Only a few have ever seen it and

escaped alive, and me and my friends Henry and Jonah are a few of them. A stampede worse than any I've ever seen, a wheat vortex, a lightning tornado that would have ripped the hair off a flea's back put us into the side of a cliff. The rain came down not in droplets, but in solid sheets as thick as steel. But we made it. It's the bison showing us the right way to go, I think, because a storm can kill a man or guide a man, but it's never by accident."

Things went silent again for a while, and people had stopped arguing. The Waya in the crowd seemed speechless at a man taking part in telling a Waya storytelling cycle, and the humans seemed to take pride in it. I, however, felt the guilt of those bison bearing down on me more than ever.

As the crowd thinned out and everyone started to go back to their places and to bed, Henry walked up beside me.

"It's my watch. Can I have one more piece of the typewriter? I promise you can have some more whenever we find some in the ruins," Henry said. Just the words made me boil. "I need them in case anything happens."

"You want them? Take them," I said, pulling the last few tines I had, leaving the A key inside. I threw them at his chest, and they tinkled to the ground. I started walking back to the barracks on my own, but he followed.

"What is your problem?" Henry said. "What did I do to you?"

"Do you want to go home, Henry? There's half a typewriter left in the city, and we haven't even found the biggest chunk yet. You're using all of them up."

"I need them. If you could use them, then you could keep them," Henry responded angrily. "They're just as much mine as yours. I found the typewriter too. I can hear it."

"Well I can't. I can't hear them anymore," I said. And then something dawned on me. "You've been giving me pieces that you've already used, haven't you?"

"What? What are you talking about?" Henry said. I knew he must have been lying. It all made sense. He wanted all of it for himself. He never really wanted to leave.

"You just want to play the hero," I said angrily. "But I'm sick of it. I'm sick of you taking things from me."

"You're nuts," Henry said, walking away. "I'm going to go do something productive."

Henry stormed off and left me standing there with a few people staring at me. I suddenly realized, hearing a shifting noise behind me, that Clyde had been standing there. I turned around, and there he stood, sitting awkwardly wringing his bag in his crystal hands.

"How much did you hear?" I asked.

"Are you okay, Jonah?" Clyde said. "You sounded so angry."

"I'm fine," I said, wiping my face nervously, trying to breathe steadier.

"You don't sound fine," Clyde said. "You sound scared and angry."

I didn't want to talk, but Clyde plopped down on the ground near the fire anyway. He let out a little smoky snort at the passers by, who quickly ran down alleys and filtered into buildings. The square sat empty and dark, and the last embers of the fire crackled.

"What is home like?" Clyde said.

I paused. "It's home, what do you want me to say?" To tell the truth, I was starting to forget. As he asked me, I tried to bring the image up in my head, but it wouldn't come. I couldn't really remember any of it.

"I don't know, describe it to me. What's it like in your most favorite place in the world?"

"Like you'd even understand what it was like. You've never been outside your little caves and your horde," I said snappily.

Clyde's eyes got sad, and I knew I had stung him. I felt immediately guilty, but I didn't know what words to say that would make it better.

"I'm sorry," I managed, but it didn't seem to help. Clyde looked away, and got up.

"I wish I had a brother to argue with," Clyde said, and walked away. I stayed out by the fire that night and fell asleep thinking about what I had said to him. I dreamt long about the bison, about storms on my face. They haunted my dreams again, washing me toward the morning.

I awoke with the feeling rough rope around my legs and arms, and sharp claws in my back.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Marching Orders

I heard a yelling noise, almost a crying roar, coming from somewhere. My vision blurred with sleep, and as I stretched my neck, I could tell the day had only just started to come over the horizon. Something pushed my head back down to the ground and laughed, my face touching concrete and dew on the grass that grew up between the cracks. The cry came from Clyde, I knew it, but I couldn't see him. I remembered, as I woke, the things I had said to him the night before. Guilt roiled in my gut as I tried to get my bearings. I felt these claws once before, when the Waya had taken us to their city. But this time, I could feel them drawing blood. Had some of the Waya prisoners turned on us? No, I thought, why would they? As my eyes adjusted to the pale light of early morning, I could see the remains of last night's fire ablaze again, the Waya throwing the weapons we had collected on it. Guns, swords, anything they could find. Past that, large Waya, almost like wolves rather than Coyotes, emptied the barracks. The wolfish captors led the tied up prisoners single file, threatened by growls, down the streets and outside the city. The claws left my back, and a gruff voice ordered me to get up. The wolves

walked out in front of me, and another walked behind. I wiped my nose with my bound hands.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"No questions, two-legs," the voice said with a growl. As we walked outside the city, the cries became louder and louder. Clyde. I could hear them torturing Clyde. I could feel my guilt spilling over, turning into anger and confusion.

Then, we came out of a street to a huge pallet of concrete, thick and cracked, but with barely any grass. Clyde struggled against his chains, keeping him down against the hard concrete ground, crying out for help. Chains crossed his back and held down his arms, and he struggled against the chains, spitting out fire every few seconds in protest as a few Waya tormented him. All of the people we freed stood there, now in chains again as prisoners. The Waya had Henry tied up too, along with Virgil, in their own separate group. The Waya behind jumped into my back, pushing me forward to Virgil and Henry. Two of the wolves stood around, guarding us with bared teeth, and what seemed like thirty others surrounded the prisoners we had freed in a circle, snapping at whoever made even the slightest move. The tall grass beckoned from the east, and I could see the mesas, foggy in the distance from here. I wished Clyde could at least get to the dirt, to disappear.

"What's going on?" I asked. "Where is Una?"

Henry pointed toward an alleyway that opened out to the concrete pad, and I saw Una, dragged out by the neck on a rope. She fought as two other Waya bit at her and sometimes slammed into her, laughing as they did, calling out "Kala." They threw her out to the middle of everything, near us, but too far away to reach. I looked at her and almost

took a step forward, but the two in front of us growled louder and took another step in. I glared at them.

"Where is it?" they yelled at Una loudly. "Where did you put the totem?"

"Leave her alone!" I yelled. The guarding Waya growled again, but I didn't care.

The largest of the wolfish ones turned to me from Una, and glared. "You wish to throw your lot in with this one?"

"Just tell us what you're looking for. But you leave her and Clyde alone."

"Looks like we've got a brave one," he said. "That or stupid."

Fear shot through my arms and into my shaking fingers, but I couldn't let them do this to my friends anymore. With our hands tied, none of us had powers, none of us could use magic to save ourselves. The fear and reality of the normal gripped us all. But I had to do something. The Waya parted and let me walk forward. I took a few shaky steps that grew in determination as I walked.

"What do you want from us?" I asked, trying to keep my voice from wavering.

"One of you left with a totem of ours," he growled. "Did you think we wouldn't notice?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said.

"Oh, don't worry, the dirty Kala here has already confessed," he said. "She said it was she who stole it, but now she doesn't know where it is."

Something clicked.

"The piece of the typewriter," I said.

"So you do know something about it," the largest, fearsome Waya said with a sort of grin.

"And you haven't found it yet?" I said. "Some trackers you are." I looked at Una, who had something of a sparkle in her eyes, and a smile despite the blood staining her coat.

"You would do well to show some respect, you two-leg scum," he said. "Now where is the totem?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Fine," he said, and motioned to the other Waya standing over Una. They began hitting her again, scratching her.

"Stop it!" I yelled, and ran for them.

She cried out, and before my mind knew it, I ran for them. I slammed into the the crowd of teeth and claws head on. I rolled on the ground, punching again and again, and then I felt a sharp pain in my arm as teeth dove into flesh. I screamed, the pain in my arm intense. Then, everything paused as a huge snapping noise echoed all around us. The sound of breaking metal and earth, and everything around me stopped. The teeth came out of my arm, and I felt hot blood run out of my arm, soaking my shirt with the warmth. As I looked up, Clyde had risen from the ground, snapping some of the chains around his neck. His right arm cracked and broke off as he got up, and the chains chipped chunks off of his skin as he struggled to get up, roaring and shooting fire into the air. Half broken, he stomped toward the Waya and shot fire at the ground.

Everyone started screaming, some of the milita running, some holding their ground and trying to fight. With great sweeps of his broken arm, Clyde sent the Waya flying off and back onto the ground. Suddenly, Una ran past me toward Henry, and I saw her drop something into his outstretched hands from her mouth. I couldn't see it, but I

knew. The "B" key. Quickly, Henry's ropes snapped and he flew up into the air, zooming toward the Waya and gathering them up by the tail. Una worked on the ropes tying Virgil and Henry, and they ran toward the crowd, untying more of the prisoner's hands, freeing them again. I looked back to Clyde. He tried to walk forward, but with tired eyes and pieces of himself dropping to the ground in clouds of dust, he collapsed. I ran to him.

"Are you okay?" I asked dumbly, on the verge of tears.

"I'm okay," he said quietly. "Is your arm okay?"

"It's fine," I said.

Then, a howl rang out from behind me. I looked around, and the prisoners, now free, surrounded the forty or so Waya who had come to attack us. Una stepped out as the crowd bunched in, humans and Waya both giving dark looks to the wolves. Una looked fiercer and more dangerous than any of the soldiers who had come for us.

"You Kala are all scum," said one in the surrounded group. "All of you, working with the humans. You disgust me."

"It's you militia who are scum," Una said in a commanding voice. "Get out of here before we do worse to you."

"You will die for what you've done," said the largest one. "You and all of the other outcasts will--"

And then Clyde roared out one more time, lurching forward with a burst of flame. The militia Waya ran as fast as they could, stumbling over one another as they raced out of the city and back toward the mesas into the tall grass, where they disappeared. I heard Clyde breathe heavily, and then he collapsed onto the ground again, head hitting the hard concrete. He lay on his side, his chipped and broken body heaving with breath.

"Clyde? Clyde are you okay?" I said rushing to him and kneeling near his head.

"I don't think so, Jonah," he said.

Henry and the others came over, and a crowd gathered around Clyde.

"We just need to get you to the dirt, that's all," I said hysterically. "Then you'll be fine."

"I don't think I can walk that far," he said quietly. "Just stay here with me, please?"

"Don't do this," I said. "The adventure isn't over yet. You can't do this."

"I wish I had my teddy bear," he said. And then his eyes closed, and he became still. I could feel hot tears running down my face, and I didn't know what to do. I had to try something.

"Henry, give it to me," I said thickly. "Give me a piece."

He pulled a small gear, a few buttons, and some metal tines from his secret pocket, and held them out to me without hesitation. I grabbed them, closed my eyes and focused hard. I didn't want anything else, not to go home or to have the whole typewriter, just not to have my friend gone. I thought hard, putting my hands on his side and holding the handful of metal in between, against my palm.

"Please work," I said. "Please."

Dead, horrible silence.

And then a whisper.

Suddenly, as if it never left, the chorus of the typewriter came flooding back to me in a rush, almost deafeningly. Clyde's arms and other clay pieces of his body began to tumble across the ground toward him and reattach, and fire began to glow in holes near

his stomach before the blue crystals merged to cover up the weak spots. It felt like singing along to a song and knowing all the words, or reading over a page and having the absolute, undeniable feeling you've walked there before. I closed my eyes, and remembered home. I remembered all the things I had left again, remembered being eight years old and not alone, but surrounded by people who cared about me. I opened my eyes.

A sharp intake of breath, and Clyde's eyes snapped back open. He looked at me in surprise, and raised up his head, rolling over onto his stomach.

"I knew you'd hear it again," Clyde said warmly. The bits of metal hit the ground with a tinkling noise as I dropped them, and I hugged his rough neck and coughed, trying not to cry anymore.

Later on, Henry and I sat next to Clyde in the town center again, after everything had died down and the day had worn itself out to the evening. The freed prisoners gathered about, we ate, and the others deliberated on what to do next, but everything was clouded out by having my friend back. I felt tired, but truly happy and at home. Virgil had patched up my arm, and it still ached dully, but not near as much as they had.

"Why did this happen?" Virgil said. "Why did they think you stole that piece?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "This was all my fault. When I heard what you were looking for, I knew it was like the piece I had from my parents. Like the one in the house of Yotl."

"You stole it," Virgil said, actually smiling.

"One of them. The other one was my parent's. But I had snuck into Yotl's cave many times before to steal food and things. He had never noticed. I guess I thought he wouldn't notice some silly piece of metal he had lying around."

Now with her bag back on, and bandages under that, she nosed in her bag again and pulled out a metal tine from what looked like a secret pocket inside.

"How did you-"

"The Militia is not very thorough," Una said. She laid the tine down on the ground.

"It was never much important to our parents," Lee said. "Just a keepsake."

"I'm sorry I brought this on us," Una said. "I didn't quite trust you at first. I kept the other piece a secret because I thought I might be able to bargain with it if you turned on me."

"No offense taken," Virgil said.

"You said this was a fool's errand," Lee said. "But perhaps you were wrong about that. This place is fortified."

"So?" Una said.

"Well, from what we know, all of these places had been turned into old military bases, right?" Virgil piped in.

"That's right," Lee said.

"Well I've been wondering why they're here. I imagine they're looking for pieces of the typewriter, but everyone knows the ruins were mostly emptied by the dragons a long time ago. There's a reason we don't come back here. Plenty of pirates have been out this way before, even before the Barons."

"So why are they here?" Una asked.

"I think they're looking for lightwater," he said. His face became serious and grave, and his voice quieter and slower. "When I was still in the military, the Barons mounted one of their first missions across to the Summer Islands. They said there would be lightwater there, more than we had lying in the Territory. They said they wanted to trade for it, to set up good relations again between us and the Waya. Many of my friends left on that tour. None of them came back. For a long time I was fed the line that they were killed by the Waya. They said you were savages. I didn't want to believe you when you said your homes were destroyed and burned by the Barons. Many of them were storytellers who had their jobs taken from them by military service. That is how they justified going into the Mesas. That's why so many died. That's when I deserted. Believe me, I wanted to fight, but I couldn't bear to follow more men into a senseless slaughter of our own people. I was tired of them sending our men to die. I had been labeled a coward, even though they weren't even sending me in the first place. I had been quiet until then. Obedient. But now I know my choice was right. They didn't just send my people to the slaughter, but yours too."

"I don't know what to say..." Una said.

"Nothing. What's past is past," Virgil said, sitting up straight and smirking again, his whole demeanor turning back. "But that's not the point. The Barons must think the Waya have another lightwater source. They're building up these fortifications to invade."

I sat up. "Then we have to fight back," I said. "If the Barons have their way, there won't be anything left for anyone. Besides, we're almost out of typewriter. The pieces

could be anywhere, but I know most of it is in the Capitol. There has to be enough to stop them there."

"But how?" Henry asked. "That place is super well-guarded."

"Not to mention, we're not exactly an army," Virgil added. "Even if the goal were just to get you to the room where they keep it, we wouldn't have enough to get past the front gates."

"We will recruit the Waya in the valley," Una said.

"What?" Virgil said.

"They're not exactly our best friends," I added. "You saw what they did."

"Those are the personal army of Yotl and the other leaders. They call themselves a militia, but they are no such thing. They don't represent the people."

"Then who will listen?" Henry asked. "They hate us. They hate Clyde."

"They will listen to all the people who have been enslaved by the Barons," Una said. "I used to think like them, even as I was oppressed by them. But my mind has been changed, why not theirs? The Summer Island tribe at least will listen. We looked out for each other in some small ways. We shared food, shelter, and heat when we could, at least before Lee left. The people are just afraid. I will make them listen."

Una spoke with such passion. She sounded confident even when all of us had our doubts.

"I believe you," I said. "We will all make them listen."

The crowd cheered, and we rested for the next day's journey.

...

The heat burned as intensely as ever that day, and the grass made it hard to walk, but all of us walked together. Not a single prisoner stayed behind in the ruins, all following us despite what had happened. They showed some sort of camaraderie, and although some groups of humans stayed together, it was not uncommon to see groups of Waya and humans marching together, talking, laughing, and telling stories. Something changed between Henry and me. Most of the day I stayed with Clyde, while Virgil, Una and Lee commiserated and argued on strategy and rations. We had gathered food and supplies from the stores at the base, and left much for the soldiers behind. Some told us they wanted to join us, repentant of what they had done, or simply praying we wouldn't leave them for dead, and others remained in the ruins. We didn't fear that they would come for us-- we burned the guns and ammo we couldn't carry, and we far outnumbered them.

Henry and I walked together for some time, finally talking, discussing our favorite movies (he seemed to like movies better than books), our favorite video games (he liked SEGA and I preferred Nintendo), our heroes. I felt like a regular kid again. That evening, we camped outside the mesas, and I helped Henry break a few large branches off of some trees, which we whittled into something like baseball bats. He produced a baseball that Clyde had given him, and he showed everyone in the camp who wanted to, including me, how to play baseball. I barely ever got close to hitting the ball, but the times I did get it felt good. I thought maybe I liked it, as we played in the diminishing late evening sun. People laughed as Henry explained the rules to Clyde so he could play too. Clyde played all the outfield positions for his team, popping in and out of the ground to catch the ball whenever someone hit a fly ball, appearing out of the ground anywhere in almost an

instant. He made a good batter too. Sometimes had to swim out to retrieve his own fly balls after whacking them out at least a mile with his huge tail, constantly apologizing for the home runs he hit.

As the night fell and Clyde lit a burning fire, Henry and I sat together underneath the bright stars next to one of the tall, red walled mesas lining the edge of the plains.

"Those stars don't look quite like the ones at home," Henry said.

"Maybe because they're brighter? There's no streetlights in this world. 'Least not out here."

"Maybe," Henry said. He paused for a bit. "It's crazy how much stuff there is out here. So many things from our world."

"The Barons have pretty well picked things dry, I think. Then there's what Clyde has."

"That's not the half of it. There's more ruins here than what people know what to do with," Henry said. "When I ran with those pirates, we'd always come across some buried city or some old junk they thought might be worth something."

"You mean the kind of things I would collect?" I said. "It's not junk, you know."

"Sure it is. Most of it is, at least. I mean did you see how many plates and cups Clyde had lying around?" he said. "That's half the fun though, searching for good stuff."

"It's not junk to somebody," I said. "Every piece of it has a story. Every antique in Popeye's store has been through someone's house or hands, meant something to somebody."

"I never thought about that," Henry said quietly. After a while, he said "You ever wonder why there's so much stuff from where we're from?"

"I guess it's just a bunch of random stuff," I said, not quite believing my own answer. "I collect antiques, so maybe it's just part of how I think. It's hard to think of it this way, but this whole place is from our minds. Everything here had to be in there somewhere."

"What if it's not?"

I had felt this question burn in my mind since I came here. He had been thinking the same thing. "What if it's..."

"Real? What if we messed things up really bad with the typewriter and it created something new?"

"I don't know," I said. I really didn't.

"What if this is all there is?" He didn't sound scared about that question, about whether or not we had replaced our own world with this one, as if pasting it on top. I couldn't bear the thought, but he seemed to be musing on something as given as why grass was green.

"You do want to go home, don't you?"

"I don't know," Henry said. "Here at least nobody can force me to leave." We went to sleep without another word.

The next morning, we woke early and marched into the mesas. My feet hurt at the end of each day, and after two, everyone seemed slower for the effort. We soon neared the borders of Half-Moon meadow. Una, Virgil, Henry and I all walked alone toward the border and into Half-Moon meadow. We thought bringing in Clyde might not go over well at first, and the others might be perceived as an army ready to attack. We wanted first to talk with them. They never watched too far in the northern walls, thanks to the

legends of the dragons. We walked out into the meadow together, and some of the Waya came out of their houses as they saw us. They started to gather on the ground, watching tentatively. Almost immediately, the militia had us surrounded again. I stood still and straight, copying Virigl's posture and confidence.

"You're still alive, I see," Yotl said, walking with the other two tribe leaders through the line of militia with a little chuckle. "My militia doesn't seem to have the effect it once did."

We stopped, and Una walked forward. "You sent them to kill me and my friends, did you?"

"Yes, for stealing what is mine, I sent them to bring you back to answer for your crime."

"Then I will answer for that, if I must," Una said, pulling it out of her bag and laying it on the ground in front of her. "I did not come here to argue over trinkets."

"Oh, well then, that was easy. Perhaps you're smarter than you look. You will still be banished, of course, Kala."

"Fine. But you need to hear what I have to say."

The biggest of the militia wolves, the one cruelest to Una, barked in protest. "You can't let her fill this place with her lies. We told you what happened. She was helping two-legs. And the dragon! It was real! It nearly killed us and she did nothing!"

"We sent her to help these two-legs," Yotl said. "And a dragon. I can't believe you expect me to believe that. Speak, Kala."

Una stepped forward, and the Militia growled and closed in, but Yotl quickly said "oh ease off, will you? They were no threat before and are no threat now."

"My name is Una of the Summer Island Waya. I have been called Kala by many of you, but that ends today. There is a threat on our home."

Whispers flew out of the crowd like wildfire, but it died down, and Una continued undaunted.

"We have been out to the north, past the borders of the Half-Moon mesas and into the ruins of the Valley-under-the-moon. The Barons have landed on other shores and made their way into the ruins."

Gasps came from the crowd, and Yotl's eyes widened. He regained his swagger quickly, hiding what looked like a shade of guilt on his face. "What? You expect us to believe these wild stories from a Kala?"

"There is no way such a force could get past the eyes of Sky Mesa," said the tall Waya from the night we had left, stepping out from the crowd. "She is obviously lying. Stop this now, Yotl."

"It's much worse than that," Virgil said, interrupting him. "You will let her finish."

"Many of you have called those who leave outcasts, or Kala. You have written off people who have disappeared into the night as traitors who have gone to work for the Barons. I have seen many of you, however, grieve these lost ones. Not all of you are so quick to judge those who are gone from our borders. We found that the Barons have enslaved them, and many two-legs, to search the ruins for something. Some energy source that they use across the sea. Your brothers and sisters did not betray you. They, and humans alike, have been forced to work in chains under the Barons."

"You cannot be serious," Yotl said. "This is outrageous. Our borders are secure."

"Not as secure as you think," I said.

"Clyde, everyone! It's time!" Henry shouted. Clyde slowly rose from the ground next to us, forming himself, and waving a little. Then, from the northern borders of the meadows, hundreds of free humans and Waya began to walk forth, flooding the ground. Many Waya from the crowd ran forward to meet some of them, crying, hugging, reuniting with those they had lost. The grounds of the meadows sat almost full of Waya and humans, surrounding us and stretching toward ever border.

"Do you believe now, old man?" Una said with a smirk.

The Waya cowered in fear at the sight of Clyde, the entire cowardly militia scattering as he appeared, running in all directions out of the crowd.

"You're real," said Yotl breathlessly. "The ground-swimmers are real."

"Yes," Clyde said. "My name is Clyde."

Clyde waved and Yotl stepped back, eyes wide. Everything was silent for a moment, and then he laughed.

"I don't believe it! The stories weren't as true as we thought, eh?" he said. No one else laughed, neither his two remaining compatriots nor the crowd. "I send the Kala out on a wild goose chase to find the dragon's horde, and she comes back with him as an ally. Simply incredible."

"You will call me Una. I, and no one else here, will be called Kala ever again," Una said strongly.

"I'm afraid I misjudged you... Una," Yotl responded.

"How can this be?" said the Sky Island Waya. "A dragon? Two-legs? She has disgraced us. How is it the Barons went past our eyes?"

"How indeed," said Yotl angrily. "You've disgraced yourself. We've all disgraced ourselves. It was our great joke to send these few out to find a dragon that wasn't supposed to exist. You know as well as I do, though, stories often tell themselves. They have brought countless of our own home from the hands of the Barons. We should be thanking them."

"Indeed," Una said.

"But why would they come for more of us?" the Sky Mesa Waya spoke up again, sheepishly.

"Do they need a reason?" spoke up the squat Summer Island Waya. "Summer Island had nothing of value. Except its people. You've done us proud, Una."

"I think I know why," Yotl said. "I've made a mistake, and it's time to remedy it. Come with me."

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Flight

Yotl led us, and everyone else in the crowd, through the meadow toward the northwest. A large opening between two mesas gaped, guarded at the bottom by a large formation of dirt and clay formed into a huge dwelling, flat on top with a fringe of green grass and vines. There were clay walls that sloped downward from the edges of the roof, ultimately merging again with the ground in a giant half-circle in front of the huge home. It stretched three stories tall and almost seemed to be part of the two mesas themselves.

"Welcome to my home," Yotl said.

"What is it you have to show us?" I asked.

"What I have to show you is behind my home. If you will follow me, please?"

Yotl began climbing the sloping walls that fenced in his home and jumped over on to the roof. He walked quickly and with confidence, as if he had traced the path there a few times.

"You can get back there, right Clyde?" I asked.

"Not a problem," he said. "You go on ahead, and I'll go for a swim."

With that, Clyde dove into the ground in a puff of dust. Una started walking up the dirt wall first, and I followed. The top of the wall had about three feet wide of foothold, enough to walk on comfortably, and flat enough that it didn't feel that we would lose footing easily, but I still put my hands down on the pathway for the steeper parts, making my way up near the roof. Una took a short hop and made it to the roof. The flattened roof, topped with shrubby grass, required a short jump or a long step. Just a few feet separated me from the next platform, but I still felt my stomach drop out when I looked down and saw earth below. I felt almost sick, but flattened myself against the side of the mesa, feeling the clay on my face. I dug my fingers and fingernails into the side of the wall. I picked up my left foot and planted it on top of the other platform, and pushed myself up with my right foot, tripping and falling into the grass of the other platform.

"Are you okay?" Una laughed.

"Yeah," I said, pushing myself up and brushing myself off. The roof went backward for longer than I had expected, but the canyon behind it seemed to stretch on forever, lined by trees and shrubs and pale green grass. I walked to the edge, a slope of dirt that led easily down, but looked loose and soft. Clyde had already come up from the dirt behind, jumping out and shaking off the dust. I slid down the dirt slope as I walked, as if walking on something slippery, but the dirt wouldn't stay still beneath my feet. Virgil and Henry followed quickly behind, and we started our walk.

"Where are you taking us?" I asked. Yotl loved his 'jokes,' sending us to nowhere or tying us up. But we held the advantage. He stood alone, and we had a dragon on our side.

"You will see," he said. "The canyon here is a maze. Just try to keep up."

We walked straight for a long time through the canyon, underneath its banded red walls. The ground was covered with patchy grass like a beard that wouldn't grow quite right. We came to a couple of forks, and Yotl always seemed to know exactly which direction to go, confidently walking forward as if he had walked down the path many times. We spent hours in silence, not sure what to say to each other as we walked. Henry and I had one part of the typewriter left each, if anything happened. I forced down my fear and trekked on.

The track curved for a while, and when it straightened out again, a huge hole opened in the side wall, a gigantic cave sloping downward and in like a mouth. Around it lay fallen rocks and earth, like a landslide, the cave only accidentally exposed. Yotl clambered over the rocks and the others followed down into the hole. I stayed behind with Clyde for a second.

"I don't know if I'll be able to fit down there," Clyde said tentatively.

"Will you be all right up here?" I asked.

"I'll be fine," he said. "Tell me how it goes."

I smiled and patted him on the leg, and then followed the others down. As we descended, the rocks became harder, and the dirt began to disappear, becoming granite. We slid our way downward, and then I could see it. Lightwater. We stood above a gigantic cave, rock pathways arcing this way and that, and through rushed a river of lightwater.

"Be careful," Yotl said. "It's deep here."

"This is what the army is looking for," Virgil said.

"Yes," Yotl said. "This is my great mistake. This is why the soliders are in the ruins. Some years ago, when I was only a warrior in the ranks of the militia, after the assault on Summer Island, when the Barons first came to this place, they thought they might find something of use, but they couldn't stand against us in our own homes. They were slaughtered, but they did enough damage to us too. When they came, they ran deep into the canyons. They tried to ambush us with their exploding weapons, and mostly succeeded. It happened right outside this cave. The explosion caused a landslide that nearly killed them all, and my soldiers with them. I, and a young man, were the only two to survive. We lunged for each other, stumbling down into the cave and discovering all of this. I had him at my mercy, but he was weaponless and injured. I knew somehow this place was important to him. His eyes were as wide as saucers when he saw how much of this 'lightwater' there was. But he pleaded with me. He said he had a family, that he just wanted to go back home, and that he had never wanted to go into the war in the first place. I took pity on him and let him go, but not back through the meadow. I thought he would die of exhaustion trying to find his way out of the canyons. Not many can. But if they are mounting an attack from the ruins, he must have come back. There is no other reason they would risk this fight again."

"It's not your fault, Yotl," Virgil said sympathetically. "The Barons are ruthless, and the Toolpushers among them are zealots. Any normal soldier might have died out here, but a Toolpusher usually believes in his cause. He believes he has the right to this place."

"I never thought they would come back. When I came back, they made me leader of the meadow. Our leader had died in the fighting before. I told them that our warriors

had been buried in the landslide, deep in the mazes, and that no one should ever go there again. We built my home in front of the Canyon, and I never told anyone. I had seen something like the water in the cave before, in some of the weapons the Barons used, dripping from some of their lanterns. Our people always assumed it was fire, but when I entered that cave, I knew I had to keep it a secret. I thought I could keep the outside world from touching us. I thought it would keep us safe. But it was arrogance."

"You couldn't have known the lightwater was so important. On our side of the ocean, it flows everywhere. There are springs of it all over the place. Here, those rivers look like they flow deeper underground. If you haven't seen them, there probably aren't many springs on this side of the wheat," Virgil explained.

"Be that as it may, I must answer for it," Yotl said. "If they will still have me, I will lead my people to help you defeat the Barons. But I will start by giving you a gift. I believe the thing you are looking for is down there."

Yotl gestured down into the pit. We all walked to the edge where we could see over. The river all seemed to come from a gigantic circular pool in the middle, gushing forth and in every direction from that one spot. On a small, half submerged rock outcropping at the bottom was the other half of the broken typewriter.

"I've got this," I said, and pulled out the last unspent piece I had. I thought hard and rubbed the small gear with my fingers, and tried to imagine myself flying. As much as I tried, though, it simply wouldn't work. I couldn't figure out why-- I could hear the song as clear as day, even above the sound of rushing water echoing off the walls. The sound echoed inside my head.

"Why won't it work?" I said.

"Are you thinking your happy thoughts?" Henry jabbed.

"This isn't Peter Pan," I snapped back. I furrowed my brow for the next few seconds, and then something just clicked. I thought back on all the times I had tried to use it, only two successful. I had made the bison disappear, and I had put Clyde back together, bringing him back to life. The other times, I remembered I had tried to embarrass the captain of the roughnecks by using telekinesis, or go home and pretend none of it had ever happened, but none them had worked. I remembered what Henry said about his abilities, that he could only affect himself, that nothing he did would change the world around him or make new things. But it worked with Clyde. I fixed him. I made him better again.

"I can do it if you're having trouble," Henry quipped.

"Wait, I've got it," I responded. This time, I closed my eyes, and touched my hand to the ground, sandwiching the piece between my palm and the rocks. I imagined the typewriter coming to me as hard as I could, and then I heard a rumbling. As I opened my eyes, I saw the typewriter had begun to rise up out of the lightwater on a pedestal of rock, rumbling as it went. The glowing light dripped down the sides of the column as it morphed and rose.

"Not bad, huh?" I said, smirking at Henry.

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We walked back over the slope and again over Yotl's roof. The smaller half of the typewriter weighed down my pack, and Henry and I had broken off a few pieces and put them in our pockets for use later, if anything happened. Henry carried a small, misshapen glass container of the lightwater that Yotl had stashed in his own pack, and we stepped to

the edge of the roof, where below the rest of the Waya seemed to be waiting for us. The crowd stretched out and covered the ground and even part of the low slopes on the bottom edges of the mesas, dotted with patches of humans here and there, all gathered around Yotl's fence.

"Waya of the meadow, of Sky Mesa and of Summer Island," Yotl called out. "I have come back from the canyons where our bretheren died fighting the first war with the Barons. But there is something I haven't told you. One two-leg did survive that battle. A weapon they had caused a landslide, and revealed a cave full of something called 'lightwater.' It is what you see glowing in the bottle that that young man has in his hands. I lied, and for that I am sorry."

Yotl paused as the crowd began to murmur and whisper, but then he continued.

"This lightwater is a valuable resource to the humans, and I am sure that the man who I let live went back across the ocean to his home. The humans must know about this place, and now they reside in the ruins, mounting a force to attack. These people, Jonah, Henry, Virgil, and Una, have all saved us from that initial attack. They stopped them before they could build up more of a force. But they will return, and we have to strike soon. I have no right to ask this for what I have done, but I ask those who would still follow me to come to battle. We will fight the Barons and stop them once and for all. Whatever small force we can take will come with us on the two-leg's ship."

The crowd murmured and muttered some more, deliberating. A few of the humans we freed in the crowd stepped forward into Yotl's yard past the fence, and so did a few Waya, but there weren't many. They seemed unsure, if not willing. Then, Una spoke.

"Come! Stand for yourselves," Una said. "I have seen what the Barons will do to us if they come, and they will come. They don't care if you are human or Waya, they simply come and take what they want. But I've also seen what these humans and this dragon can do. I've seen bravery and loyalty from Virgil and Henry and Jonah, and from Clyde. They are great allies. Whether you have been called Kala before or not, whether you are Waya or not, we are all threatened by these invaders. Now is the time to strike!"

Una sent up a howl, and then another came from Yotl, then from her brother Lee in the crowd. Then shouts from some of the humans, and more howls and shouts spread through the crowd like wildfire until the sound was almost deafening. The people stood ready, cheering, howling, prepared to fight.

"How are we going to take so many?" Yotl said. "We have no ships."

"I think I may have an idea," Clyde said.

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Clyde left for half the day, while Una, Virgil, Henry and I sat near the fire and tried to plan our strategy. Despite being willing, we had no concrete plan. I told them about my trip there, how many rooms and soldiers and hallways kept us from our goal. We decided that if, somehow, Clyde could get us close enough to the wall, then we could sneak in over it, and use the powers of the typewriter to get the rest of the way, fighting our way through. We only held so many pieces and using something too big would drain the typewriter and perhaps dash our chances of returning home. But, if we could get to the piece that lay within the Capitol, the biggest one, perhaps we could find out some way to end it. Some big gesture that would shut everything down. What that gesture was still remained for our imaginations.

Virgil told of all the ramparts that held lookouts in the city-- distracting them, Virgil said, was the key to everything else.

"That is where the Waya come in," Yotl said. "There are at least a thousand willing Waya and men here to lay siege to the Captial. If we can come in close enough, then we can bring the battle to the front of the city, or even outside it. We don't want to injure any normal folks."

"But how are we supposed to get so close?" Virgil asked. "The city is well guarded on its own, but there are military outposts stationed in every single town, even outside of some farms, all across the landscape in the Territory. Ever since the lightwater shortage, so called, they've had a stranglehold on everything."

"That's my job," came Clyde's voice with a rumble of earth. He crawled out of the ground quite suddenly, startling everyone, and dusted off a huge clay compartment on his side, breaking it open. The dirt fell to the ground, and inside it was his bag. He set it out, and delicately searched through it with his fingers, finally finding a scroll of paper. He rolled it out onto the ground in front of us, revealing his scrawls of a flying ship, much like a zeppelin.

"We fly in," he said.

"How are we supposed to make those?" Virgil said. "How do you know those will even work?"

"I've built models. It's based on a book by Jules Verne," he said. "All you need is an adequate source of fire. Which I have plenty of. Watch."

Clyde dug again in his bag and brought out a mound of clay, holding it in between his sparkling claws.

"This is what I'm made out of. It's what allows me to make the fire I do," he said. Then, he snorted a little fire from his nose, and the clay lit. "It's not quite like regular fire, mind you. It's magic."

"I'll be damned," Virgil said. The plan was set.

Over the next months, everyone went back out to the ruins and sometimes into Clyde's horde to scavenge the parts we would need to build this giant flying ship. We tore down signs and picked up bars of iron, and as we went we piled them on Clyde's back when we had enough for a load. Sometimes, Clyde himself ripped items out of the ground, and Henry used the typewriter to lift a few things himself. One day, we even stumbled onto one of the winged bikes at the outposts. Virgil wanted it badly, missing the bike we left on the first ship in the storm, but in the end we left it there to keep room for more useful things. We dug four days straight just to find a welding tool at one point. Clyde turned into a bit of a task master in that month we spent collecting metal plates, iron bars and canvas tarps and sheets. Through all the work, we still had fun, talking through every job and playing word games together to pass the time.

Henry and I talked every day about what we would do if and when we got to the typewriter. We came up with almost nothing practical or good. One day we would suggest lifting the city and setting it back down again, and another we would talk about sending a huge shockwave through everything, for what reason I didn't know. The fear of using up the typewriter's power, that maybe it would never let us go home, constantly ran through my mind. Perhaps the typewriter couldn't do something big enough to stop the barons, and send us home too. Henry only had the ability to change himself, and I only to change the world around me, but I knew we couldn't change someone's mind.

I occupied myself with whatever project I could during that month. I had taken the folded, telescoping wings from one of the ships. I had my own special designs for it. Perhaps I couldn't fly, but the bikes could, or at least they could glide. Every day I would find something strong to fortify them with, something else to make a joint where only a flat line existed previously. I had made some pieces larger, and refitted them with stronger, thicker canvas on both sides. When the day came to leave, we all stood admiring Clyde's work. The floating ships looked incredible as they stretched out on the escarpment near the ocean. They all sat near the edge of the shining golden sea, held up by giant wooden stilts. From head to toe, they reached three times the size of Clyde, or about the same size as the small ship we had come in on. Clyde had managed to salvage that ship and use it for parts.

Each one looked like a magnificent metal pirate ship with a huge canvas bag drooped over the top, and ropes draped slipshod here and there. But they still had something perfect about them.

Before we everything started, I pulled Clyde aside to talk. I had a large canvas sack full of something for him.

"I have a present for you," I said eagerly.

"Oh! A present? What sort of present? Is it a book? Or a toy? What is it?" Clyde hopped excitedly on the ground, sending loud, thumping shockwaves through it.

"It's better than all that," I said. I set the canvas sack on the ground, and opened it up. There sat the folded up wings from the bikes I had salvaged, fixed up, completely bendable, but useless to anyone else.

"You always said you wanted to fly," I said.

"But how will they work?" Clyde said, noticeably deflated. "I can't just stick any wings on my back and fly. I've tried, you know.

"But I can use the typewriter," I said, taking out a large handful of pieces from my bag.

"No, Jonah, you can't," he said. "You have to use those to get home. I can't take that from you."

"You don't have to," I said. "I'm giving them to you. Now put on the wings. "

Clyde hesitated for a moment, but then took them up in his hands ecstatically, and bound them to his torso using the leather straps I had fitted for him. It didn't fit perfectly, and the wings hung off of him in a sad sort of way, at an odd angle. But none of that mattered. I just needed them to stay on. I took all the pieces in my hands and pressed them against Clyde's side, and thought hard. The sound left. The whispers returned, and like shaking the hand of an old friend, I could feel it working perfectly. The leather straps tightened and snapped, and flew off. The wings sank into his back, and for a second he flinched, but didn't cry out. They straightened mostly, looking endearingly lopsided like the ears of a puppy. Then, they began to move, hinged directly at his back. They squeaked a little, and then Clyde spread them out with a snap of canvas.

"Oh my goodness," Clyde said in a whispering disbelief. "I think they work."

He jumped into the air and for a moment looked like he wouldn't stay there, but then with a sputtering sort of flight, moving the wings up and down, he flew.

"I think I'm getting it!" Clyde said, dropping down for a second and then pulling himself back up with a few strong flaps. "I'm flying! I'm flying!"

I smiled as I watched Clyde play in the air, and a thousand Waya from different tribes and two hundred humans gathered to board the ships. Clyde jumped up and put a bit of clay into the makeshift fire cages he had constructed. The tall cylinders sat packed with clay that Clyde gathered. At the end of the cylinder sat a welded-on cone that compressed the fire and sent it shooting into the air. They had a lever that turned the fire on and off. Henry held up the balloon using a few more precious bits of the typewriter, and Clyde lit the clay. The balloons took longer to inflate than I thought, but when they did, the ships began to float, tugging on the ropes that held them to the ground. The crowd of thousands boarded the ships just as dawn broke, we cut the lines and set sail for the ruins, scared, unsure, but unable to go back.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Stormbringers

We flew for days and encountered little resistance along the way, running into the odd ship here and there. Still, their guns wouldn't reach high enough, and the slow moving, earthbound ships we passed over missed us from either awe or fear. From the pirate ship, Clyde had loaded a single windmill each on the back to propel us forward. Without the wheat in our way, we blazed quickly across the sky, with Virgil at the helm of our ship, and a man who had once served in the Baron's navy at the helm of the other. By night, Virgil would argue over strategy with Yotl and Una and Lee, the four never quite able to agree on the same thing. Yotl thought it would be best to drop down far away and sneak up.

"But that defeats the whole purpose of flying in," Virgil shouted. "We have nothing but surprise on our side, here."

They all agreed that they probably couldn't draw the battle outside the city, as that would make no strategic sense for the army of Barons safe within the walls-- and with the Leader himself at the helm of everything, they probably wouldn't talk either. Anything

we did, the Barons could twist to start a fight. They finally agreed to get as close to the city as possible, although we knew Clyde would hate putting the ships in harm's way like that. They could fly straight in and try to land in the streets, but the cannon lined ramparts loomed in our minds.

During the day, the operators of the burners would sometimes let us get too low. Nobody quite knew how to operate these things, and so Clyde would fly by occasionally and admonish the pilot or the burner operators for dropping too low, critiquing their technique, and the amount of fuel they used at a time. We flew high most of the time, but our path was not a straight or confident one.

Finally, at dawn of the third day, the coast came into sight. The golden wheat gave way to a sloping edge of green land, and far off in the distance, we could see the ruins. We had finally made it. I stood at the edge of the ship looking out, the wind blowing in my face, and watched Clyde try new flying tricks. I saw the joy in Clyde's face as he zoomed back and forth through the air. I sat out on the deck and watched him all day sometimes.

That day, however, Henry, Una, Virgil and I were all there, waiting for him. We had flown as high as the balloons would let us, and the land below looked so tiny. The edges of the horizon just seemed to fade out at some point and turn to sky. Clyde flew up next to the ship, bringing his wings inward a little, and turned to me.

"It's time," he said tentatively. He seemed scared. I nodded at him reassuringly, trying not to show my own fear. Henry appeared next to me, wearing his jacket, zipped up against the cold night air. Virgil had lent me his second jacket, the dirty one that we

took with us on the ship, and I had rolled up the sleeves to my wrists. The green messenger bag looked more worn and used than ever as it swung by my side.

"Be brave," Una said reassuringly, rubbing her head against my arm. I kneeled and gave her a hug, and then stood to give Virgil one too. Henry did the same, although a little less awkwardly. As silly as I felt, I wasn't sure I would see her or Virgil again.

"This will make a great story," Virgil said. "You're going to be a legend, my friend."

"Sure," I said without confidence.

Clyde plopped on the ship's deck in front of us, and beckoned for us to get on. The ship dipped to the side briefly as his feet touched it, and we stumbled toward him. We climbed on his back, and I held on tight to Clyde's wings while Henry held tight to me.

Clyde put his claws on the side of the ship, and jumped. We dropped almost horizontally, and I thought for a moment we would hit the ground, feeling my insides squirm and my heart stop. Then, with a huge swoop, we flew up into the air again, all my internal organs going back to their original places. We slowed, and the ships took off in front, straight toward the ruins. We flew to the southeast, hoping that the battle would start before we ever got there, and that we could somehow sneak in to the ruins. With that, we flew forward to a battle for all or nothing, for death or glory, for home or a grave.

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When we got to the ground, we could see the ships in the distance, already flying over the city. Clyde landed in a puff of dust on a deserted patch of dirt road, surrounded

by grass, lying parallel to the mountains bordering the Territory. The mountains we never passed. I wondered how far the world's edges went, and how much we hadn't seen.

Clyde retracted his wings with a squeak and a click, and then suddenly, grew clay over them in rear facing fins.

"That will protect them in case I have to go underground again," Clyde said. "It looks fearsome, right?"

"Right," I said, smiling.

Clyde lowered himself a little, digging into the dirt, and we flew off again, gliding across the ground with ease. In the distance, the walls of the Capital Ruins loomed.

Then, the sound of thunder rumbled in the distance, and we saw the ships' balloons deflating as they descended into the city, disappearing from view behind the buildings.

"Oh no," I said.

"We have to get there faster," Henry said.

"I've got it. I can get you in, but we'll have to take out the turrets up top first," Clyde responded. He sounded confident and firm, and it gave me courage. With a huge heave, we flew again, flattened against Clyde's back as his wings broke through the clay and shot out again from his back, sending him flying into the air. The wind whipped about my face as we sped up, the wall coming ever closer. Sets of wooden and metal turrets sat all about the walls, firing inward, carelessly shooting inward on huge crowds of their own scared kinsfolk. Then they saw us. We could see them turn as we got closer, and we could hear their shouts and the creaks of their cannons as they saw us coming.

Some moved fast, but we flew much faster. A shot rang out, and a cannon ball seemed to come straight for us, but Clyde banked easily to the right and zoomed upward.

Clyde blazed through the air and flew up high near the edge of the city, then flew like a shot across the edge of the curved wall, shooting hot fire at the wooden crow's nests that held the cannons and the watchmen. The flames enveloped the bottoms of the turrets as he flew by, and we reached the last one. I slid across Clyde's back a little as he made a sharp turn, and then flew again past each turret, picking up the falling men before they could plummet to their doom, setting each one on the wall as delicately as possible,

"Sorry, sorry," Clyde said as he set each man down, and the turrets burned down and fell into the city or outside past the wall.

Then he flew to the ground, landing in a wide alleyway, deep within the city, retracting his wings. We could hear the sounds of the fighting from there. A cacophony of shouts and screams rose and streamed through the alleyways to us. I felt a huge weight in my belly that wouldn't go away. People were dying.

"This is as close as I can get you," Clyde said. "There weren't any places wide enough that weren't right in the center of the fighting. I'm sorry."

He fretted and looked around for a place to go, but there didn't seem to be one.

"It's okay Clyde," I said, hugging his neck. "We can take it from here."

"Thank you for my wings," Clyde said shakily. "Please don't die. You're my best friend."

"I won't. I promise we will find a way back," I said. I held back tears and straightened, and Henry coughed.

"We'll be fine as long as we have the typewriter on our side," Henry said. Clyde stood there, as if he couldn't move. Neither of us wanted to leave.

"Go," I said. "It'll be fine."

And with that, he nodded, and took off, sending a rush of dust and wind across the ground. I shielded my face as he took off into the sun, and flew away.

"Okay," I said, grabbing a few bits of the typewriter in my fist from the front pocket of my bag.

We ran through the maze-like alleyways of the ruins, sometimes past children running away, screaming families trying to leave the main street where the biggest fight raged. Luckily, the fight hadn't spilled yet into the darkest alleyways, still sitting dormant and empty. I tried to keep my bearings as we turned each turn, east, north, east, south, east again. We needed to reach the square and would have to spill out into the main road eventually to get to the Capitol. I hoped we wouldn't have to fight too many. Even though I had fought battles in stories before, I never faced any real danger. Nothing could kill me.

This could. The guns and bullets and shrapnel, as real and searing and violent as anything, terrified me. I could still feel the ache in my arm from the bite of the Militia soldier when I had tried to protect Una. Henry had the power of the typewriter more than I did, but I was only flesh and bone. But turning back was never an option.

The twisting pathways finally forced us out on to the main road, as the structures got higher and higher, and the slums disappeared. We were only twenty feet away from the fountain circle, but fighting, blood, heat, and death began to overtake us. Waya and

men jumped and lunged against thousands upon thousands of grey uniformed Toolpushers and grunt soldiers. Blood spattered the ground.

I took a piece of the typewriter and thought hard, and I could feel the ground around me, the concrete blocks in the ground and windows in the buildings. I felt everything happening for twenty feet in every direction. Henry punched his way through, and flew, punching soldiers off of Waya and pulling their guns off of their backs. I saw a Toolpusher raise his gun, about to shoot a Waya in the back, so I concentrated hard. The world seemed to slow down. I raised a huge chunk of concrete in front of him, and the shot ricocheted and hit him in the arm, sending him back first onto the ground. I threw earth and concrete and poles this way and that, using up piece after piece, just trying to stop the death as I fought my way forward through it all with Henry at my side.

And then, an explosion. A searing pain in my shoulder that engulfed by throat and chest in a burning, firey sensation. I fell back and felt hot blood soak through my shirt and my vest.

"Henry," I croaked. The metal bullet in me stung everywhere. I didn't know where it had hit. I saw the man standing over me, reloading his gun, and he pointed it again. Henry flew into him, hard, slamming him away, and grabbed me, picking me up.

"We can't stop now!" Henry said. The pain burned through every part of my body. Sounds didn't come through to my ears properly, wobbling along with my footsteps.

I heard Clyde's yell as we stumbled forward. Waya and free men fell right and left. Then, trumpets. Not ours. I could feel the defeat in the ground. I tried to focus my thoughts on the typewriter again. The pain in my arm wouldn't ease. Henry knocked back

people left and right but every few minutes had to stop and fumble with another piece, grasping the awkward bits in his fist.

They began to surround us, too many to count. I sent some flying with the ground, and Henry fought each one, blasting them away as hard as he could, but each time one fell, two more replaced him, bubbling into a huge, menacing crowd of gray. I felt them wrench the bag away from me as I tried to reach for the typewriter, to stop all of this for good. The mass of gray threw Henry to the ground and the pieces he held scattered everywhere. I fell, and watched as they forced Henry's jacket off, putting a boot to his back and another to his head.

Clyde flew over, and my eyes blurred with tears and sweat. I couldn't tell what was real anymore as I felt kicks into my stomach and spine from all around. A huge net flew from the air, and caught Clyde, bringing him crashing to the ground, just out of view of the horizon of gray uniforms and pain.

"It's over," came a voice.

Everything went black.

...

I woke up in a dirty, tiny cell next to Henry, with only my shirt and pants left. No shoes, only aches, bruises, and crusted, dry blood on my shoulder where the bullet had hit. The pain blazed as I tried to push myself up. Henry woke as I stirred and wiped his eyes. He had a cut above his eyebrow, and he held his arms to his jacketless body.

"Glad to see you've woken up," came a voice. The Leader walked by, the man who had sent me through all of this, the man who spared my life once. I now glared at him with hatred through my swollen eyes.

"What do you want," I said, shaking in the cold.

"Nothing," he said. "Nothing but to tell you how futile all this was. Why did you do this? Why did you put yourselves through all this pain? You could have just given me the typewriter."

"Just shut up," Henry said defiantly. His speech stumbled out awkward and stilted through his split lip.

"So defiant," said the man in the opulent uniform with gold lining. Darkness weighed down any light inside and outside the cell, but I could still see, through the dark bars, his five o'clock shadow, his greedy eyes. "Did you really think that our men wouldn't come back and tell us about the dragon? About your little magic tricks? That was Yotl's mistake, letting me live. You spent too much time with those filthy savages, I think."

He was the man Yotl had let live. I wished now he hadn't.

"The flying ships were a touch of genius, I'll give you that," he continued. "But in the end it just prolonged your suffering. Now we have most of the Waya who will rot in our jails until they die. Our deserters. The Waya are weak, and now I have exactly what I wanted from them."

"What about the lightwater?" I said.

"Peanuts compared to having the author of this world at my fingertips. I can make lightwater now. We will expand to the West, yes, but in due time. Time you've given us."

"What have you done with my friends?" I shouted. Please let Clyde be okay, I thought to myself. Clyde and Virgil and Una.

"Oh they're in no worse state than you. No better, though. I suppose I at least owe you that much information for bringing the piece to me," he said. As if sensing my thoughts, he added, "Don't worry your head, though. We won't kill them for a while. They will be here for a long time, until they are needed for labor. Execution is so... wasteful."

"What about Clyde?" I asked. "Where is Clyde?"

His demeanor completely changed. He seemed angry.

"Our people can't get near him for too long," he said haughtily. "He keeps shooting fire everywhere. He's still out in the street."

I laughed. "I hope he gives you hell."

"He will tire soon," I heard the Leader say. "And then we'll destroy him."

"You don't know my friend Clyde, then," I said. I had no confidence Clyde would last another day, but I still took some small joy that he had stayed alive out there. As he left, I fell back. Henry and I had no words, no energy left. The only thing left was to sleep.

...

For the next few days, little food and water came. Less than once per day, a guard would spill a full cup of water at the base of our cell, and we sipped up the droplets from the dirty floor just to survive. We talked little, but when we did, we remembered home, even though it hurt more than anything to talk about it.

"I thought maybe I wanted to stay here," Henry said. "But now I think I'd give anything to be away."

I laughed. "Why did you want to stay?"

"I still would if we were free," he said. "I don't want to go back just to be given away again."

"You're an idiot, then," I said.

"What do you know," he responded.

"You're an idiot. Nanny is trying to adopt you."

"They all say that before they give you up," Henry said.

"Nanny practically adopted me," I said. "My father hasn't always been the best at taking care of me. Nanny and Popeye are the ones who really raised me."

"Really?" Henry asked quietly.

"Really."

We didn't talk much after that. Every single day I struggled to wake up again. Home haunted my dreams, home trampled by the bison in retribution for all I put my friends through. Every day the pain in my arm worsened, my mouth drier, my stomach emptier. One morning that blended into every day before, I woke to the sound of boots.

"Why doesn't it work," came a voice. I opened my eyes. As they adjusted, I saw the figure of the Leader come in to view, showing more emotion than I had seen on his face in the short times I had seen him. He clenched his fists and spoke through his teeth.

"What?" I asked.

"Why doesn't it work!" He yelled. "It does nothing! My best men have put it together, and nothing we do yields lightwater. What did you do to it? What have you left out?"

"You're using it wrong," Henry piped in in a hoarse voice. "Just like Jonah did."

My heart rose a few inches. He couldn't use it the way he wanted to. It didn't work. He didn't know to use it like we did, but maybe he couldn't do that either. I felt hope, and through the pain I felt at least a little energy in my legs and arms. I pushed myself up from the ground, and stood.

"Let us see it," I said.

"Do you really think--"

"We know how to use it. We can show you how."

He looked at me hard for a moment, but almost immediately walked away. I felt my heart sink. It hadn't worked. As I walked backward into the cell to take my place on the floor again, I heard footsteps. More than before. The Leader reappeared, but this time with more soldiers surrounding him.

"Take the taller one first, and then the boy, and keep them separate."

...

We stood in the atrium, in front of the typewriter. Men with guns held us back, and I felt a rough hand squeeze into my wound. I felt it ooze and spike with pain, and I sucked in air through my teeth. The Leader stood in front of the typewriter, on the stone pedestal. It looked all together again, but horribly disfigured. It looked as if they had simply stapled it together.

"Make it work," he said gruffly. The man let me go, and pushed me forward. I looked back, and another man pushed a gun into Henry's neck. A whole host of soldiers stood there at the ready, gripping their weapons tightly.

I hesitated. "Now!" The Leader shouted.

I walked forward, feeling the grass and rocky earth beneath my feet and in between my toes. Every step hurt, and I held my shoulder as I walked forward. I felt sick and woozy as I walked, but I took a step onto the plank above the pool, and walked over to the stone pedestal. The Leader grabbed my shoulder and pulled me over.

"Show me how to use it," he said. "Show me or your brother dies."

"Fine," I said. I couldn't see a way out. I touched the typewriter, and I heard its song again, and it sounded broken and sad. I thought of my childhood, of when I touched the typewriter for the first time. This looked more like Frankenstein's monster.

But then, like the sound of an orchestra tuning up, the sounds began to mesh. I opened my eyes, and the typewriter began melding together and regrowing, fixing itself. The song grew louder and louder, like it had long ago. Pieces grew from inside, molding themselves in the right places, and the sound reached a crescendo-- and then silence.

"How did you do that?" the Leader said shakily. "What did you do?"

"I fixed it." I didn't quite know how it happened either, but there it stood, fixed.

"Fine," he responded. His normally perfect hair had come undone, falling in strange directions. He looked harried, as if he hadn't slept in days. "Now show me how."

"What do you want me to make?"

"Show me power," he said darkly, and stepped up next to me. I hesitated, but I looked back at Henry, and thought of Clyde. They would all die. I couldn't let that happen. I had to do something.

"Put your hand on the typewriter," I said, resigned. I knew he couldn't use it, but even serving him was better than letting all my friends die here. Maybe someday I would have my chance.

Then, I heard the rumble of thunder in the distance. I saw light through the windows of the atrium flash. And I remembered.

I closed my eyes hard, and thought. "Just concentrate," I said. "Try to think of a song." I heard the song ringing in symphony with ever rising thunder. I opened my eyes, and lightning flashed, striking with a deafening explosion. Part of the domed roof collapsed into the room as the explosion echoed, sparks went everywhere. I flinched, and so did the Leader, but we both held on.

"Do not toy with me, boy!" he yelled. "I will kill your brother if this is a trick!"

"It's not," I said, lying. The storm became stronger and stronger, and lightning flashed again, shooting out another part of the ceiling, the pieces flying up into a vortex in the sky. A huge tornado was brewing, behind the mountains, sucking up everything. And then the sound came-- the rumbling of hooves against ground. Over the rocky hills in the east came a brown line-- the shaggy storm bison running downward on a fuming cloud of lightning and rain and wind.

"The bison!" the Leader cried. "We brought back the bison!"

"Yes," I said, smiling weakly. They came closer and closer, and the entire dome collapsed on the west side, laying bare the entire city before us.

"How do I control them?" he asked over the din. I saw the soldiers behind me had lowered their guns in awe, staring upward.

"You don't."

The entire stampede came crashing down from the rocks and into the dome, swirling everything up in a vortex. Some of the soldiers were trampled, and some carried

away on the storm. The leader stood next to me, and looked at me in rage as the bison passed us by, and I saw Henry standing back, holding on to the wall behind him.

The Leader lunged for me, but I jumped into the Lightwater, and as I sunk I saw him trampled underneath the thundering herd of the storm.

...

"Is he okay?"

"I don't know, he looks pretty beat up."

"He always looks that ugly."

"Henry, that's not nice."

My eyes snapped open, and I saw dark silhouettes gathered around me. The bright sky hurt my eyes, but as they adjusted I saw Virgil, Henry, Una, Clyde, and even Yotl all standing in a circle. Virgil knelt with a wet cloth, and wiped my face.

"Welcome back, sleepyhead. You've been lazing around while we're doing all the work!"

I tried to sit up, but everything hurt. None of my limbs seemed to work. Virgil helped me sit, and he leaned me back against a wall. We sat inside the top of the Capitol, but the sun and sky shined through the broken, open dome, and I could see the city down below. Clyde smiled happily as I sat up and snorted a little smoke. One of his wings was bandaged.

"What happened?" I said groggily.

"The bison, that's what happened," Virgil said.

"I made them disappear by accident when I first came. I'm sorry," I said deliriously, again and again.

"No, don't apologize. That's what turned the tide," Virgil said. "Henry dove in and saved you, and then he used the typewriter to let us all out. Everyone is outside now, rebuilding."

"The bison set me free," said Clyde. "There were soldiers there trying to hurt me, and a lot more came outside to see what the thunder was all about, but they scattered when they saw what was coming."

"They're all gone?"

"When Henry let us out, we were too many for the ones still in the building. We overpowered them. Some have even surrendered. There's pockets of them hiding out there, I'm sure. But the Leader is dead. We won because of you. Even after we had lost," Virgil said. "Now let's get you somewhere where you can rest, and we can get that healed up. The people are starting to come out of their homes, and I'm sure there's a healer out there somewhere."

They carried me down, and Clyde tucked the typewriter away in his bag and gave me a wink. We found a bedroom outside the Capitol, a huge hotel with all kinds of people helping the survivors. Even though the city stood in tatters, everyone seemed happier. I slept soundly that night.

...

Over the next few months, we helped the people of the Capital Ruins rebuild, and got many of the Waya home on the ships. Henry went on a few trips with Virgil back to the mesas to transport those who wanted to go home and those who died, so they could be buried in their homeland. As I healed, I spent almost every day with Clyde, flying around and using the typewriter to help fix things. Nothing was perfect the way it used to be-- the

typewriter still didn't work quite like it did before. This world was too real. It resisted change, outside forces making it into something different. I got stronger and stronger every day, but that provided no solace, because I knew the day that we would have to leave loomed closer with every passing second.

As the city rose back up from the ashes, we discovered so much in the ruins. So many books and stories that the barons withheld from the people. Clyde began to bring his horde here, storing it up near the atrium where the typewriter sat, waiting for me. We had rebuilt the atrium to a certain extent, patching some of the missing roof with metal plates, but Clyde insisted we keep the front open, so he could see out on the town to protect it, and protect the typewriter, even though we now knew only we could use it. He invited people up regularly to borrow from his library, even though at first few were quick to warm up to the idea of standing in close quarters with a dragon. They had even started building tunnels big enough for Clyde to walk through, so he could curate the library some day.

Virgil had begun to rebuild the storytellers' guild, and before long, the city was full of teachers and tellers and people standing around the fountain looking for an extra coin. Many of them had languished in the jails for a long time, and some had been part of the Baron's army. We heard news once in a while of pockets of them still hanging around, but we had broken their will. The oppressed, I think, didn't ever want to go back.

We stuck around for as long as we could, much longer than we should have. I felt my clothes growing too short for me, and my hair growing shaggy. Henry grew at least an inch. We met all our friends in the still open Capitol, overlooking a town rebuilt by paws, hands, and even the wings of a dragon. We all met up in Clyde's room all the time,

now, milling about and looking at the things he had collected, talking and laughing like we couldn't before. Una and Virgil milled around Clyde's Library, telling stories and arguing, and Henry sometimes just stared at the typewriter. Clyde swooped up from nowhere, and flew into the giant hole in the makeshift dome, and sat down next to me. We looked out for a while together, thinking the same thing.

"You have to go, don't you," Clyde said sensing my thoughts.

"I don't want to," I said.

"But you have to," he said. "That's what all this was for, wasn't it? So you could go home?"

"Maybe," I said. It had become so much more than that.

"They probably miss you," Clyde said. "Your Grandma and Popeye."

"I know," I said. "But I don't want to leave. I've got no friends there except them."

"You have Henry," he said. And for the first time, he was right about that. "I'll miss you so much."

"I'm going to miss you too, buddy," I said, giving his hard shell a hug.

"What's all the commotion about?" Virgil said, walking over.

"It's time," I said. Virgil looked surprised, as if he wasn't expecting the words to ever come.

"No! Not now," Henry pleaded. "There's so much left to do! We can't just leave them like this!"

"No, wait," Una said calmly. "You are not our slaves. You have helped us so much all ready. You do not have the responsibility to make sure everything is perfect here. It is not a perfect world."

I got up, and moved to hug Henry. He resisted at first, but then broke down into tears, the first time I had ever seen him cry.

"It's okay, man," I said. "It's okay."

"But you know what this means, right?" he said. "We can't come back."

"I know," I thought. The same thought constantly ran through my mind too, in different forms. We couldn't avoid the reality of that place. Who knew if our own reality still existed beyond the borders of our minds? But if we could go back, we knew we would have to leave the typewriter behind.

"We have to leave it," I said. "We have to use it to go home, but we can't take it with us."

"You think I care about the typewriter?" he said. "I know we have to leave it. But what if we can never find our way back?"

"What do you mean?" Virgil said. "It's yours. Why can't you take it with you?"

"Because it created this place," I said, finally. "We used this typewriter to create things, fictions in our heads, before all this. But this place is real. We're afraid if we leave with it, this place will cease to exist."

"I'm sure it's not all that dire--" Virgil said.

"It is," I said, cutting him off. "This thing hasn't acted the same since we came here. Anything could happen. We might not have a home left to go to. But we don't want to destroy this one."

"He's right," Henry said, wiping his nose and coughing.

"Then break it again. Take some with you," Una said.

"No, not again. Last time we did that, all this happened. We have to leave it with you. Please take good care of it."

"We will," Clyde said quietly.

We said our goodbyes, some tearful, some meaningful, and found ourselves all too soon standing before the typewriter again, one last time. Henry and I both put our hands on the unfinished keyboard. We hadn't found every piece. But it still looked brand new, felt as if it had never had a scratch on it. Then, I imagined home. I could feel through the typewriter somehow that Henry did too. We imagined home, and then let go of the typewriter for good, both in our hearts, and with our hands.

My eyes opened to the dark. A movie screen rolled credits for an adventure movie in front of us, through the glassy windshield of a truck. The air smelled of dust and popcorn. Henry, with his ketchup stained shirt and jacket, sat next to me. We looked at each other and stared around until all the cars had left the lot, and nothing but the spotlights shining on the movie screen remained.

As we drove home, I was sure I saw a dragon peeking out from behind a hill, watching.

