ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: CALEB

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Caleb is a post-apocalyptic novel set in the Philadelphia suburbs. The novel begins fifteen years after a genetically engineered version of smallpox ravages the country, killing 90% of the population. The present tense of the novel follows Caleb Rivas and his partner Elia Morris as they become embroiled in a refugee crisis propelled by unchecked climate change and racial tensions that have survived the smallpox plague. As their home is engulfed in the crisis, Caleb is confronted with a part of his past he thought was long gone, forcing him to reckon with his relationship to his mixed Mexican American heritage. Through these events, in addition to flashbacks from before the plague, the novel aims to explore how toxic and unequal power structures might survive or be dismantled in the aftermath of unprecedented disaster, in addition to how these power structures inform and interact with the characters' identities.

Caleb

by

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Chapter 1

Heavy winds surge around Caleb and Elia as they trudge up a hill beneath a grey sky. Caleb's t-shirt snaps in the wind, and the biting chill sends goosebumps rippling along his skin. Upon reaching the top, they drop their backpacks and dig through them. Elia pulls out a worn black Patagonia windbreaker, pink and blue patches of cloth sown in pieces where the nylon has started to tear or disintegrate. Thankfully, the zipper was functional when she found it eight years ago while rummaging through a house in the Poconos; unlike other parts of the coat, it has stayed intact. She zips the jacket all the way to her neck and lifts the hood over her head, tugging on the elastic chord to pull the fabric in tight around her short-cropped hair. The painful roar evaporates, but the tips of her ears still sting. Caleb unfolds what looks like a burlap sack. After burrowing an arm into it, sleeves appear, then a hood, then buttons. He replaces them at the end of every summer. The cloth is rough against his skin, but better than the bite of the wind. Elia raises her eyebrows at him, pulls a thermometer out of her backpack, and then sets it on the ground. They both pace back and forth for a few moments, waiting for their bodies to fill the space between skin and cloth with heat. Elia crouches by the thermometer, hands stuffed in her pockets and elbows pointed away from her body. She holds it up for Caleb to see: the red line rests at 47 degrees Fahrenheit. They look at each other and then west, towards the smattering of skyscrapers crowded along the Schuylkill River.

The valley unfurls for miles around them. Bunches of abandoned houses and strip malls interrupted by brief patches of green fields, all surrounded by a ring of trees. The sprawl of disintegrating suburbia eventually melts into endless forest. The Schuylkill River lies to the south and curves east, part of it obstructed by the small skyscrapers of

what used to be downtown Conshohocken. Caleb regrets not bringing extra clothes for layers. Elia had suggested it at the start of their trip a couple weeks ago, but it had been so warm back then. He hadn't wanted to carry too much, in order to make more room for the supplies and loot they hoped to find. Now here they were, the duffel bags they brought along for scavenged items half-empty, and Caleb with the cold whisperings of the wind leaking down the sleeves of his coat.

"How far do you think?" Elia asks. She crouches again and looks towards the town. "Three miles?"

"If we huff it and puff it, maybe an hour's walk, tops," Caleb says, tying his bag shut and tossing it over his shoulder.

They agree to forgo lunch until they into town. They will trade some of what they've found on their trip for a meal in one of the restaurants by the market, instead of eating the dried fruits waiting at the bottom of Elia's bag. The wind pushes them faster as they descend the hill. The duffel bag slung over his shoulder lurches back and forth in the breeze, knocking into his hip, its strap twisting in the frenzied currents of air. There's almost nothing in the bag: this has been the latest bad haul in a series of bad hauls. For the first three years they scavenged along this route, their bags would always hang heavy from their shoulders by the time they reached Conshohocken. The empty bag at Caleb's side, like the empty bags he's carried into Conshohocken on each trip during the past year, suggests that the plundered suburbs of Philadelphia may have little left to offer them.

For three years, the trip here never failed to yield an abundance of treasures and trinkets they could sell in one of the valley's settlements or use back home at the

Greenhill House. The territory they walk curves north and west to the edge of the valley, then turns south towards the Schuylkill River. It's full of abandoned houses, businesses, and offices abandoned by the exodus of former inhabitants who had futilely tried to escape the smallpox plague fifteen years before. Caleb and Elia picked this route specifically because of its lucrative scavenging opportunities. But they are not the only ones: hundreds of people in the valley make their living by picking through the possessions of the dead and selling whatever useful things they find. The paltry results of Caleb and Elia's trip so far: puffs of down feathers torn from jackets they'd found in a shed a few days ago, a jingling mass of unrusted nuts and bolts, two sealed packets of printer paper to be used for record keeping or kindling, five intact coffee cups wrapped in layers of disintegrating newspaper, and six baseball caps, torn in some places but still usable.

They come to an intersection at the bottom of the hill. The wind dies down for a moment and voices fill the air. The sounds of creaking wheels and shoes scraping on asphalt cut through the low drone of voices. They slow down and jump into overgrown bushes on the sidewalk, trying to pinpoint where the noises are coming from. Soon a crowd of people emerges from behind a row of dilapidated houses, which must have obscured the group from Caleb and Elia's vantage point atop the hill. There are dozens of them: each body is smeared with dirt and covered with tattered clothing. Roughly ten or so push rusted shopping carts over the ruptures in the road. None of them notice Caleb and Elia; the entire crowd shuffles hunched down the hill, their shoulders curled inward like dying leaves at the base of a tree. A person at the rear of the group clutches a worn

purse to their chest, a torn towel wrapped around their shoulders. Its frayed corners flail in the wind's continued onslaught.

"Refugees," Elia whispers in Caleb's ear.

It isn't uncommon that groups of people periodically displaced by famine, flooding, or drought from nearby regions find their way to the valley. This area is known to be fertile for farming, thanks to the two rivers, and also for scavenging, due to the remains of Philadelphia and its suburbs. There haven't been refugees in the valley since the Delaware River flooded about fifty miles north in Stroudsburg a couple years ago. Based on the direction Caleb and Elia saw them coming from, he guesses these people must have come from out west. They wait for the group to walk half a mile ahead of them before emerging from the bush.

"I count 66," Elia says, craning her neck.

"67," Caleb offers.

She grins at him. "My eyes have always been better. It's 66."

"That's more than during the Stroudsburg flood a couple years back."

Her smile flattens into a frown as she watches the crowd again. Neither of them speak, but he knows she's wondering the same as him: what horrible disasters or manmade crises drove these people here? Refugees usually number no more than two or three dozen, and because most of the settlements here generally are tolerant and friendly, they make room for however many people they can.

Caleb and Elia hang back as the crowd approaches the gate. Like most of the resettlements since the collapse, Conshohocken has built a wall surrounding all the places where people have taken up living. Ten feet of stone rubble, propped up by scrap metal,

juts out of the ruptured asphalt of an arbitrary street like some haphazard recreation of the Berlin Wall conjured in the middle of American suburbia. For people like Elia, who were only nine or ten when the plague hit, this seems ordinary. But for older survivors like Caleb, who were grown by the time the super strain of smallpox ravaged the entire country, this sight still startles him.

The gate is situated in the driveway of an old apartment complex. Two guards rest in a balcony above the gate; they stand up as the crowd approaches. Even from this distance, Caleb can see their eyes widen and mouths grow into large O's. They mutter in each other's ears for a moment before one disappears through the sliding glass door behind them.

The remaining guard shouts from the balcony. "Good afternoon," he says. He wears a bulky sweater, stained jeans, and gloves. A shotgun rests on the floor by his feet. "Who are you, where do you come from, and what's your purpose in coming to town today?"

The refugees look at one another. Finally, a woman towards the middle of the group walks forward and shouts back: we're here looking for shelter, work, and food."

The guard says nothing for a moment. "Please answer *all* of the questions."

"We're not farmers, or hunters," The woman says. There's an edge to her voice now. "And we're not squatters. Many of us are able bodied and can work in town."

"You didn't say where you come from," The guard says.

The woman hesitates. "Does it matter where we come from? We're in need."

"None of you will be let in if you don't answer each and every question. And if you lie and we find out, you will be expelled from the city."

The woman turns around, her bulging eyes scanning the crowd for an offer of help. Her fellow travelers stand still. Most of them look at their feet.

"We're from Lewisburg," she says.

A few of the refugees hiss at her.

The guard picks up the shotgun and leans over the balcony. "Why are you here?"

"We're looking for work, shelter –"

"Not what you're looking for. Why are you here?"

"The drought, sir," She says.

"And what makes you think we're going to let you in just because there's a drought?"

"There's no food anymore," The woman starts, her voice crackling. "The river runs so low you can't even get a single-person raft afloat. We haven't had rain in months."

The gate then opens, with two dozen other guards marching out. They line the sides of the road and hold guns to their sides: pistols, shotguns, assault rifles. The refugees shrink back from the weapons and huddle closer together. They move in tender stutters, as if they are afraid, by placing their feet too hard on the ground, they might shatter their bones.

The other guard reappears on the balcony. The two men confer again.

"Are you aware that Conshohocken is a mixed town?" The guard asks.

Murmurs ripple through the crowd.

"Are—are there any other sanctuary towns nearby you could direct us to?" The woman asks.

“So that’s what they’re calling them now,” Elia mutters.

“This is the Delaware Valley,” The guard says, beginning to sound impatient. “The only sanctuary town is Old City, and they’re in the middle of a war.”

“Please, sir, we won’t cause any trouble,” The woman walks forward, and immediately all of the guards raise their weapons. She looks back at them and freezes. Even at a distance, Caleb can see her knees buckle and shake.

“I’ve been asked by the Mayor to order all of you to leave,” the guard says. “If you don’t turn around and move away from the gates, we will open fire.”

Immediately, dozens of shoes scraping the blacktop. But the woman stays rooted in place while the crowd begins to amble away.

“Please, we only need food and shelter, and we won’t cause any trouble,” She says. She’s weeping now.

“A merchant from Lewisburg stabbed a black man three years ago,” The guard said, “Just for spilling a glass of water near him. Imagine what would happen if we let dozens of you in.”

The woman’s shoulders shake for a moment before she turns around and lopes back up the street. The guards wait a few minutes and then file back through the gate. Caleb and Elia wait for the entire crowd to file by. A stench of sweat, dirt, and urine billows out from the single moving mass of them, smothering the shredded street and the overgrown bushes. Caleb and Elia can see the refugees in more detail than before. Their faces are covered with dirt; their clothes look dirty and torn in some places. Many of them carry towels wrapped around their shoulders like shawls. The expressions vary from open-mouthed disgust, to tight-lipped anger, to open-eyed shock. What discomforts

Caleb more than their ragged appearance is their silence; none of them speak. The only sound as they pass by is the unsteady rasping of shoes on the asphalt.

They wait until they can no longer hear the crowd before emerging from the bushes and walking down to the gate. The same guard is still holding his shotgun.

"If you're with the travelers from Lewisburg, we are not allowing entry."

"We're not from Lewisburg," Caleb says, holding up his duffel bag, "We're traders. Looking to sell somethings, stay the night, and then be on our way."

The other guard squints. "I recognize them – they're from New Hope, come here to trade three or four times a year."

There is one block of unoccupied buildings, the weeds growing out front and the faded paint indicators that no one has moved in yet. Quickly, however, the town comes alive with two blocks of streets crowded with old businesses and apartment buildings. There are no weeds covering the sidewalks or tree roots threatening to rupture the streets, and most of the buildings have fresh coats of paint. The wind whips quilts and clothes hanging out of open windows and, a people sit in plastic lawn chairs on the sidewalks. Some of them watch Caleb and Elia walk by, while others concentrate on not looking at them at all. The only cars on the street are stripped-down husks of old sedans and SUVs, tires missing and metal frames thickened with rust. Then the narrow streets open into the market, where dozens of people move between rows of wooden stalls. Vendors shout about prices or what kinds of items they will trade for, while others shout dollar and cent amounts, because Conshohocken is one of the few towns in the valley to accept pre-plague money.

Caleb and Elia divide their loot between them. They discuss who will speak with which merchants and remind each other of what they're willing to trade for. Caleb can almost carry his half in his hands: the still-useable coffee cups knock against each other as Elia transfers them from her bag to his. She doesn't try to hide her displeasure at their paltry wares.

"I wouldn't trade nuts and bolts for this," she says, scooping her half into her bag.

"Let's hope everyone is in a good mood today," Caleb offers.

He weaves through the crowds jammed between the rows of merchant stalls. Most of the vendors argue with their potential customers. People jab at wares and some gesticulate exaggeratedly. Most of them argue over food: apples, potatoes, deflated loaves of bred and freshly hunted venison. Other stalls sell scavenged things like boxes, silverware, and chairs, while others offer handmade hammers, wrenches, and other tools. While many of the towns of the Delaware Valley have tried to reincorporate pre-plague coins, most people prefer to barter. Caleb also prefers it because trading one item for another involves a more precise sense of value and need for both parties involved, while money is too vague and abstract. He reaches the end of the market square and turns left down a side street. There are more shops here but fewer people. He ducks into what used to be a cell phone store. Mitchell reads a book behind the counter.

"Hey, hey, hey!" He says, smiling.

"Good to see you, old friend," Caleb says.

After they embrace, Mitchell taps the counter. "Less people are traveling these days, so I see fewer and fewer friends from the old times." Mitchell was one of the first people Caleb had befriended in the aftermath of the superpox plague. Mitchell had been

one of the first to begin collecting materials from before the plague and trading them to others. He's had this store in Conshohocken for more than ten years now, and has always traded fairly with Caleb.

"Things are getting easier, there's more food, more people to clear old houses and make them liveable," Caleb says. "Less of a need to travel around looking for food and supplies."

"But yet here you are," Mitchell, spreading his arms to both sides, "This is, what, you're fourth trip this year? Fifth?"

"Fourth. Last one before the cold settles in."

"And how's Elia?"

"Doing great. She's talking to Maria and Oscar right now."

"She's a keeper, my man. And I guess you've got some stuff for me as well?"

"Sure," Caleb pulls out the coffee cups. "Figured people here might want something to drink out of, even if there's not much coffee left."

Mitchell's arms fall to his sides. He picks up one of the cups, runs his hands over it, sets it down. "Could always use more of these. Surprisingly fragile little fuckers. What else do you have?"

Caleb manages to keep a straight face as he shrugs. "That's everything."

Mitchell's smile wilts. "Are you sure? You're not saving things for other merchants, are you?"

"No. This is all I've got for you."

"Well, okay." Mitchell rummages through baskets under the counter. "What are you looking to get in return?"

"We're in need of five bundles of twine. To fix up the fence back home."

Mitchell freezes and looks up. "Five?"

"Yes."

He straightens and puts one bundle on the counter.

"This is all I can give you."

Caleb scratches his neck. "You don't have more?"

Mitchell sighs. "You've brought me five coffee cups."

"Yeah, a cup for a bundle."

"Twine is harder to come by than cups."

Caleb doesn't usually have to negotiate too much with his friend, but he had known that this would be a difficult conversation. "How about four?"

A deep breathe. "No."

"Three?"

Mitchell shakes his head. Caleb can see the muscles in his neck tensing. He had been dreading trying to make a deal with so little to offer, but he hadn't been expecting Mitchell's pity, or the shame burning in Caleb's chest.

"Come on man, I've brought you a lot over the years."

"Yeah, and I've given you fair deals. I gotta look out for myself too."

"You're not being reasonable."

"No," Mitchell raises his voice, "I'm being completely reasonable. If I remember correct, you brought me some plates and silverware the last time you were here."

"Yeah."

“And I gave you three bundles of twine, scissors, and a small wagon to carry things in.”

Caleb nods.

“That was more than generous. Any other trader in this town would tell you to find your own fucking wagon. I can’t keep giving you fantastic deals like that.” He pats the twine sitting on the counter. “So, it’s one bundle of twine for the coffee cups.”

Caleb starts to speak but Mitchell raises a hand between them. “If not, you can go trry somewhere else.”

He’s right. No one else will give him even this much, and he doesn’t know any of the other merchants as well as Mitchell. He nods again and pushes the cups toward Mitchell before grabbing the twine and placing it in his bag.

“You need the twine for the fence?” Mitchell asks.

“Yeah. It needs to be mended in a few places before winter.”

“So you’re still in that house. Maybe you guys should start relying a little less on scavenging. Don’t you grow food over there?”

“Tomatoes, potatoes, carrots, things like that.”

“Then why are you all the way out here, trying to trade me five coffee cups for all that twine?”

Caleb looks at the ground. “We don’t grow much more than what we eat. We’ve been trying to save up for some livestock.”

“Listen, it’s your life, but if it were me, I’d just leave that house.”

Caleb grimaces.

"Seriously. Don't you have connections in New Hope? They could probably set you up with a nice place there and you could work for the town guard or something. Things are a lot calmer now than a few years ago, but a quick knife is still needed every once in a while. Put your old repertoire to good use."

Caleb slings the duffle bag strap over his shoulder. "I'll see you later, Mitchell. Good to catch up."

"Best of luck, my friend," Mitchell says as Caleb walks out the door.

He wants to punch something. There's anger and shame twisted like steel wires into the muscles and sinews in his back. His legs are restless. But there are people around, and it would only add to his trouble. He checks his watch: there's still half an hour before he's to meet Elia at the restaurant. He decides to go for a walk, let loose some of this negative energy. His legs are tired from the long morning march it took to get here; they'd camped for the night about six miles away and had been walking straight from first light. But there's too much anger in his body to sit still and rest. He wanders the streets beyond the market; these are mostly residential areas, old apartment and office buildings filled by survivors who chose to settle back down here, close to the water. He arrives at the last street overlooking the riverbank. The water shifts and splashes south, where, after another ten winding miles, it will empty into the larger Delaware River. He turns right, and the wall stands ten feet tall just two blocks away. He decides to follow it east to the front of town, where he can meet with Elia. Hopefully Oscar and Maria were kinder with her than Mitchell was with him.

He tries his best to ignore the limp bag bouncing at his side. The wires of anger and shame twist tighter into his muscles. Mitchell stepped out of line when he suggested

abandoning Greenhill House. Caleb and Elia have been fixing that place up for the past three years, patching the roof, fixing the windows, and starting the garden. After ten years of traveling in and out of the valley, working as a caravan guard and a mercenary, he had wanted to settle down and try his hand at something else. Their garden still doesn't produce enough food to sustain them year-round, they have no livestock or other crops, and they still need to scavenge far and wide to find the supplies necessary to maintain the property. Perhaps what Mitchell said hurt so much because it's true; if they couldn't scavenge enough to trade for the things necessary to maintain the property, why are they still living there?

As he approaches the front gates, a sound cuts through the cacophony of hawking merchants and negotiating customers. It pulls him from his thoughts of Greenhill House, through the Conshohocken Market, and back to childhood memories on the streets of Philadelphia. At first he can't comprehend it; then he realizes the sound is laughter. Stretching microseconds into minutes, the voice slowly unfurls its familiar timbre. Then it's gone. He wills to hear it once more, because his ears must have deceived him. As if responding to his wish, it rings out again, and now he's sure. He hasn't heard that laughter in fifteen years, and until this moment thought he would never hear it again. One hand on the wall, he takes a few cautious steps in its direction, his eyes roving over the crowd, looking for a face from another lifetime.

His eyes lock on a dark-skinned man with thick curly hair and a full beard. For a moment he doubts who this is, because he'd been clean shaven fifteen years ago, but after the man playfully slaps the shoulder of a town guard, he knows this is Miguel Alvarez, one of his closest childhood friends. There's a group of other dark-skinned men standing

around him, all of them smiling at something he's said. He's telling jokes, everyone around him chuckling. His face looks exactly the same, save for the beard. Caleb's eyes linger in shock for a few moments; if it hadn't been for the laugh, he would have thought that maybe this person simply held an eerie resemblance to his childhood friend. But there's no doubt. Caleb stands still, leaning against the wall as if he's out of breath from running a marathon, and watches the man he thought was dead breathe, speak, and laugh. His entire body is locked in shock and his mind floods with old memories. For a moment, he considers walking over, but then long-dormant spurs of guilt dig into his abdomen. He has thought Miguel was dead all of these years because Caleb has been convinced that, after abandoning his friend all those years ago, he had left him for dead.

Miguel takes his leave of the guards and wanders into the crowd in the other direction. The heavy spell of shock shatters around Caleb. He looks around for a moment, then begins to follow. He keeps at least twenty feet behind, ducking though the crowd as Miguel and his group walk along the western flank of the market. A large man bumps into Caleb, sending him skidding for a moment. After breathless apologies, he looks desperately for Miguel or his companions, but they're nowhere to be found.

Another few minutes pass before he remembers that he's supposed to meet Elia by the restaurant. He walks slowly, trying to shake his mind out of the frenzy. He's almost completely forgotten about the disappointing trade with Mitchell by the time he spots Elia leaning against the side of the restaurant. Thankfully, he isn't late. She asks how it went and he holds up the single bundle of twine in response. She curses and holds out what she was able to procure from Oscar and maria: the short strip of metal for her arrowheads, along with a single trowel for the garden and a roll of thread for mending

their clothes. It was half what she was hoping for and will be difficult to get through the winter with. They pack everything up before heading into the restaurant.

It used to be a pizza shop, now refitted to serve fresh soups and salads from greens grown in the garden out back, along with venison and other freshly caught meat. The place is full, dozens of voices clattering against each other in the chilled air. There's a fireplace in the corner, and a boy of maybe 12 or 13 prods the pile of wood every few minutes. Neither of them wants to talk about their failed trades and the difficult winter they portend. Instead, they reminisce about the former owner of the restaurant, who died three years ago during the last smallpox aftershock. Caleb insists his name was Eric, while Elia thinks it was Elijah. Caleb tries to settle the matter by suggesting that his memory is generally better, which makes Elia almost choke on her water while laughing.

They settle into silence once their soups arrive. Taverns, bars, and restaurants are great places to catch various threads of information and rumors. They've planned this trip to coincide with the final laps most merchants will run along their trade routes before winter settles in. Caleb tries to tune out the chatter between townspeople about their gardens, their children, the windy weather. A few men at the table next to them talk about the latest violence in the war going on between Port Richmond and Old City. Caleb would call it more of a sustained skirmish; seven or eight years ago, he'd worked with a mercenary company who'd been hired to fight on behalf of Old City a few months before. The other mercs said the "battle" was more of a skirmish, nothing more than a couple dozen people on either side firing potshots at each other from behind rusting cars.

The men next to them worry there will be more violence between the settlements before they year is out, concerned about trade routes along the Delaware, since Old City

had restricted travel through their part of the river the year before. At the table in front of them, a trader tells some wide-eyed townspeople about a crashed plane site he'd found along the Jersey Shore. Somewhere behind them, two women speculate about the rumors of drought out west. One says its been going on for four years, the other says five; one says the resulting crop failure could produce thousands of refugees heading this way before winter arrives, the other argues that those people would throw themselves into the shriveled-up Susquehanna River before groveling for food from all of the black, Hispanic, and poor people they left behind here.

That's when he hears the laughter again. For a moment he thinks this is it, after all of the bizarre and terrible things he's seen over the last fifteen years, this is the moment when he finally loses his mind. He turns around, scans the room. He isn't insane: Miguel sits at a table with the same group of men at the other end of the restaurant. They all smile and laugh as if they haven't stopped since Caleb lost track of them in the market.

"What's wrong?" Elia asks, leaning to look past him.

Caleb turns back aground, dumbfounded.

"Hello," Elia waves a fork in front of him. "Is something going on?"

He stays quiet for just a moment. He doesn't know what to say or how to react. He raises his hands as if to gesticulate or demonstrate something, but they hover in the air over his plate. His mind is a whirlwind of memories and questions. How long has Miguel been sitting there? Did he see when Caleb walked in? Would he recognize Caleb? He wants to look in a mirror, to find an old picture from before the plague, to compare the before and now and capture how much fifteen years of survival have altered the landscape of his face, if that time could render him unrecognizable to his childhood

friend. But he couldn't have, because otherwise he would have acted. Miguel had always been one to act decisively. Caleb imagines what would happen if Miguel spots him: He would march across the restaurant. He would stand at their table, Elia noticing only after he would grab Caleb's face, stare into his eyes, and plunge a knife into his heart without saying a word. But – no. Miguel had always been a talker, one to explain the history and context of whatever was going on. Maybe he would announce to the everyone in the room what Caleb had done to him: *Fifteen years ago, when the national guard occupied my city and terrorized my neighbors, this man betrayed us in our time of need, and his cowardice cost the lives of good, decent people*.

"Caleb," Elia says, raising her voice.

"Sorry," He looks at her. It occurs to him that they should probably leave. He struggles for a moment with what to say. There are certain understandings among survivors of the superpox plague: the deaths of hundreds of millions of people over a few months created desperate circumstances. Everyone alive today has done or been complicit in things they may regret. No matter the severity of the transgression, most survivors assume that everyone they meet has done something in the past that they are not proud of, and there is a common understanding that it is better to not talk of these things.

He has to break that rule today with Elia. They have been together for years, and while he's told her some of the things he's done in the past, he hasn't told her about Miguel or the Alvarez brothers. He leans towards her. "There's someone in this restaurant who I used to know."

"From the merc days?"

“No.”

“From the in-between?”

“No.”

She raises an eyebrow. “From before the plague?”

“Yes. We didn’t end on friendly terms.”

“And this person is here.”

“He’s at the other end of the room. I’m not sure if he’s seen me.”

“And you’re telling me this because it may be better if he doesn’t see you.”

He nods.

She leans back, looking a little surprised. Even for an ex-mercenary, Caleb doesn’t have many enemies.

“And if he does, so what? You’re scared of him?”

“What?”

“We got out of that game because we didn’t want to hurt anyone anymore. But if someone wants to hurt you, you hurt them back.”

“I don’t want to hurt him,” Caleb says, trying to keep the panic from rising up his throat. “I don’t want violence. It’s complicated.”

She leans forward again. “What do you mean, it’s complicated?”

“Because if we’re being honest, he deserves to hurt me a lot more than I deserve to hurt him,” Caleb says, “And also, it looks like he’s got us outnumbered three to one.” He doesn’t want to wait here until Miguel sees him and he does not want to fight him. He doesn’t think he could fight him.

“Oh,” She says. She gives him an odd look, then slurps a couple quick scoops of soup. For the thirty seconds it takes for them to reach the door, his body feels heavier, as if gravity is pooling and thickening around them. His heart jumps in his ears. The muscles in his neck ache from resisting the urge to look in Miguel’s direction. Outside, Elia says she didn’t see anyone from across the restaurant take particular interest in them, But Caleb urges caution. The original plan was to stay for the night at the inn across the street, starting their return trip tomorrow. Caleb suggests they start the return trip now; they can cover a few miles before sundown, and probably pick through a couple houses as well.

“That seems a little extreme,” Elia says, “I don’t think anyone saw us.”

“Listen,” Caleb glances at the restaurant door, “I would be a lot more comfortable if we left now. Plus, the more time we spend on the road, the more opportunities we have to scavenge.”

“What did you do to that guy?” Elia asks, her eyes growing wide, “You’re terrified of him.”

“I’m not terrified of him,” Caleb says, “It was a complicated situation. I thought he was dead, and he’s not, and it’s been a long time, and we have a lot of other shit going on right now. I’d rather not deal with more if I don’t have to.”

“You thought he was dead?” Elia asks, her expression softening.

“Yes. I was obviously wrong. We can talk about this more once we’re clear of town.”

They walk towards the gate. Elia shrugs. “You’re right, though. We don’t need any more shit to deal with.”

In case they're being followed, they weave a complicated exit route through backyards and across residential areas. Fragments of questions knock against each other in his mind. Is it really Miguel? His gut clenches in response to that question – he would recognize that face anywhere. How did he survive? Why has it taken fifteen years for Caleb to see him again? What has he been doing all this time?

Chapter 2

It was before the military checkpoints were up, when only national guard troops occupied the corner of Cottman and Ryers. The weather was unusually warm for November. The troops were stationed at every intersection of the neighborhood that bordered the suburbs. There were few things Caleb knew as he approached one such checkpoint. Some of the things he didn't know: These soldiers were not here to provide relief or security. The first superpox victim here would not fall ill for another week, and when they did, they would be quarantined in a makeshift detention center on the other side of the neighborhood.

He didn't know that a family that lived on this block was taken away was taken last week. They had gotten the mother at work. Quietly, the principle at the high school she answered phones for let the immigration officers in through a side entrance, and they gagged her so she couldn't make a fuss. The father was pulling up to the house in his beat-up Toyota Camry, the children kicking their feet in the backseat, when immigration officers poured out of a white van. They smashed his windshield and demanded he get out. One of the officers yanked the son and daughter out from the backseat. A couple neighbors ventured outside, but the soldiers came running down from the corner, assault rifles aimed high, and said interfering with a government operation was a federal crime. His son's trodden backpack still lay crumpled on the pavement.

On this very street, a man had been arrested the day before for dropping his gum wrapper. He had worked at the panaderia where Abuela would take Caleb on Sunday afternoons. He used to whistle old rock songs behind the counter, and always sported a big grin. Now the man was slumped in the corner of a makeshift detention center 30

miles away. There was also the elderly woman who had been his abuela's knitting friend for 20 years: her grandson, a few years older than Caleb, was caught in the crossfire of the first guerilla attack the week before. The shopkeeper who used to let Caleb take extra gummy bears, free of charge, had closed the store for the last time just that morning. He and his family would survive the occupation and ensuing riots unscathed, but each of them would succumb to the plague by the end of the year.

The soldiers were sweating under all their uniforms and gear when they asked to see Caleb's driver's license. When he used to come here as a child, the yards lining the street would burst with the joyful shouts of children, watched over silently by parents and grandparents in rocking chairs on the porches. But there was no one outside now. The only noise was the low rumble of the Humvee behind him.

He saw the boy's crumpled backpack at the street corner and could infer what had happened. Social media feeds were inundated with videos of mothers, fathers, aunts, and uncles hauled away by ICE. The raids were happening all over the country, but he had seen a video of one just a few blocks from here. The woman holding the phone could only muster gargled lamentations of *la migra! La migra! La migra!* While her parents and brother were loaded into the back of a van. Caleb heard her cries again when his eyes fell on the backpack, and he quickly looked somewhere else.

Crossing the street, his shoe caught on the lip of raised pavement, and he heard the voices at the corner behind him stop for a moment, and then resume when he continued walking. He'd been asked to park his car at a minimum distance of four blocks. He could feel the soldiers' gaze on his back. Another soldier stood at a corner two blocks away and turned to face him. Close up or far away, their faces all said the same thing:

give us a reason. He understood their behavior to an extent; after an attack on the federal courthouse in Center City and a bombing not too far from here, of course the soldiers would be on alert. But he didn't look like a gangster or terrorist. He wasn't being a problem, he was just walking down the street, but it was like they thought he might whip out a gun or a bomb at any moment.

Ten minutes of walking through the eerie hush before getting to the cafe. When he opened the door, voices and laughter demolished the oppressive quiet. Miguel sat in the corner farthest from the door, staring at a cup of coffee.

"Thanks for coming," he said as Caleb took a seat.

Caleb offered a small smile and stared at Miguel's coffee cup, searching for something to say. They'd last seen each other a couple days after Christmas, when Caleb visited the Alvarez brothers to play videogames and eat junk food. Within an hour they told him they would be taking the spring semester off. They hadn't offered specific reasons as to why, other than that they needed time to "figure things out." That was before the occupation began. He hadn't heard much from any of them until Miguel texted him a few days ago about getting coffee. He excused himself to grab a drink.

When he returned to the table a few minutes later Miguel's cup was still full.

"So, how are things?" Miguel asked in a flat voice.

"Well," Caleb started, glad for something easy to talk about, "I've got an internship at Microsoft for the summer. In Center City."

"Great."

"How are you?"

Miguel shifted in his seat. "Things have been better."

"It's not really the same without you and Paco and Manny," Caleb said.

"You miss us?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Well, we're probably not going to come back." Miguel made brief eye contact with Caleb and then looked away.

"What? Why not?"

"Are you kidding me?" Miguel asked, his hair falling in front of his eyes. "Have you seen my neighborhood?"

Caleb nodded.

"Do you see the soldiers? The Humvees?"

Caleb nodded again.

Miguel leaned back, looked away. "The police have always acted like they owned the place. But this is worse."

Caleb grimaced in response. He'd always found, even after the events of the last year, that Miguel's critiques of the police and the government went too far or were a little too unfounded. They had taken a required speech and writing class together their first semester, and Miguel had written every paper and speech about police brutality or immigrant detention centers or American neocolonialism. Caleb knew they were all problems, but Miguel had always been a little too angry about it. Caleb's own father, an immigrant, had never reacted to the news or to the words of politicians the way Miguel had. And even the professor had remarked, after Miguel gave his final speech, that while he appreciated the vigor, maybe he could tone things down a little, and people would be more receptive to what he had to say.

“Aren’t you more worried about the smallpox?” he asked. Smallpox outbreaks in Los Angeles and Chicago had been the reason for the national guard occupying neighborhoods like this one in cities all across the country.

“I haven’t met anyone who knows anyone who has actually gotten sick,” Miguel said, “But there are rumors. I think it’s a front.”

“A front.”

“Smallpox was supposed to be gone, right? People are scared. They have to do something. Maybe if people see soldiers in the poor neighborhoods they’ll feel like it’s being contained, like they’re safe. But no matter what, they’re definitely using it as an excuse to tighten the collars around our necks. Have you seen the white vans?”

“What?”

When you walk back, past the checkpoint, count how many white vans you see. That’s La Migra.”

“There’ve been undocumented people here for years, and most of them weren’t taken before.”

“That’s what I mean. With this smallpox shit, it doesn’t matter. They take whoever the fuck they want at this point. You just gotta be brown, squat, make a wrong move,” He set the coffee cup back on the table, looked Caleb up and down. “But it’s okay that they’re taken, because it make the white people watching the evening news feel like something’s being done. That’s why they’d never take a guero like you.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Caleb thought of the soldiers at the street corners. The looks in their eyes, like they hoped he would do something wrong, had definitely made him worry.

Miguel leaned in. “When they look at you, they see someone normal. Inconspicuous. When they see me,” he tapped his arm, “they see a carrier, a deviant waiting to misbehave.”

Caleb wanted to disagree, but there was a sharpness to Miguel’s voice that made him more uncomfortable than when the soldiers had looked at him. “Why does it matter anyway?”

“It means you can help us,” Miguel met and held Caleb’s gaze. “You can come and go without being followed.”

“What are you talking about?” Caleb’s ears went hot.

“Listen, man, gotta be honest, I’m on edge,” Miguel was whispering now, swirling his coffee with a spoon, “we’re all on edge. You see it. It’s nice now. It’s quiet. No one’s been beaten or taken today. That’s part of the reason things feel almost normal in here. They’ve been nicer since the attacks, but it’s not usually like that. They’re here to maintain an order.”

Caleb wished he could disagree. Miguel had always had a penchant for dreaming up conspiracies about people in power. But since the election a few months before, it felt like everything had veered drastically off course. There had always been shootings and sporadic violence in the national headlines for as long as Caleb could remember. But after the election, bombs started going off routinely at concerts. The shootings grew deadlier. The pundits on TV shouted daily about who was responsible – they would usually say the culprits were mentally ill people, Mexican and Islamic terrorists, or the New Black Panthers – and there were a lot of politicians saying that the impoverished urban neighborhoods were breeding zones for terrorists, communists, and anarchists.

They called them compromised communities. Miguel had always pointed out that the only communities considered "compromised" were the ones that were mostly black and brown. After the first official smallpox diagnoses in LA last month, the president signed a law which allowed for national guardsmen to be deployed into any place designated a compromised community, in order to maintain law and order while quarantines and other preventative measures were set up.

"They said on the news it's only temporary," Caleb said.

Miguel's spoon smacked against the inside of the cup, spilling coffee onto the table.

"I don't know what the fuck is going on, but it's not temporary. That's why we need your help."

"Again, what help? With what?"

Miguel glared at him again. "You hear about the raid at the courthouse?"

"Yeah."

In a chaotic news cycle of fresh horrors constantly replacing each other, the courthouse raid last week had captured the headlines for nearly 24 hours. A group of black and Latino men had attacked the federal courthouse in Center City. They performed a citizen's arrest on the Department of Homeland Security officers there. When the building was surrounded by police and the army, the attackers posted a video on YouTube demanding, in exchange for the safe return of the DHS officers, the restoration of their constitutional rights, the end of the occupations of compromised communities, and the abolishment of the Department of Homeland Security. The video, titled WE ARE CITIZENS TOO, amassed four million views in the hour before it was taken down.

"How'd you hear about it?"

"I read an article from *The New York Times* on my phone."

"Well, I know some guys who were friends with the guys who did it. You hear about the attack on the soldiers the other day?"

"Yeah." A week after the courthouse raid, a minivan had driven by and tossed Molotov cocktails at two Humvees half a mile from the café. Several men had fired guns and killed three soldiers standing at the corner. No one had yet been caught.

"I was there."

Caleb suppressed the simultaneous urges to gasp and laugh. It seemed ridiculous. Miguel, firing a gun? Assaulting a police officer or a soldier? He had never been shy for a fight, always quick to charge the mound if he was hit by a pitch in little league. Maybe it was all just bluster.

"The news said they were gang attacks," Caleb said.

"They weren't gang attacks. Only white people would believe that. It was regular people – me and Paco and some of the other Central guys – along with a bunch of others. It wasn't the first time, and it won't be the last."

"You're going to kill more people?"

"Listen to me right fucking now, Caleb," Miguel hissed, "Listen to me. The courthouse. The drive-by. They're coordinated. We're fighting back."

Caleb struggled to form words. "Against what?"

"Against them." Miguel gestured towards the door.

"You won't get what you want with violence."

"Fuck that. For people in our position, violence isn't always a choice."

Caleb's heart raced. He didn't want to hear any of this. "What are you taking about?"

"The demonstrations, the protests. They killed some of us. I watched them run over two women."

Caleb shook his head furiously. What had gone wrong his friend?

"I'm not fucking kidding! I saw them. Some people think we should keep protesting, and eventually the videos and pictures will make the rest of the country angry. But it's been over a month, Caleb, and we're still alone. This is not the beginning or end of the violence. Why not fight back and possibly gain something from it?"

The hairs on Caleb's neck went rigid, and the skin on his arms shriveled into goosebumps. "No way."

"It's the *only* way, and we need help. That's why I called you here. You're white. You act white. You live somewhere else, they don't know how much time you spent down here when we were kids. They'd never suspect you."

"Suspect me of what?"

"Of helping! Listen, man, we're trying to set up networks that can pass through the barriers they've set up. That can keep going, even if they set up actual fences, or full military checkpoints. Even if they bring more soldiers. We need people to smuggle in stuff we need, because they've also started monitoring and limiting shipments to the corner stores."

"What are you asking me to do?"

"To bring food. Clothes. Other small stuff. Things we may need if shit gets worse. You live out in the suburbs, where the police don't follow people, no soldiers. If they start restricting what officially comes and goes in here, people like you can help."

Caleb shifted in his chair as cold droplets of sweat ran down his sides.

"That's a pretty big *if*."

"To you, it may sound irrational. But if you'd lived even a week in my skin, you'd see it's a perfectly reasonable response."

"The military. They wouldn't let me bring my car past the checkpoint."

Miguel smiled and tapped his head. "Already thought that through: St. Bartholomew's, at the corner of Cottman and Ryers. The border. The police and soldiers don't look there, and you could get stuff to us through the building onto the other side."

That was the church Caleb had been baptized in, where he'd attended masses one or two weekends a month while his abuela was still alive. "But…what if Father Bolger knew about this?"

Miguel's eyes narrowed. "Father Bolger understands what role the church should play in times like these, and he's already helping us in every way he can. So what will you do?"

Caleb stared at him for a moment. This neighborhood had been a refuge during Caleb's childhood. His Abuela's apartment had always felt more like home than his parents' house, both when they'd lived nearby in Cheltenham and when they moved to Willow Grove a couple miles north. He cherished the memories of summer nights with the Alvarez brothers. He wanted the soldiers to rumble away in their HUMVEEs and the ICE agents to shut down all their new detention centers. But he was being asked to

smuggle in contraband through a church. What would happen if he were caught? He looked over Miguel's shoulder, past his waiting eyes, then at the ground. "Has it ever occurred to you that you ask for too much?"

Miguel leaned forward. "You're scared."

"There's got to be other ways, other things you can do," Caleb looked back up, "Have you tried calling your congressman?"

Miguel laughed. "You're scared to do anything because of how much you have to lose. You're not stupid enough to believe the typical bullshit. This country put automatic rifles in the trembling hands of those soldiers, and it put that sweet Microsoft job in front of you, dangling from the end of a stick like a slice of ham. I can see you salivating. It's all you can taste. You're consumed by the slightest hint of any comfort. What about us? What about amigos como familia?"

Caleb leaned back. "You just said it. I have a lot to lose."

Miguel sighed. "You're right. There's risk involved. But I'm not asking you to learn how to shoot a gun, or anything wild like that. Hell knows I don't want to shoot anybody. I'm just asking for low-key help, stuff you could get away with. You know me. I always have a plan."

Caleb thought for a few moments. He remembered all the times Miguel had thrown himself into a cause, asking Caleb for only a tenth as much, and Caleb had barely given anything. He could say yes. He could back out at any point, after all.

"What plan?" he asked.

Miguel smiled. "You remember that event the church would have right before lent when we were kids? International Foods Day?"

***

During dinner that night, Caleb's father asked what he'd been up to while he was gone. He stopped eating and put down his fork when Caleb talked about his visit with Miguel. He only mentioned that he'd gotten coffee with him, and did not discuss the details of the conversation.

"Why did you go down there?" his father asked.

"I wanted to see my friend."

His father rubbed his forehead and sighed. "I understand. But that place isn't safe."

When the news broke about the section of PARTA which allowed for the national guard and army to be deployed indefinitely into compromised communities, his father had not gone to any of the protests organized by their Burholme friends. The excuse he offered the only time he was asked was that he couldn't get out of work. A couple weeks later, when footage of army trucks rolling into Philadelphia was on the TV, his father had only shaken his head and left the room.

"It's completely unfair," Caleb said, not looking at his father. "Miguel says it's just meant to everyone who doesn't live in places like those feel safer."

"Of course it's completely unfair. And Miguel can read all the books about history and politics he wants," his father waved his hand, "but he doesn't know everything. My father had a name for people like Miguel: todologo, always thinking he knows better than everyone else just because he read so in a book."

Caleb scoffed.

"I'm serious. What did you expect, after all of those bombings and shootings? And that case of smallpox out in California? Some kind of government response was inevitable. If we had a more tolerant president and congress, maybe the response would be less dramatic and brutal, but there would have been a response all the same."

"Miguel is doing fine, by the way."

"Don't be like that. Promise me that you won't go back until the occupation is over."

Caleb said nothing.

"Please."

"I don't know if I'll go back or not."

"You're getting a little too old for this attitude," his father said, getting up from the table. "It's sad to see Miguel on the wrong path," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't you tell me at Christmas that he'd dropped out of school?"

"He's just taking a semester off."

"That's what they all say. One semester turns into a hundred. He'll be stuck working the same jobs as his parents."

"And what's so wrong with that?"

His father came back into the living room and grabbed his empty plate. "You are nothing in anyone else's eyes until you are educated and have a respectable job, Caleb. This country has given us everything I have because I went to school. If Miguel wants los gringos to respect him, that's what he should do. None of those high school theater skits in front of the dean."

Caleb thought it better to turn on the TV and not respond at all.

The next day he went to a friend's house down the street to play videogames. They played games and ate potato chips until his friend's father got home. They turned the games off and switched to channel six to watch the basketball game. There was still half an hour until it started, and the local news was on. A reporter spoke live into the camera about downtown protests against the occupation led by Philadelphia City Council members from the compromised communities. Lights glowed in the windows of city hall behind the reporter.

"I still can't get over how fucking crazy that is," Caleb's friend said.

"It's ridiculous and unconstitutional," Caleb said.

The father walked into the room with a bottle of soda and sat on the couch next to them. One of the council members appeared onscreen in a pre-recorded interview.

"First of all, those of you in the media need to stop parroting their language," she said, "We are not compromised communities. We are *occupied* communities, like opponents in a war."

"Have you guys called our congressman?" Caleb asked. He had called when his Burholme friends had asked, and had set a reminder on his phone for 2 p.m. each day to call again, but hadn't at all since.

"What's the point?" His friend's father said. "None of those assholes cares about regular people. They're just looking to line their pockets."

"I was down there yesterday," Caleb said. They both looked at him, surprised. "In Burholme, on the border with Cheltenham, where my grandmother used to live. Soldiers checked my license and everything."

"Why were you down there if you're grandmother passed away years ago?"

"I still have friends down there." Caleb's friends from high school knew about his Latino friends, mostly because Caleb would have to explain when he couldn't make it to a party or event. They'd never bothered to find out more, never asked to hang out with the Alvarez brothers. The few times Caleb brought them up, it seemed like the possibility of other people outside everyone they knew in Willow Grove had never occurred to them.

"I haven't been down there, and probably won't have to go while the occupation is up. I almost never go near any of those neighborhoods anyway. Most of my clients are out here." His friend's father said.

"That smallpox shit is scary," Caleb's friend added.

"You watch, it's gonna be like one of those horror movies. Everyone in this country's gonna die of that smallpox, except for the idiots in DC who are supposed to stop it."

"They always say that, like about the bird flu, SARS, H1N1," Caleb's friend said.

"Maybe we just got lucky all those times."

"Nah," Caleb's friend said, "At some point, the people in charge get their shit together."

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Two days later, after setting up a meeting time with a friend of Miguel's through an encrypted messaging app, Caleb answered the quick, short knocks on his parents' door. A scruffy man in tight pants and worn leather jacket leaned against the railing. Two duffel bags sat at his feet. A blue sedan idled in the street below, exhaust curling out the back and into the air around it. The man nodded curtly, muttering a quick greeting in

Spanish before nudging the duffel bags toward Caleb with his feet. Caleb pulled one over the threshold. The other he grabbed and cradled against his chest. The sides hung obtusely over his elbows. The man patted him on the shoulder twice, reminded him that the feast would be the next night, and said he hoped to work together more in the future. Caleb watched him trot down the steps while checking his phone. Only when the car had turned the corner did he shut the door and take the duffel bags upstairs.

They contained everything Miguel had promised; clothes, cleaning supplies, bottles of water, cans of soup and beans. Except underneath all of these things were three plain black boxes. Caleb took one, held it to his ear, and shook it: a sharp, metallic clattering. He put the box back down on the floor and opened it. Inside were bullets, all the same size and shape, round and wide at one end, narrowing into a sharp point at the other. The other two boxes were also full of them. His hands trembled as he arranged them in neat rows on his bedroom floor. There were 24 in all. They gleamed and flashed as he put them together, like twisted versions of the gold and bronze Christmas decorations his abuela would break out after each thanksgiving. He touched the narrow tip of one and imagined it burrowing into flesh faster than the shattering of sound waves.

It would be over a year before he would fire a bullet into another living human being out of desperation. It would be years before he was taught how to fire bullets well. At this point, curled up in comfortable clothes in his father's warm suburban home, he could never imagine a life structured around violence. The word *mercenary* would sound strange, even to him, after someone would call him that several years in the future. He would still find the gleaming curves of bullets and the sharp edges of knives sobering

even after he grew adept at wielding them, but the night before the feast, he couldn't imagine anything more terrifying than the mere idea or intimation of real violence.

He contemplated taking them outside and burying them at the bottom of the trash can. Multiple times he grabbed his phone to text Miguel and call it off. *You told me there wouldn't be anything incriminating in here*, he typed once and then erased. *I am not going to help you spread violence*, he typed again and quickly deleted. He stared at the blinking cursor on his phone until the screen turned off. He got into bed and turned the lights off. He thought of how eerily quiet those streets had been two weeks before, about the videos on social media of people being wrenched into ICE vans, and for a moment before sleep enveloped him, there was a spark of conviction.

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He felt not even a glimmer of that conviction while approaching the checkpoint the next morning. While it had been unusually warm two weeks prior, that day's chilled breeze slithered up his shirt and along his sides until he zipped his coat and wrapped his arms around his chest. The streets were still empty. The only sound was the low rumble of the Humvee half a block away, accompanied by the distant drone of traffic throbbing along the Roosevelt Boulevard. It was too early in the year for the birds to sing from the trees. Approaching the checkpoint, he decided that silence didn't suit this place.

The two soldiers who inspected his driver's license from the week before looked him over again, but this time they were accompanied by a third soldier. Caleb's heart fluttered when he saw the grey, white, and black, uniform. Instead baring his name, the patch over his heart showed a red and white shield; at its center was an eagle clutching a spear in both talons. Unlike the other soldiers Caleb had encountered here last week, this

one had a full-grown beard, and wore large sunglasses. Caleb had looked up the extremist militias Miguel had mentioned at the café, only to find investigative reporting from small news outlets confirming that officers from these militias had been spotted in compromised communities working with regular federal and national guard regiments. They were not soldiers who had been deployed by orders; they had volunteered.

One of the regularly dressed soldiers squinted at Caleb's face, then his license, and reached his arm out when the militia officer clicked his tongue and held out his hand. The other soldier passed him the license.

"Don't see many people like you coming to this neighborhood," the officer said after scanning Caleb's license. "You have family down here?"

"Yes." Technically, his abuela was buried one block to the north, on the other side of the park and outside of the neighborhood.

"What's your name?"

"Caleb Rivas."

The officer jabbed at him with his license. "You do realize that false declaration is a federal offense, don't you?" He asked.

"I'm sorry?" Caleb tried not to stutter. His ears burned like lumps of coal at the bottom of a fireplace.

"False declaration. Don't lie about your name."

"But – sir – that is my name."

The officer grinned. He looked at the other two soldiers, who seemed neither impressed nor entertained by this fracas. Then he looked back at Caleb. "You seem like a good kid, Mr. Rivas, from all appearances. You deserve another try. Tell me your name."

It took a concerted amount of energy for Caleb to resist curling his hands into fists. What was he talking about? This man had just looked at his driver's license. He knew Caleb's name. Why was he bothering with this? What kind of game was he playing? Caleb looked around to see if anyone was watching, but both the streets and windows were empty.

"Caleb Alejandro Rivas."

The officer clicked his tongue again. "I don't hablo espanol, but I can tell bad pronunciation when I hear it. I honor English by speaking it correctly. You should honor your language."

Caleb's ears burned even hotter. He repeated his name, and tried to roll the r's, although he never had been able to sound like his cousins in Mexico or any of the Burholme kids.

The officer smiled wider and handed back the license. "Now my man understands."

Caleb tried to put the license away slowly, as if he weren't affected by the threat, but his fingers slipped and the card clattered on the ground.

The officer watched him bend down and pick it up. "What are you visiting Burholme for today?"

"I'm helping out with the event at the church, sir," Caleb said, standing straight and tucking the wallet in his back pocket.

"The indoor picnic?" The third soldier asked.

"It's world food's day," Caleb said, "I've been asked to volunteer."

"You're going to hand out food?"

"Yes."

The officer looked down the street. "I'm not from here, not used to the way the big city works, but you don't exactly live near here, do you?"

Caleb explained how his abuela had lived down the street, how he was baptized and confirmed here, careful to use the word *grandmother* instead. The officer appeared to lose interest and nodded quickly when Caleb stopped talking. All three of the soldiers trotted away towards the suburban side of the street, and Caleb took the cue to be on his way. The first people he saw outside other than the soldiers were an older couple shuffling towards the church. He followed them off the street and into the parking lot, where there were more people walking from the other entrances. Father Bolger was waiting by the basement door, saying hello as people walked in. He nodded to Caleb and held up a wrinkled hand in silent greeting before saying Miguel would know who needed help setting up. Inside, dozens of people were scattered around the gym. Faded lines curved across the gleaming wood, carving out the foul lines, three point lines, and center court for the parish's basketball court. A ring of long, rectangular tables surrounded smaller ones, several dozen fold-out chairs leaning against them. A few people greeted Caleb as he walked across the court, ducking between leaning piles of linens and moving quickly past a potpourri of aromas emanating from trays covered in aluminum foil.

Miguel was in a back room stuffed with broken chairs and the old church organ. He was talking with three other young people, his back to the keys. One of them waved to Caleb as he walked in and Miguel turned around.

"Oh, great, you're early," He said, glancing at his watch before hugging Caleb. "It's great of you to come. Did you bring everything I asked you to?"

Caleb wanted to tell him about the third soldier, about the questions he'd been subjected to. He wanted to recall out loud how Miguel had said last week that Caleb would have no trouble. But his friend was much warmer than he'd been at the café, and Caleb remembered the stuffed bags he'd wedged under the fence separating St. Bartholomew's' property from a private house one street before the checkpoint. So instead he gave Miguel his best smile and said he'd be back with the stuff.

He exited through a door on the other side of the church, facing away from the street. The soldiers would have to walk around the building and onto the property to see him now, but his heart rattled up his throat regardless. He approached the fence, shrouded by vines, and glanced at the house on the other side. All the curtains were drawn. Last week Miguel had only referred to the owner as a sympathetic party. Caleb hadn't seen anyone on the porch or though the windows when he walked into the backyard and slipped the bags away. Despite years of running around these streets, he couldn't remember even the faces of the people who lived there.

The bags were still there, crunched into the small opening in the fence. It took a few tries to tug them through, the jagged edges of shorn fencing wire scraping the fabric. When he'd pulled them completely over, he knelt, as if in prayer, and stuffed his face into the cloth. They smelled like the back corner of his parents' bedroom closet. He breathed in the musty spores, then lifted his head to breathe out, counting *one Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi, four Mississippi.* After several moments his heart still rattled and his veins still throbbed with fear. He raised his head and breathed again, not

counting, taking in as much air as his lungs would hold. The dirt smelled moist from the morning dew, and the grass stuck to his shoes. He remembered playing soccer back here, on Saturday mornings when all of the parents and grandparents gathered in the basements for prayer meetings. The yard was not long enough, even for small boys, to play soccer in. But they had made it work, the Alvarez brothers dancing with the ball, Caleb always designated goalie because of both his gringo hands and gringo feet. Crouched on the ground, he breathed the dirt in again, could almost feel the ground rise to meet him as he dove to catch a goal, could almost hear Miguel shouting *golazo* over and over and over, until one of the parents came outside with a face folded in anger.

He breathed out again. He had already committed. It was, after all, only a short walk to the convent down the street. He didn't like the soldiers at the corners. He didn't like their Humvees, or their assault rifles, or their ignorant questions. Their presence had suffocated these streets with silence, had quelched the music and the shouting and the laughter which had all been hallmarks of his childhood. He had never officially lived here, but the summer afternoons and weekends he'd spent with his abuela and the Alvarez brothers had felt like home. He was angry with the soldiers, as if they'd sucked all the oxygen from the air when they had first rolled down the streets.

He stood quickly, slung one bag over his left shoulder, and carried the other in the crook of his right arm.

Miguel opened them carefully while conversing with a nun and another of the neighborhood kids. He transferred all of the duffel bags' contents into two paper grocery bags. He treated the black boxes as nonchalantly as he'd treated the cans of soup. Caleb remembered the nun from his CCD classes, waving around a ruler as she lectured about

the holy trinity on Thursday nights. The neighborhood kid, was her name Lola or Luz? She always wore her hair in pigtails, carried around a SpongeBob lunchbox. But Lola is taller than he is now, and the nun's face seems heavier, and Caleb realizes they are both far older than he remembers.

Miguel turned to him. "Sister Ana Beatriz will accompany you both to the convent," He held up a sweater. "This is the light stuff, the easy stuff," he turned to look at Lola/Luz as well, "The big stuff will stay here at the church until midnight." He nudged Caleb. "But you don't have to worry about that."

Caleb didn't bother asking about the hushed delivery, or Miguel's chipper demeanor. The year before, when a police officer in the city had shot a 13-year-old Puerto Rican boy in Lawncrest, Miguel organized die-ins and marches on campus. They lasted for weeks and occurred seemingly at random. Sometimes it was a few dozen people marching into the library and lying down, spreading from the front door to the stacks. Sometimes it was at public events, like a hundred people marching onto the court during halftime at a basketball game, or during the Dean's speech to prospective students. The college had asked Miguel and the other organizers not to protest during events where the college interfaced with the public. He ignored their requests. Die-ins were targeted during tours for wealthy alumni, prospective student groups, and visiting lecturers. Even after several more weeks, when only five or six people had lain down with Miguel, blocking the chancellor's path, he refused to stop. The college threatened increasingly severe disciplinary action, until finally Caleb and the other Alvarez brothers had convinced Miguel and the other organizers to cool it for a little while.

Caleb watched Miguel at the table now, jovial in his conversations with Sister Beatriz. He'd been this way at planning meetings last year, smiling and giddy, walking around the room, waiving his hands excitedly. Caleb had gone to the meetings at his friend's behest, but tried very hard to be at work, at home, or at the other end of campus during the protests. His mother, a professor at the college, had had the dean over for dinner just a few months before. He couldn't imagine the look on his mother's face if he had laid down in front of the dean. Plus, just as Caleb figured would happen, the protests hadn't accomplished anything. And yet there was the guilt, bubbling intermittently over the months whenever protesters were on the news, when they marched in the streets after the election, and when Miguel had asked him to help in the café the week before.

Miguel had told him this was mostly a test run. To see what Caleb could get away with, to prepare for the inevitable tightening of the military's vicelike grip around the neighborhood. This first attempt wasn't halfway over and already Caleb dreaded the next time Miguel asked him to smuggle something over the border. The three of them walked back out to the basketball court, where most of the tables were lined with food. There were dishes from Germany and Italy and Poland he did not recognize, but most of the tables were filled with arepas from Venezuela, empanadas from Colombia, pasteles y alcapurria from Puerto Rico. And tamales at almost everywhere; Tamales from Guatemala, from Costa Rica, from Nicaragua, from Mexico. His abuela would have been able to point out the subtle differences in each style, but he couldn't tell any onetype from another.

The last International Food's Day was ten years ago. While Caleb could remember standing at the table with his father and abuela, wearing a baseball cap

emblazoned with the Mexican flag, snapping plastic tongs as people walked by, scooping spoonfuls and handfuls onto their plates, he could not remember what food his family had served.

This day Miguel insisted they all sit down, sit down, he would get them food, he knew what everyone liked. The nun, Lola, and the other two Alvarez brothers found a table. Manny and Paco smiled big, waved their hands like they were conducting orchestras while they spoke. The nun spoke of how she remembered Caleb when he was just this high, un encanto de nino, que tan hermoso y agradable el nino. Then Miguel was back with armfuls of tamales, laughing, saying he had not been wrong, this was what everyone had wanted. Caleb tried to keep his thoughts in the present, avoid thinking about the walk to the convent, because after his abuela had died, there'd been less of this food, and more of the Taco Bell and Chipotle all of his friends from the suburbs loved so much. There were only the hot dogs and hamburgers of Fourth of July cookouts, and the same fettuccini alfredo his neighbor's mother insisted was a secret family recipe all the way from 19th century Sicily, but Caleb had run into her one day at the supermarket, and all the cheapest kinds of ingredients were piled in her shopping cart. They ate briefly and Caleb tried to smile and joke with the rest, but each time the corners of his lips turned upward, they seemed to tug at something hard with sharp edges in his gut.

Finally, Miguel stood up, gathering plates. Only a quick glance at Caleb, a flash of his eyes, and he knew it was time. Others had already smuggled things out of the church. This had been the plan. Down the street and to the convent, where the Sisters of Contemplative St. Helena would keep them in the basement for distribution and use at a

later time. Caleb grabbed the bags from the back room, joined Lola and Sister Beatriz at the door, and walked back out into the eerie vacuum of the Burholme neighborhood.

Sister Beatriz made small talk in a low voice. Lola, carrying a large purse, latched her eyes onto Sister Beatriz's face, nodded vigorously every few seconds. Caleb smiled when Sister Beatriz smiled. He heard her voice but the words were scattered by the thrashing in his eardrums. He felt the muscles in his arm, bent around the strap slung over his shoulder, tense and tighten. But already they were halfway down the block, and the register of Sister Beatriz's voice had not changed, Lola's nods had neither increased or decreased in intensity, and Caleb started to think he was the only one on the edge of panic.

Sister Beatriz stopped, looked back, and in the absence of her voice Caleb heard shouts from down the street. He was already so used to the silence, that his ears perceived them at first as strange, alien shapes. But only for a moment before he realized the shouts were coming from the coner with the soldiers. He turned to look with Lola and Sister Beatriz, his arms now trembling, sweat dripping down his sides, only to see the soldiers gesturing in the other direction, toward the park.

"Come over here, right now!" The soldier in black waved his hands over his head.

The two other soldiers rested their hands on the butts of their rifles and walked across the street.

Caleb, Sister Beatriz, and Lola shared an uneasy glance.

"We're almost there," Sister Beatriz said, starting to walk again. Lola went with her, but they stopped when they realized Caleb wasn't with them. They looked back at him.

"Joven," Sister Beatriz said, "Por favor."

His knees shook and he could feel sweat moisten between his fingers, his toes, along the edge of his collar. The soldiers were still facing away from him, but his body was locked by the notion that they might turn around and shout to him. The grocery bags strained his arms. He thought of the soldier in black asking his name again as he tore through the bags. He could see the soldier shake black boxes, could see his eyes light up at the harsh, metallic sound. Sister Beatriz called out to him again, but he dropped the duffel bags in the middle of the street and scurried back towards the church. At first he was going to tell Miguel: no more, don't ask so much of me, but instead he walked right past the church, up onto the lawn, and towards the fence. He pushed the sharp edges over his head while crawled under, dirt smearing his arms and sleeves.

Chapter 3

Once there is a mile of overgrown back yards and dilapidated houses between them and Conshohocken, Caleb feels guilty about all the pointless effort they've put into covering their tracks. After enough time and distance, he realizes that there was almost no way Miguel saw them. His panic settles into a general discomfort, which may also be due to the freezing wind buffeting his body from all directions. The space between houses grows as the thick suburban tangle thins. The houses grow larger until they are small islands of rotting wood adrift like islands in a sea of knee-high grass. After an hour or so they rest on a porch to eat some of the dried fruits for breakfast. Elia pulls out an old map from the mid 2000s, before smart phones and satellites made paper maps obsolete. The roads further west can be dangerous, as are some parts of the city, but the old suburbs in between are mostly empty. In the four years they've made a living as scavengers, Caleb and Elia haven't seen a single soul scavenging more than half a mile away from any of the usual trade routes.

"We should change the route up, take a different way home," She says, tracing old state highways through the suburbs.

"Why would we do that? We can practically walk the usual route with our eyes closed."

Elia holds up her nearly empty duffel bag and stares at him.

"Just because we've had bad luck on the usual route doesn't mean we'll have good luck going somewhere else."

"Don't you want to fix the cracked windows back home? Patch up the door? Mend the fences?" she asks, "don't you want to eat more than carrots and potatoes?"

"Of course I do!"

"Then I don't see how we have much of a choice. We need to try something new."

Caleb is silent for a moment. "Where would we go?"

"We could try heading further into the suburbs, cutting through parts of the city," she says, pointing to large patches of green. "There's a lot of woods on the edges of the city, and there might be a lot of wildlife there."

"We could visit any of the state game lands for that."

"Yeah, but all of the houses around the game lands have been picked clean. We don't know what we'll find in these other houses."

"That's also a problem – we don't know *who* we'll find down there either."

"It's a chance I'm willing to take."

Caleb looks at their sagging duffel bags. "We can probably make it through the winter with what we have. I don't know if trying something new and possibly dangerous is worth the risk."

Her expression softens. She touches his knee with her hand. "You're right, honey, we don't know." She waits a moment. "But you have to admit, the odds aren't exactly in our favor."

He looks away. "You're right."

She reaches up and brushes his arm. "We can always get back to the usual route if things don't go well. Why don't we give it a try for a couple days?"

He looks back at her, offers a small smile, and nods.

They follow Butler Pike, careful to stay away from the road but close enough to keep it in view. Marauders and highwaymen roam the roads farther west, in addition to some parts of the city, but the old suburbs in between are mostly empty and safe. They usually follow this road until they hit the old route 309, but today they veer right onto Germantown Pike and head towards the city. The first couple miles are mostly woods and grassland before giving way to a residential area. They strike gold with their first house: hammers, pliers, and a box of fresh nails in the half-collapsed garage, with entire bedrooms left in pristine pre-plague condition. They spend the rest of the afternoon looking through five more houses; three are nearly picked clean, while two are untouched. Most scavengers who know what they're doing stick to areas near the regular routes, and territory off the beaten track They have plenty of silverware and dishware at the Greenhill house, so they take anything that could be easily traded back in New Hope, like down feathers from bedroom pillows, dust-choked window curtains, and trinkets like old pocket watches and baseball cards.

Just before sunset, they decide to test their luck on a tenth house. Caleb grabs the front door and moves it slightly, keeping on the balls of his feet to make minimal noise. The hinges groan, disturbed from years of slumber. After counting to 120, he takes a few steps around the door and into the house. Furniture is strewn across the wooden floor; several chairs are missing their legs. The couch is ripped open and the stuffing inside is long gone, probably used to keep someone warm during one of the last fifteen winters without electric heat. He pads from room to room, checking for signs of life and anything useful. Elia comes in behind him and advances up the stairs to investigate the second floor. Caleb rejoins her after checking every room downstairs; neither of them have found

anything of value. They were hoping to finish the day with some good finds, but three out of seven houses isn't bad. By this point the sun has set. Elia leans out the window and opens the worn map.

"We're facing east," she says, tracing a finger over the names of dead towns and forgotten roads, "and it looks like the edge of the city is just a half mile in that direction."

"Chestnut Hill," Caleb confirms, "It was a pretty wealthy neighborhood. I haven't looked through there in ten years. We might find more good luck there tomorrow."

They fall silent and stare out the window.

This house sits at the top of a hill, making the window a vantage point overlooking the sprawling neighborhood below. The night sky is clear, an ocean of black with stars swimming through like phosphorescent fish. Below the ocean of black lie houses scattered onto the landscape. Roads curl and coil. In the distance hills rise and fall. From here their layout looks haphazard, as if they'd washed up where the night sky meets the tops of the trees and hills. All the houses have fallen into disrepair. Paint chipped and fading, vines and moss slowly engulfing entire buildings. Windows shattered and pools of glass shards glittering beneath them. Roofs caved in like holes punched in eggshells. All is quiet now, but the shattered windows and battered doors stretching before him are evidence of the violence this place once knew. He tries to remember this place in better times.

"I dated a girl from here once," he says.

Elia raises an eyebrow. He shrugs. "Senior year of high school. We met at the All-County Orchestra."

"Your first girlfriend?"

"No. The year before I went out with a girl who lived down the street from me. I think we lasted a couple months."

Elia laughs. "I don't know if you'd call it dating, but the fist time I was serious with anyone was one of the other mercenaries on this long caravan trip from Old City to the Bronx. We would sneak off into the woods together every night, volunteered to go hunting together, took the same lunch shifts. We tried to keep it hush hush, but everyone knew."

"Was that the guy with the Saturn-shaped birthmark?"

"No, he was a couple years later, when I was working out of New York."

Caleb looks out the window again. "When I'd drive over to this girl's place, the highway exit overlooked the valley from almost the same height," he points out the window to their left. The overpass cuts through the star steeped sky, towering over the houses and hills.

"What would you do?" Elia asks.

"What do you think?"

"No," she smiles, pushing his arm, "What *else* would you do when you spent time together?"

"Oh. We'd go to the movies. Walk around the mall by my house. Go for picnics when it was warm. Go for dinner. Stuff like that."

"My first dates were much more spontaneous," Elia says.

"There probably won't be any movies or malls for a while."

"We should do something like that though," Elia says, turning from the window and heading downstairs. "We can put together a picnic by the river in the spring. And

when the next season starts at the Bucks County Playhouse, we should go see the production."

"We haven't gone in a couple years," Caleb agrees, "it would be nice."

They venture back out into the neighborhood, wading through the knee-high grass in the backyards, in search of a safe spot to spend the night. They pick a house right at the edge of a wooded area, and while Elia retrieves kindling for a fire, Caleb scans the surrounding properties for lawn chairs or stools. People must have guessed there wouldn't be much sitting after the riots and the plague. While most everything else was up for grabs, no one ever bothered with the lawn chairs. If someone flew over with a plane now they'd see an endless sprawl of cracked roads, overgrown houses, and lawn chairs scattered everywhere like flower petals after a spring storm.

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All along the roads close to the Delaware River, wooden wheels of caravans creak under the pressure of stripped-down car frames. Horses pull the larger caravans; the smaller ones are pulled by teams of four or five people, their sweat-slicked skin catching the faded sun on this autumn afternoon. These areas were wooded long before European settler-colonials tore down large swaths of the massive forest, leaving its remains scattered around the eventual four malls, dozens of shopping centers, hundreds of office buildings, and hundreds of thousands of suburban homes. But in the sudden absence of their descendants, the forest has begun to take shape again. The trees and tallgrass have claimed the outer lanes of the major roads, leaving only one or two lanes left to walk on. The chilly onset of winter has halted the forest's advance for now, scheduled to resume during the first feverish weeks of spring. The leaves turn orange, red, and yellow as the

trees drift into their winter slumber. In some parts they shed so heavily that thick layers of dead leaves cover the road, and the wooden wheels roll silently over them instead of crunching over the gravel.

These are the roads Caleb and Elia usually travel; the routes chosen by most traders and scavengers because of how quickly they can be navigated from one resettlement to another. Consequently, they are also the routes used by the exodus of refugees from central Pennsylvania. After Reading rejected them, after West Chester and Pottstown threatened them with rusted guns and badly made bows, and after Conshohocken turned away not only the group Caleb and Elia witnessed, but also several more; the bitter refugees, moving in groups from as small as a couple dozen to as large as a couple hundred, now wander the broken roads and pick through the barren neighborhoods of the Delaware Valley.

Many of them once lived in these suburbs and fled just as the smallpox riots began. They were the lucky ones with cars, who could pay the sudden exorbitant cost of gas, who bribed the military and militia soldiers at the checkpoints. They drove north and west, away from the population centers along the coast, in desperate attempts to avoid the plague. For some of them it was already too late, and they grew sick during the drive or fell ill at one of the rest stops along the way. But many left before they were infected, arriving to Lewisburg, Carlisle, and Harrisburg in droves. When the next waves of plague survivors arrived, the first wave joined the town natives in insisting that not a single person with dark skin or speaking other languages be allowed inside. Some of them may have chased desperate travelers away themselves, shouting slurs and expletives while waving shotguns out their car windows. But more likely, most of them watched from

their hotel balconies, silently lamenting that such barbarity was necessary. By keeping out anyone who was not white, they reasoned, they might keep their families safe from the disease which had so quickly ravaged the country.

Even after the plague's tendrils stretched across the Pennsylvania landscape and coiled through their segregated streets, they did not change their beliefs. They reasoned that their closed-door policies had kept them safe for months while life near the big cities was quickly extinguished. The more fanatical of them argued that someone had gotten the disease into the towns' water supplies, or someone immune to the disease carried it in unwittingly, and so they kept their gates shut and walls guarded. Fifteen years later, most of them are still scared to come in contact with any complexion a shade darker than their own. The drought has drained their segregated oases throughout the last three years, the Susquehanna river shriveling to a moist ditch. The farther east these crowds have moved, the more towns that have closed their doors to them, the larger a rage has swelled within them, its roots digging deeper into their chests.

On one of the main roads leading into Philadelphia, eight middle-aged men break off from the group Caleb and Elia stumbled upon yesterday to search for food. They come across a small caravan, just two traders protected by two mercenaries. They ask the trader for food or supplies. He refuses, saying these wares are his private property, and if they want anything they must trade for it. They offer the weapons they carry, but the trader points to the two mercenaries and says he doesn't need weapons. The men grow angry, snarling epithets at the traders, calling them mongrels and cursing their greed. The mercenaries draw their knives as the group closes in. After killing and looting everything they can carry from the traders, they deliberate their next steps. The carcasses of

buildings around them are all empty, they reason. Everything has been taken by the scavengers and merchants and hoarded in the settlements that will not let them in. They decide, instead of searching through more buildings, to search for more traders. They set off down a less-traveled road, unsure of where it will take them but hoping for the best.

These men will eventually cross paths with Caleb and Elia, who search fruitlessly through the empty McMansions of Chestnut Hill. The sun burns bright above them in the morning as they move from house to house. After the fifth turns out empty, they move to the edge of the neighborhood and take a break for lunch. Caleb had been hoping that yesterday's decent outcome was a good sign, but each house was empty, left only with the useless fragments of torn up furniture and the droppings of mice. As they eat, the sun disappears behind a thick cover of grey clouds just before hitting its noon zenith. The temperature drops. The clouds grow darker every few minutes. A storm approaches, and they decide to forgo more scavenging today in order to travel as far northeast as possible before the rain and lightning start. They walk through the northwestern edge of Philadelphia for over an hour. The clouds grow darker around them as the houses grow smaller, the spaces between them shrinking until they are surrounded by dilapidated brick and stone rowhomes. They cut north towards the old state route 309, which they intend to follow back to New Hope.

The group of eight men materialize about half a mile in the distance. As far as Caleb and Elia know, traders don't use this road, and the strangers conjure many possibilities in Caleb's mind: marauders, mercenaries hired to patrol by a small settlement nearby, bold scavengers like him and Elia, or regular people, traveling from one place to another for any number of reasons. He doesn't think about the group of

refugees from the day before. Elia suggests they turn back and hunker down in the closest building, but Caleb says the chances of violence are low. They deliberate for a moment more, but thunder begins to growl in the distance, and they're out in the open, with nothing but grass on either side of the road. There are houses up ahead, slightly past where they see the men standing in a circle. The buildings behind them are farther away, so they press ahead, their hands close to the knives strapped to their thighs.

The men's voices drift towards them and then quickly evaporate. Almost immediately, Caleb regrets his suggestion. These are not peaceful travelers: each of them is armed with long knives and crow bars. As he and Elia get closer, the strangers' tattered clothing comes into focus. Their faces are gaunt, deep craters of purple beneath tired eyes. Their shoulders curl inwards, their backs hunched, their knees locked straight, legs set shoulder-length apart. They remind him of the haunted faces and postures from the crowd of refugees yesterday, and he remembers the expressions of rage some of them had after being turned away. He can feel Elia's body tighten next to him: the duffle bag no longer bounces at her waist, instead locked into place by her clenched hand.

"Good afternoon," Caleb says as they stop ten feet away.

No one from the group offers a response.

"We were just scavenging through Chestnut Hill," he offers, "But with nothing to show for it. The place is picked clean. Y'all had better luck?"

"No," One of the men growls, "We haven't had much luck for months."

"Sorry to hear that," Caleb says, piecing things together, "Where y'all traveling from?"

"Lewisburg."

“That’s far. Heard some things about drought.”

“You heard right. There’s nothing left.”

“There’s plenty of empty space around here,” Caleb gestures to the field around them, hoping to send this group of grizzly men in any direction away from them, “one of the nearby towns might be able to trade you some things to get started with a garden, or a farm.”

“We tried that already. We’ve been turned away from Reading, from Pottstown. They held us at gunpoint this morning outside Conshohocken.”

“That doesn’t sound right,” Caleb says, “Not everyone is as kind as they should be.”

“What about you? Are you kind? You gonna spare any of the things you’ve got in those bags?”

Caleb grimaces. “There’s not much here. And we need what we do have.”

“We’ve been traveling for months. Our people don’t have enough food. And you’ve got nothing to spare?”

“We’re in a bit of a rough patch ourselves,” Caleb says, “We’d be in the same situation as you if we gave you any of our stuff.”

“Rough patch, that’s funny,” A bald man steps forward. “Didn’t know that’s what you’d call months of walking with almost no food.”

“Looks like there’s not much kindness for strangers around here,” The first man says.

“You can try Old City,” Elia says, a sharp edge to her voice. “They might take people like you.”

“People like us?” The bald man laughs again.

“We figured our survival is in our own hands now,” the first man says.

Elia’s hand clutches the knife strapped to her leg.

He continues: “We figure, instead of scavenging like animals, we could hunt instead.”

“There’s plenty of game lands farther north,” Caleb says, also taking a step forward. “Lots of deer. We could point you in the right direction.”

“We’re not hunting deer. Deer don’t have clothes,” the man says, taking one more step forward. “Or weapons.”

“I was afraid of that,” Caleb says. “We don’t want violence. We’re peaceful scavengers.”

“I don’t care what you are,” the man says, “We need what you’ve got, and if you don’t give it to us, we’ll take it.”

Caleb and Elia don’t respond.

The man tries again. “If you don’t drop those bags and clothes, we will beat you bloody until you do.”

Elia’s arms fling outward and flashes of steel cut through the air. Blood gushes from the man’s throat. He collapses to the ground, his arms twitching, blood pooling on the blacktop around him. Another man behind him falls, a knife protruding from just below his collar bone. Elia drops her bag and sprints towards the remaining men, and Caleb unsheathes his own knife as he runs behind her. The world becomes only the sound of blood pumping in his ears, only quick, sudden images of the men’s contorted faces. His body knows what to do, his muscles and sinews performing without command: he

knocks one of the men down, twists around another, pins his arms against his back and pushes him to the ground.

The world expands again: the sound of thunder booming in the distance, the sky an endless sheet of sullen clouds, the wind like ice whipping his face, the rancid smell of torn flesh, the gurgling groans of dying men, the frantic rasp of bodies flailing on concrete. Elia shouts to him. He looks around and finds her ten feet away, standing over the fifth man's body. At first he can't understand her, but then her voices reshapes into coherent words.

"Watch out! Watch out!"

He looks but it's too late. The man he'd knocked down scrambles to his feet and smashes his fist into Caleb's face. He tastes blood as he stands back up, getting his bearings, but the man is quick: he snatches one of Elia's knives from a dead man and rushes Caleb. He steps aside and catches the man's arms, and they stand locked together, trying to push out of each other's grasp, before the man twists away, twists back, and rams the knife into Caleb's shoulder.

There is a moment, as lightning flashes blue in the distance, where the man stares at Caleb, dumbfounded, and Caleb stares back, and he does not feel pain. Then an explosion, emanating from his shoulder, searing through every muscle in his arm and chest. A hand reaches around the man's face and jerks his head back while another slides a knife across his throat. He crumples and Elia steps over him, her eyes wide, her voice cracking. She's saying something but her voice is distant. His entire body both burns and freezes simultaneously. He looks down and his entire arm is crimson. The pain focuses

into a single hot point, then spreads again in waves of dull burning. He kneels. Elia’s voice thins. The world smears like the words in a wet book.

Chapter 4

What Elia remembers of life before the plague: peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in her lunch bag, the mustard yellow paint of her grandmother's VW Beetle, the crunching chain-link swings at recess. She remembers how the sunset splayed through the trees behind her parents' crimson-red single-story house. She remembers playing in the woods behind her house with her brothers and friends from school, screaming Marco and polo until their mother's voice shot through the underbrush, calling them home.

They played whenever it was warm enough to run around without gloves, until one evening, maybe a year or so before the first wave of smallpox, her brother Tyler tumbled over a fallen tree. They'd been playing manhunt with two of Tyler's friends and Elia's friend Gloria. Rivulets of blood swelled down his skin. He screeched, rolling on the ground, dry leaves sticking to his bloodied arm. She'd seen him get hurt before, scraping his knees on the gravel driveway, smacking shoulder-first into a tree trying to catch a soaring whiffle ball, but never had he made sounds like this. Tyler was the oldest, and both Elia and their younger brother Dylan had come to expect a fearlessness from him which, in that moment, was nowhere to be found. They watched, dumbstruck, as he screamed and writhed on the ground. Gloria ran out of the trees toward the house. After a couple minutes, she returned with Elia's parents, eyes wide and mouths tight. Her mother grabbed Dylan by the hand and beckoned Gloria and Elia to follow her. Her father scooped Tyler in his arms and took him to the car. Inside, they ate ham and cheese sandwiches while her mother called Gloria's mom to come and pick her up.

The girls waited in Elia's room.

"Can you believe all of that blood?" Elia asked, still awestruck by not only how much had come out of her brother's arm, but the color too.

"It was so scary and gross," Gloria said.

"It was so weird."

"What did you expect to come out? Butterflies?"

Elia looked from her pale palm to Gloria's dark cheeks.

"What color is your blood?"

Gloria frowned. "You ask some weird questions sometimes. Mine's red, just like Tyler's, but I wouldn't want to look at it."

Gloria's mom poked her head in the door at that moment, saying how she hoped Tyler got better soon, and it was time to go. After Gloria closed the door behind her, Elia pulled out the newest *Magic Tree House* book she'd gotten from the library. When they finally brought Tyler home his arm was wrapped in bandages. He grinned and told Elia and Dylan that he'd needed *ten stitches*. The next morning, their mother explained that playtime in the woods was over. It was too dangerous, she said. They could stay in the yard, or play out front, but they were only allowed into the woods with an adult present. Tyler protested, insisting that he was fine and it hadn't been that bad and he'd be more careful the next time.

"Santa brought you guys that Nintendo for Christmas and it's been collecting dust since January," their mother said, going into the kitchen to wash dishes.

Tyler followed her into the kitchen, repeating the word *please* over and over and over, stopping only to take brief breaths. After a minute of ignoring him, their mother's shoulders crunched together. A plate slipped from her hand and shattered on the ground.

Tyler stopped talking. Elia and Dylan watched from the doorway as their mother knelt. When she stood, her face was red and her mouth tight. She jabbed a shard of ceramic at Tyler as she reiterated, in a low, tense voice, that they were never allowed to play in the woods again.

***

A girl in Elia's third grade class fell sick during the first wave of smallpox. Elia was given a letter to take home to her parents, who had also received a phone call and email the same day. She did not go to school the next morning. Her mother drove her to the closest hospital, where soldiers and people with lab coats waited outside. They stood in line with the rest of the local third graders and their parents. Her mother smiled at Mrs. Kerry, the lady who ran the grocery store downtown, and started talking about the weather. Elia didn't understand why her mother talked and talked about the flowers growing in the garden and the temperature, because she always talked about how much she hated Mrs. Kerry, who was, according to her mother, a prissy busybody who only married her husband for money. But the two women kept talking and smiling big, and Elia felt bad that she wasn't really talking with Tommy Kerry. It wasn't that she disliked him, but he was a bit boring.

Inside, the doctors ran Elia through tests. They asked her if she'd felt sick recently. If she'd shared any food or clothes with Rebecca. She shook her head no to each question, her mother reiterating to them that Rebecca had sat at the opposite end of the classroom from Elia, and there'd been no contact between them. The doctors nodded politely at this remark the first time and ignored it each time after. Then they asked Elia to be brave and hold out her arm. She watched wide-eyed as blood spiraled out of the

blue spot in her skin, twisted along the tube, and filled two vials a few feet away. She thought of her brother the year before, writhing in pain on the forest floor, and was suddenly hyper aware of her own stillness. She did not cry, yell, or complain. The needle's point of entry was sore, but she was overcome with wonder that all that blood had come from her own body. She stretched her fingers out under the clinic's cold lights: how could she be so full of something she rarely saw?

The bruise on Elia's arm was almost gone when they received another letter from the school a week later. Her mother clapped a hand to her mouth as she read. She dropped onto the couch. Tyler and Dylan ran to her side, asking what was wrong, trying to read the letter over her shoulder. Her mother stood abruptly before they could read for too long, walked up the stairs to her bedroom, and shut the door. She emerged half an hour later, her eyes red but dry, to tell Elia and her brothers that Rebecca Plunkett had died that two days ago. There would be an assembly the next day at school. There would be no funeral or viewing.

***

The next day, Elia and Gloria were swinging from the monkey bars at recess. Since Rebecca's diagnosis, the children were not allowed to share clothes, food, or come into any kind of physical contact. While the aides had only interrupted children during fights before Rebecca had died, they now watched everyone closely, each one positioned at a different corner of the school yard. Elia followed two bars behind Gloria, who stopped at the last bar and hung by one hand for a moment. Elia, expecting her to swing straight through instead, crashed into her, and they tumbled to the ground in a heap, laughing as they disentangled themselves. Immediately, the closest aide ran over, yelling

at them to separate. They scrambled in opposite directions, wood chips clinging to their clothes.

"No more monkey bars," the aide said, before returning to her post in the middle of the playground.

Elia and Gloria shared a look before sitting down on the wooden edge of the playground. Elia kept thinking about Rebecca Plunkett, but instead started to talk about the latest *Magic Tree House* book, which she had been trying to get Gloria to read, when two boys from Gloria's class walked over.

"Do you think you're being sneaky?" One of the boys asked, looking straight at Gloria.

"Excuse you?"

"Are you trying to get Elia sick too?"

"Are you stupid?" Gloria asked. "I'm not sick."

"My mom said they don't even realize it," the other boy said, "They don't shower enough, don't wash their hands."

"Shut up," Elia said. She could see the aide out of the corner of her eye. She was close enough to hear what was being said, but she stared past Elia, Gloria, and the boys.

"They can't get sick since they're from Africa," the first boy said. "It was normal where they come from."

"Can't you tell that she's dirty?" The boy asked her. "I can smell her from here."

"Gloria smells like strawberries," Elia looked him dead in the eye.

"P-U," The boy held his nose, and took a couple steps back. "Watch out Elia, she's gonna get her nasty germs all over you if you're not careful."

"Go away!" Both Elia and Gloria yelled as the boys ran to the other end of the playground. When they both sat down, Elia sat right next to her friend, only inches separating them. She put an arm around Gloria's shoulder for just a moment before the aide was back.

"What did I say? No touching!"

Shifting away from each other, Elia noticed something as her eyes scanned the playground. Everyone there, including her, was white. She looked at the aide, who was still watching them. A spike of anger in her gut: the aide was also white. Come to think of it, her teachers were almost all white, except for Mrs. Fernandez, the vice principle. She looked at Gloria, who was also looking around. Was she realizing the same thing? Or had she always known?

***

A few days after the assembly for Rebecca, there was an assembly for her brother, who had worked at the McDonald's on main street and attended the local community college. Then another letter and another assembly for Mr. and Mrs. Plunkett.

After the deaths of the parents, the school shifted its policy. There were no assemblies for the seven other children who died. Elia only knew because almost half the kids in her class stopped showing up over the next week. The remaining children spoke in hushed tones at recess about who died and whose parents had simply pulled their children from the school. Mrs. Garrett continued on as if nothing were amiss, as if her classroom was as full and boisterous as it had been at the beginning of the year. But Elia could see her eyes linger on each empty seat while the students read or wrote or worked in groups.

Some children started wearing hospital masks to school. Elia's mother tried this for a couple days, before the Armstrong twins down the street, two grades above Elia, were quietly taken to the quarantine zone in the hospital. Their mother didn't try to keep them away from the window, and all five of them watched at dinner as the ambulance rolled into the driveway. Its lights were off, its horns silent. Wheelchairs were brought into the house, and the boys were rolled out onto the driveway and into the ambulance. The parents even left the garage door gaping open.

When Elia woke the next morning, her room was much brighter than usual. The sun's warmth was more intense than she was used to. When she sat down at the breakfast table, her mother set a plate full of chocolate chip pancakes in front of her. The corners of her mouth attempted a smile, and she asked, "Just one pancake. Did you enjoy sleeping in?"

"I did?" Elia asked.

"It's 9:30," her mother said, getting up and stirring something on the stove. "You're not going to school today."

Elia didn't need to ask why. Her heart sparked with joy as she cut a chunk of pancake and pressed it into a pile of whipped cream. "Just for today?"

Her mother stood at the stove for several moments, unmoving. "For longer than that. Until they figure out why people are getting sick."

Elia sensed in her mother's mood an opportunity for a couple extra pancakes. She quickly slid them onto the plate and rushed back to the table. No school and home cooked chocolate-chip pancakes for breakfast; it felt like Christmas nine months early. But as she munched on her whipped cream-soaked pancakes and contemplated what possibilities lay

in her new freedom, she realized she was at a loss as to what to do all day. Her brothers were already outside and playing as close to the edge of the woods as their mother would allow. She had called out of work for the next week, she said, so she could keep an eye on things. Elia wasn't sure what she meant by that.

The radio was on. Several voices spoke angrily, the edges of their words ruffled with static. They were talking about all the people falling sick, about whose fault it was. Elia caught bits and pieces of the conversation over the sounds of her mother's cleaning. She heard the words California, Mexico, and then Lancaster. She strained her ears to hear what the radio voices had to say about her town.

Her mother switched off the stove and left the kitchen. The radio was still on, and Elia could hear clearly now.

"They probably sent it over with the farm workers," one man said.

"That seems a little extreme, though." Another voice argued.

"Why else would so many of them come over here? Their trying to get hard working Americans sick, and make more room here for their surplus poor."

"It just seems like the headline "Mexican Government Deploys Farm Workers to Spread New Smallpox Strain" is a little too ridiculous," the second voice said, "even for you."

"It's not ridiculous. It's bold. And I bet they've got the blacks and Asians helping them. Thankfully, we have a president and a congress who will act fast."

"They've already got the national guard stationed in inner cities around the country," the second voice said. "There's no real evidence that anybody brought this

disease into the country from somewhere else. It's only been a couple weeks, and we don't know that much about it yet."

"But almost 90% of the victims are white," the first voice said, angrier now, "You're gonna tell me that's a coincidence?"

"That's true," the second voice sounded like he was thinking, "Maybe Hispanics and blacks and Asians are immune to it."

"That proves my original point entirely."

At that moment, Elia's mother reappeared in the doorway. "Oh, did I leave that on? No reason you should be listening to that." and she offered another strained smile as she switched the radio off. She still hadn't noticed the extra helpings of pancakes on Elia's plate.

She joined her brothers after breakfast. Like them, she loved the thrill of almost breaking the rules. But Tyler, like usual, pushed things too far. He exclaimed that he would give his dessert that night to whoever could run the farthest into the woods before their mother noticed. Dylan readily agreed to compete, but Elia thought of the strained smile her mother had offered that morning. There was no point in making things worse, if they were all going to be home for whoever knew how long.

She murmured that she didn't want to go into the woods and wandered back to the house. The temperature was mild. The windows were open and she heard the drone of the vacuum as it rattled over the hardwood floors. She didn't want to be inside with her mother, but didn't want to be enclosed in her room either. She wandered around the house towards the street, walking in long curves across the front lawn, stretching her arms out, feeling the slight breeze. She sat down at the curb and looked up the street.

Most of the driveways were empty. This was before most of the adults would stay home out of fear. She looked the other direction, towards the busy thoroughfare which connected her neighborhood with the rest of the town. Her eyes fell on the Armstrong's house. The garage door was still open, a gash of darkness interrupting the long row of white colonial houses. She thought of the twins, who sometimes played whiffle ball with Elia and her brothers, about how the only way she could tell who was who was because Ashley had long hair and Michael had short hair. Ashley threw better curve balls than Tyler did, which always made him mad. Elia realized she couldn't look away from their house. Their parents' blue minivan wasn't there. When she finally scanned down the street, she started counting how many houses separated the Armstrong's from hers. Six. Her eyes couldn't help but linger on each of the houses in between. A knot formed in her stomach. She was about to get up and walk back towards the house when her mother, leaning out the front door, called to her, asking what she was doing there alone.

***

The next three days her mother cleaned the house incessantly in the mornings. During the afternoons she stomped around the attic and brought down old boxes. Their contents were old computer parts: a box full of old hard drives, another full of old power supplies, their fan blades choked with dust. Elia was inside by noon each day. She watched her mother pull the parts out of their boxes, scrutinize each one, and squint at the miniature lettering on their sides. After an hour or two a makeshift computer would be set up on an old box: processor fans whirring, CD drives humming, a tangle of cables draped over the motherboard that connected them all. On the third day, Elia asked about the parts, and her mother explained how the hard drives were like a filing cabinet, storing all

the important information, how the RAM was like a desk that the information from the hard drive could placed on for work; how the traces etched throughout the motherboard's surface carried millions of signals at the speed of light, sending information about colors, fonts, sports scores, and temperatures. Elia wouldn't retain many fond memories from those days, but the afternoon she spent pouring over the old computer parts with her mother glows in her mind like a blazing fire on a frigid night.

***

Elia's father worked at the hospital's pharmacy, and wasn't allowed to take off due to the increased need for anyone with medical training. The atmosphere in the house shifted when he walked through the door. All Tyler and Dylan wanted to do was to talk with him. They kept asking how many people were sick, if he knew if the parents of various children had shown up at the hospital. Their mother swatted them away, telling them to give their father space. He only sighed, told the boys that he didn't know nearly as much as they thought he did. He set his phone on the table next to his plate, started tapping and scrolling with one hand and stabbed a fork through a piece of steak with the other. Elia gave him space, and went upstairs to read *The Magic Tree House* and *Nancy Drew* for the rest of the night. Even though she'd read most of them before, she became engrossed in them again, and didn't bother to go to turn off the light at her usual bedtime, since she wouldn't have to get up for school anyway.

Around midnight, hours after her usual bedtime, she went to get water before finally falling asleep. On her way back, murmurs sputtered out from under her parents' door. She paused just outside. She could hear her brothers snoring down the hall. Amber light pooled in the threshold to her room. Her parents' voices bubbled at her feet. It

wouldn't hurt to listen for just a minute. She held her breath, got down on her hands and knees, and put her ear inches away from the door. The murmurs sharpened into coherent words.

"Are you sure you couldn't grab at least three?" her mother was asking, "For the kids. Not even for us."

One of her father's long sighs. She could almost see him press his thumb into his forehead. "I don't have that kind of clearance, Diane."

"But what's the point of the vaccines if children aren't going to be getting them?"

"The elderly and those prone to illness get them first. It's federal law." A few beats of silence. "This is all part of a protocol. Any medical professional would run this the same way. The CDC knows what its doing."

"The CDC also doesn't know how a supposedly dead disease came back out of nowhere."

"No one ever guaranteed that it would be gone forever."

"A lot of people used to die from smallpox."

"Around 30 percent, yes. Didn't you read that article I sent you about the history of the disease?"

"Why would I want to read that stupid article?"

"Knowing more about it can help soothe some of your fears and anxieties."

"Getting vaccinated would really help my fears and anxieties."

"They've quarantined everyone in town who has the disease, along with all of the people who might have made dangerous contact with them."

“They didn’t give Elia anything, even though she was in the same class as that girl.”

“Yes, because she never touched the girl or spent prolonged periods of time in close proximity to her. Most of the people who are at risk are quarantined. If we just play it safe for the next week or so, we’ll be fine.”

“I can’t keep the kids in the house forever. They’re going to get cabin fever soon, and even if I took them around town, they’d get bored of that too. And I have to go back to work on Monday, or I start losing pay.”

“Then send them back to school on Monday.” A tense pause. “Don’t look at me like that. The CDC hasn’t recommended school closures. Only a dozen or so kids have gotten sick – there’s what, five hundred in the elementary school, almost a thousand in the middle school? The chances are so low.”

“I’m starting to feel like the CDC is feeding us watered-down information to keep things from getting out of hand,” Elia’s mother said.

“You’re listening to that talk radio too much.”

“Talk radio are the only people who seem to understand the gravity of the situation.”

“The TV networks have been covering this since the first case in California. There are reporters with long careers in reporting on science and medicine writing about this on the internet. On the radio they just yell and shout conspiracy theories.”

“That’s exactly why I listen, Carter – children in our own town are dying. Most of their families are dying or sick. Paranoia is a perfectly reasonable response. Why didn’t all these well renowned journalists see this coming?”

"Not a single person on the face of the Earth saw this coming."

"It seems like the more people say it isn't a big problem, the less they're able to actually respond to the problem in meaningful ways."

"And what would be a meaningful way to respond to this?" Her father asked.

Silence for a few moments.

"Exactly. This is why we let experts make decisions, and even though there's some real incompetent assholes running the government, there's still plenty of professionals who know how to handle a situation like this."

Her mother mumbled something about experts, but Elia couldn't catch it.

A long sigh. "Like I said, give it a couple more weeks, and it will pass."

Then quick footsteps. Elia scrambled to her feet, ran down the hallway, and closed her door just as she heard her mother open hers.

***

Elia drew her new daily routine tight around her like a blanket, finding comfort in both the warmth of the sun filtering through the woods in the afternoon and the low buzz of her reading lamp at night. As her mother predicted, her brothers grew tired of the backyard and the temptations of the woods. They spent the entire afternoon on Saturday begging her to take them to the park, the mall, the movies. Their mother said no, no, just wait a little longer, and their father said nothing at all. After eating dinner every night, he would watch TV shows with people talking to each other about the news. Mostly they talked about the smallpox outbreak, about how historic it was, and how the CDC expected to have the disease contained soon. Three days after she overheard her parents' conversation, her mother announced they were going on a road trip to their grandparents'

cabin in the Poconos, which was a two hour drive away. There, almost ten miles away from the closest town and 100 miles from Lancaster, they were allowed to roam free. They stayed for three days, exploring the woods near the cabin under their mother's watchful eye, and playing *Monopoly* and *Sorry* with their grandparents by the fireplace at night. When she and her mother would return to this place almost a year later, Elia would dig through her memories of that visit and marvel at how the place could have ever held even a flicker of happiness.

While they were gone, the 13th and final child victim of the first wave died. Lancaster's death toll rested at 56, one week before the plague was officially announced contained. The number stayed that way through the summer, when the talk radio programs her mother now listened to daily shifted their focus back towards the crime and chaos in the compromised communities. Most of the media turned its attention back to the daily mass shootings and terrorist attacks. There were only a few investigative reports linking the outbreak to either bioterrorist activity, or a naturally occurring new strain. Everyone in town, including her mother, breathed deep sighs of relief throughout the summer heatwaves. Her father would talk about the latest think piece he'd read about how the outbreak may have been caused by melting glaciers at the North Pole releasing millennia-old bacteria, or by right-wing military extremists in the forests of Michigan getting their hands on the disease through connections with former Soviet officials. Her mother would roll her eyes at these stories, saying something to Elia or Tyler about people who think they know it all. As her father would start to object, her mother would quickly say something about how hopefully they'd seen the last of the disease, and wouldn't it be better to talk about something else?

***

The summer was hotter and dryer than usual. Elia's mother worked long shifts at the computer firm and her father spent most of his waking hours at the pharmacy. She and her brothers spent their mornings and afternoons at the Griffin Park camp, then evenings with their aunts and uncles. Elia's mother picked them up at nine p.m. Elia fell asleep many nights on the car ride home, the radio's angry voices vibrating the glass against her cheek. There was one summer afternoon when Tyler came home early from camp, his cheeks tinted green and his breath smelling of vomit. He went to the doctor later that night and was told he had a rare case of the summer flu. Their mother didn't let Elia or Dylan into Tyler's room for three days until he got better. She also didn't let him return to camp for another week after, and their conversations in the mornings devolved into screaming matches. He kept yelling about how she was depriving him of his summer fun for no reason, while she loudly insisted that it was better to be overcautious than dead at the age of 12. She eventually relented and let him go back to the camp the week after. Other than the heat, the flu, and the talk radio, it was as normal and mundane as the summer before.

Fall soon followed. The temperatures stayed hot despite the turning leaves. The warm autumnal trance was ruptured by new reports of *neovariola* cases in early November. TEN SICK IN TEXAS exploded on the TV screen during a Monday dinner. Within 24 hours there were fifty sick. After two days, there were a few hundred in Texas, a few hundred in California, a few hundred in New York City. Within a week even Elia could tell this was worse than the spring wave. Three days after her parents turned off the initial news reports during dinner, half of her class didn't show up. Over the weekend,

school was postponed until further notice. This time there were no assemblies, no letters home, no half-empty hallways. One day her classmates were being pulled from school. The next day, her mother's announcement, after the telephone's shrill drone pierced the weekend haze, that they wouldn't be going to school for a while.

Several of her neighbors were taken away in ambulances on Friday. Then a couple more on Monday. The second group were quietly loaded into military Humvees. No shrieking ambulances. No cascading lights. If Elia's mother only noticed because she happened to glance out the window at the right moment. Days passed. Elia and her brothers played in the backyard with less energy and abandon. They casted wayward glances to the street. Even Tyler, who had tried to joke and laugh about the breathing masks during the spring wave, was quieter than normal. They were forced inside earlier and earlier, daylight abandoning them to the gradual encroachment of sunset and twilight.

It felt to Elia as if almost no time had passed and the first wave had been just a week or two before. Her mother cooked in the morning, listening to the radio. Her mother cleaned and rearranged things in the afternoon, listening to the radio. Her father came home from work, looking increasingly haggard each evening, asking, as he sat down at dinner, for her mother to turn off the radio. At night, low tones of discontent spread from under their door like a high tide, their tangling voices ebbing and flowing on the hardwood floors. Elia did not press her ear to the door. She walked straight past each time, refusing to stop and listen. She read all of the new books her mother had bought her over the summer: *Magic Tree House* numbers 12 through 20, and three new books about a fantastical kingdom of talking animals: *Redwall*, *Mossflower*, and *The Pearls of Lutra*. These books were hundreds of pages longer than anything she'd read before, and their

heavier weight felt even more comforting in her hands. Each of the books were connected, telling stories of characters who lived dozens of years apart. She traced her fingers over the illustrated maps at the front of the books and compared the three of them to spot each of the differences. There were 20 other books in the series, and while she would have been content to reread these three over and over for a few more weeks, she wanted to find out what happened in some of the others.

Her mother froze for a moment when Elia asked. It was morning, scrambled eggs were simmering on the stove, and Elia had just grabbed a bagel and some cream cheese. Her mother went still for only a moment, barely perceptible, before she turned back to the stove.

"Honey, you know how it is," She said, her voice noticeably flat. "It's so easy to get sick."

Elia had prepared for this. She sat down at the table, stuck a fork in her scrambled eggs, and launched into a detailed history of Redwall Abbey, of the legend of Martin the Warrior, of the sword Matthias found a hundred years later, of the abandoned church down the road, of the moles and squirrels and other inhabitants of Mossflower Wood, and after ten minutes her mother sat down across from her, smiled, and held up a hand.

"There's a five book limit," she said.

"There are 22 books in the series," Elia said, "But I know which five I want to read next."

"Give me the titles. I'll request them online today, and we pick them up tomorrow. No dawdling, no looking around the stacks. We go in, we grab the books and then we go home."

"Can we stop for donuts on the way back?" Her family visited ALL THE BEST DONUTS on Truxton Street at least once per month.

Her mother smiled. "We'll see."

Elia would have preferred to spend some time wandering the stacks, at least until she couldn't notice the smell of all those books any longer. But this was still a significant achievement. Her brothers came along with them, not because they wanted any books, but because their cabin fever was beginning to settle in. The library was almost empty. Elia remembered the last time they had been here, maybe a month before, when people wandered the stacks, children played in the corner, and lines formed at the reception desks. Now there were three people in line in front of them and no one meandering among the books.

"Elia! What books do you have?"

Gloria bound up to Elia with a smile. In that moment she realized how long it had been since she'd run around on the playground or had talked at lunch with other kids who weren't her brothers, and she felt a wave of happiness to see her friend. She started to talk about the *Redwall* books as her mother grabbed her shoulder.

"Please don't stand so close," She said curtly to Elia. Then, slightly kinder: "Hi Gloria."

Elia gave her a funny look and decided to stay right where she was.

"Oh look, what a surprise!" Gloria's mother walked up and smiled.

"Hi Evelyn," Elia's mother's grip tightened on her shoulder. "I hope you've been managing well."

"It's been so sordid and depressing, with the news and all, so we decided to do something fun. You guys are checking out books?" She leaned down to see what Elia was holding.

"No!" Her mother screamed, yanking her back. There was now a silence, heavy with the looks of shock and confusion on the faces of Gloria and her mother. The attendant at the desk was watching, and so were both people lined up in front of them.

"Excuse you?" Gloria's mother said, straightening up.

"I'm sorry," Her mother looked at the floor. "We can't take our chances."

"Huh." Gloria's mother clicked her tongue. Her eyes went flat. "Is there something wrong, Diane?"

"Evelyn – It's not against you, it's just – oh it's so horrible, and I don't want to get sick. I don't want *her* to get sick."

"I'm not sick, Evelyn."

"Some people can carry it. They aren't affected by it but they can carry it."

"That is patently untrue, and you know it." Evelyn took a step closer.

"Don't touch me!" her mother screamed at a pitch Elia had never heard before.

Evelyn frowned. "You know, a lot of this has been going around. But I didn't expect it from you."

Elia looked at her mother's face: muscles clenched, eyes wide, looking somewhere over Evelyn's shoulder. Her arm tight around Elia's body. She looked at Gloria. There was a look she'd never seen on her face before, not when other kids on the playground called her bad names, not even when the boys had said she was sick: deep hurt. Then Elia felt something in the pit of her stomach; a shriveling, as if her insides had

gone cold. Suddenly the sensation of her mother's arm around her burned: she watched sweat drip down her mother's pale face and was ashamed.

"We need to go," her mother said, walking towards the door and pulling Elia with her. "I'm sorry, but we need to go."

"Ma'am, you have to check out!" Called the attendant.

The alarms went off as Elia passed through them, clutching the books. The alarms screeched in her ears, but she was thankful they drowned out her mother's insistences that they needed to leave.

In the car, Elia said, "We just stole books from the library."

"We're not coming back for a while."

"Considering what you just did, that's probably not a bad idea."

"For God's sake, I'm not talking about the books, Elia. It's not safe."

"It was perfectly safe. And you hurt Gloria and Mrs. Noel."

"They have to understand."

"I'm in the fourth grade, and even I know you can't get sick just because you touch a black person."

Her mother exclaimed, slamming on the brakes as they screeched to a halt at red light. She took a few deep breaths. "You will not speak to me that way."

"Gloria is my friend!"

"And I am your mother. I'm more important than any friend you will ever have."

Elia thought many things: that she would rather have a friend like Gloria than a mother like her, that she was being stupid, that she had just embarrassed both of them in

public. But she said nothing, and opted instead to open one of her stolen books and study the map on its opening page.

***

Elia didn't have to worry about returning the books, because two mornings after their spontaneous getaway, a large envelope whispered through their mail slot. Elia only heard it because she was curled up reading on the couch, just a few feet from the door. After spotting the orange envelope she dashed to the window just in time to see a soldier dressed in camouflage disappearing around the corner.

She knelt by the envelope. Her brothers were asleep upstairs. Both of her parents were at work. It looked important. She looked up at the clock on the wall; 9:18 a.m. Her mother wouldn't be back to eat lunch and check on them for another three hours or so. Maybe it should wait for her, because of its apparent importance. Maybe it contained horrible, terrible information not fit for the eyes of children like Elia. She picked it up and held it to the light. It wasn't a particularly *long* letter. She let it slide through her hand, until her thumb rested beneath the sealed top. Her mother would be angry if she opened it. She could already see the wrinkles between her mother's eyebrows, and could hear the breathless dissatisfaction in her voice. It would be better, after all, to leave the envelope on the kitchen counter with the mail that would inevitably flop through the slot in an hour or two.

She opened the envelope carefully, making sure not to tear it, and leaned against the door as she read the single sheet of paper inside:

> Dear resident:
>
> No doubt you are aware of the recent outbreak of variola virus in your community. While we are not yet releasing specific numbers about infection and

death rates, we do want to stress that there have been expirations in recent weeks due to this illness, and it is a legitimate threat to public health.

It is for this reason that we have temporarily ordered the closure of all public parks, grounds, and buildings within a 50-mile radius of Lancaster Hospital. This temporary closure is ordered in coordination with the closure of other public areas near outbreak hotspots in Pennsylvania.

While this may appear a drastic measure, I would like to stress that this is a temporary action and is not cause for alarm. We are fighting the spread of this outbreak 24 hours per day, 7 days per week. We are working with public health officials from your community, from the state of Pennsylvania, the Centers for Disease Control, and the World Health Organization to contain the disease and snuff it out. It is currently unknown how long the temporary closure will stay in effect. As we have in previous communications, we urge you to only leave your home for necessary events such as work. If you or your loved ones begin to show symptoms of infection, you are mandated by federal law to report them to one of the numbers listed below. If you are well enough, you must also report in person to the temporary quarantine and treatment clinic located at 4451 Lawrence Avenue. If you are not well enough to drive, we can arrange transportation for you.

My best wishes to you and your family, and may God bless the United States of America.

Terrance G. Hampton, Jr.
Lt. General, Pennsylvania National Guard.

Elia slumped against the door. It must mean no more books from the library, at least for a while. Definitely no chance of going back to school and seeing her friends. She stood, slipped the letter back into the envelope, and carefully folded it together again. She left it on the kitchen counter and went to read in the sun on the back patio. She'd been absorbed in the book for hours when her mother burst through the back door, the edges of the envelope snapping back and forth.

"Elia Rose Morris, did you open this letter?"

She looked up in surprise. Being pulled from the world of Mossflower wood felt like waking from a dream. "What? What letter?"

"Don't play dumb with me."

The letter, the outbreak, the perpetual scowls her parents had been carrying this past few weeks – for a moment in the clear autumn sun, they all seemed like phantoms from some distant world, some hazy nightmare. Then she remembered her thumb sliding against the seal.

"I'm sorry, mom. I was bored."

"Bored!" Her mother paced back and forth. "I keep you home from school to keep you *safe*, I go to the grocery store every Saturday, exposing myself to all this shit to keep you *safe*, and you're *bored.*"

Even if she could think of a substantive response, Elia knew better than to say anything.

"You begged me to go to the library. You opened the letter. You and your brothers wander to the edge of the woods almost *every damn day*. You do whatever you want and you make my blood pressure skyrocket."

Elia couldn't help herself. "That's not fair. I don't play with Tyler and Dylan outside that much, and I've done nothing more than read and watch TV since we stopped going to school."

"*Fair*." Her mother's back straightened. "Fair. The world isn't fair, honey. Especially not now. People are dying. You have to understand that. People are dying and no one seems to be able to do anything about it. Everyone is scared. Just this morning, they closed my work indefinitely because someone in the office got sick. And I'm trying to protect you. Which is why you need to *do as I say* and *mind your own business*. Do you understand?"

Elia didn't understand what opening an envelope had to do with not dying, but an ache was forming behind her eyes, and she felt like reading in the sun until she fell asleep out here, so she simply nodded. Her mother watched her for a moment before turning around and shutting the door behind her.

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She tried her best to avoid her mother over the next few days. Her brothers, on the other hand, had either not yet grasped the gravity and sensitivity of the situation, or had and did not care. On the warmer days they played manhunt and tag and soccer within a hair's breadth of the woods, and on the cold days they rampaged through the house, chasing each other and sending tennis balls ricocheting around each room. At least once per day, the sound of something shattering stopped their laughing and yelling, followed soon by her mother's angry voice. After her brothers were sent to their rooms, the voices from her mother's radio filled the house. Elia wished it were spring again, warm enough for her to venture outside and get some distance from the chaos of her family. But it was only warm outside if she sat in the sun, and as her day-to-day activities grew more sedentary, she felt more listless.

A few days after the letter from the military, the boys were playing soccer in the living room and accidentally knocked over a vase that had belonged to their great-grandmother. Elia expected their mother to scream like she had been, but instead she marched into the room, didn't look at any of them, stiffly grabbed the ball, took it to the kitchen, punctured it with a knife, and tossed it back at their feet. She told them to clean up the mess, and then she went upstairs to lie down.

After her eighth time through *Mossflower,* Elia turned to watching TV. Her

mother had been spending increasing amounts of time lying down upstairs with the curtains drawn, so she couldn't tell Elia not to watch *Jerry Springer* or *Cops*. But the shows which held her attention were the real-life surgery dramas. The blood and gore was gross, but with each episode she learned something new about the human body, and after every episode she wanted to learn more. She would watch two episodes back to back, from 2 p.m. to 3 p.m., until her father came home from the clinic and turned on the news channels. For the next few hours, he would watch people in suits talking about the pandemic over footage of quarantine tents and biohazard trucks. She realized, after a while, that it was the same 40 or 50 seconds of video, played on a loop for hours while the TV people talked. They asked questions about the availability of the vaccine and about the information coming out of the CDC. If her father's eyes weren't trained on the TV, his head was bent into his phone. There were moments when Elia wondered if he realized she was there. After an hour or so each day, she needed to get up and go to another room. The images on the TV, the approximate death toll ticking up in the corner like a sports score, and the grim faces of the news people set a feeling like rocks in her stomach.

For the first few days of that week, her father was gone until the midafternoon. On Friday, the day after the boys broke the vase, he came home a couple hours early and announced that the pharmacies had been closed. The national guard and the CDC would be distributing vaccines for free from tents throughout town, and they had requested healthy trained professionals to volunteer their time at each location. He had been assigned the following Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

"It's about time," Their mother said. "Are we sure the vaccine is going to work?"

“Diane. Of course it’s going to work. This is a more powerful strain of smallpox. We don’t know if it’s naturally mutated or if someone genetically engineered it, but it’s stronger than what the older vaccines were designed to protect from. They’ve been working on the vaccines since the spring outbreak. They had to study that strain, reverse engineer it, and then produce this one.”

The entire family had been assigned vaccinations on Sunday at Lancaster General. It was the first time in two weeks that Elia had to get up early. Her mother hadn’t made pancakes, instead leaving pop tarts on three plates at the table. Her parents said nothing and her brothers very little on the drive over. The silence continued during their hour-long wait in line. Elia looked around for a friend from school, any familiar face, but they were surrounded by strangers. It was almost noon when they were called into a small room deep in the hospital. The man who gave them their shots worked with her father, and they talked briefly about shifts and how things were going. Her father’s friend said they planned to have the entire town immunized within two weeks. He said that some of them might get sick from the vaccine, but it was not a cause for alarm; it was just a mild side effect of having a dead version of the virus injected into their bodies.

Her mother was mostly quiet on the car ride home.

“Does this mean we’ll have to back to school soon?” Tyler asked.

“I imagine they’ll open in the next week,” Her father said, “Once more people get the vaccine.”

Tyler groaned, but Elia wondered why. Her brothers had been getting bored over the last few days.

“Hopefully this means I can go back to work too.” Her mother said. Elia thought it sounded half-hearted, but it was the first time in two weeks that her parents hadn’t argued when the plague was brought up, so she stayed quiet.

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Elia expected a phone call one night, or another letter through the mail slot, or her parents announcing an email fresh from the school board, but nothing changed for the next five days. The news channels her father watched incessantly replaced some of the footage of hazmat trucks with people lined up outside CDC tents, along with videos of other people receiving shots. The day after her family was vaccinated, the president appeared on the television to give a speech thanking the brilliant scientists and researchers who developed the new vaccine so quickly. He announced that one million Americans had been vaccinated in the United States alone, with several hundred thousand also vaccinated in Mexico, Canada, and parts of Europe. He said the goal was to get every single American vaccinated by February of the following year. When he finished, the camera cut back to the hosts who’d been talking about the pandemic before the speech.

“That’s great that they’ve finally got this thing rolled out and all,” one of them said, “but why didn’t he give an update on how many people are sick? We haven’t got official numbers from the CDC or WHO in over a week. How many people have been infected? What’s the survival rate? Why won’t anyone tell us how many people have died?”

He wasn’t the only one. On the third day after they were vaccinated, she watched her the entire Keswick family across the street rolled on gurneys into ambulances. The

white vans that picked up the sick and the dead alike silently rolled down her street several times per day. On the fourth day after her vaccination, the next door neighbor was helped into one of the vans by some national guardsmen. Ten minutes later one of the other neighbors was at the door. They spoke with her mother in hushed tones. Her lips were pursed and her forehead creased in worry when she finally shut the door. When her father got home from his second vaccination shift that night, she didn't wait for him to finish dinner. She walked into the kitchen, stood across from him, put one hand on the table, and leaned forward.

"Mr. Blanchard next door was taken to the hospital today."

"Oh. What for?" Her father got up to rummage through the fridge.

Her mother waited for him to sit back down. "He was taken in one of the white vans. The ones they're taking sick people in."

Her father frowned. "Oh, no."

"You don't get it, do you? Mr. Blanchard was vaccinated the same day we were."

Her father looked up, mouth half full of food. "He can't have been."

"Cindy saw him taken away too. We talked about it. She saw him walk out of the hospital the other day with his sleeve rolled up."

"That's impossible."

"It's not impossible. I saw it happen. She saw it happen."

Her father regained his composure, dabbed at his mouth with a napkin, and scooped more food with his spoon. "There's a misunderstanding. She must have seen someone else walk out of the hospital."

"Jesus Christ," her mother said, slapping the table, "Why won't you believe me? The only misunderstanding is this fucking vaccine."

He stared at her.

"This," she jabbed at her arm, "Is a fucking sham. I'm not a doctor, or a pharmacist, or an *expert*, but I know when I'm getting fucked over, and when other people are getting fucked over. Richard Blanchard is fucked over."

Her father looked around, saw Elia and her brothers stand in the doorway. "The kids are right here, Diane," He muttered.

"And what about them? This vaccine doesn't work. We have to think about the kids."

"What do you mean *think about the kids*?" Her father whipped back around.

"People are getting sick. There's no sign that it's stopping. These 'vaccines' probably don't help. Our *next door neighbor* was taken away today. We need to do something to protect the kids."

"What are you suggesting? That we drive somewhere? Leave town?"

"We need to do something!"

"And where do you think we would go? Where do you think is safe, Diane? This disease is *everywhere*. It's not just in Lancaster. It's in Philadelphia. It's in New York. It's on the West coast. It's in the Midwest, it's in the south, it's in Phoenix. You can't delude yourself into thinking you can run away."

"The only person deluding themselves right now is you," Her mother snapped back. "We could go to my parents' cabin."

"No," her father said, getting up and grabbing his plate. "No, no, no, not at all." He walked over to the sink, turned on the faucet, and furiously scrubbed the plate. "We are not going anywhere. The vaccine is working. And things will start going back to normal soon. The kids will probably start school this week. Your office will probably reopen. In a few weeks I can go back to the pharmacy."

He finished cleaning the plate, slammed it on the drying rack, and turned around. He looked at Elia and her brothers. "There's nothing to worry about," he said, "Everything is fine."

"Don't lie to them," her mother snapped, walking down the hall. "I think it's time for bed a little early today. Let's go."

Elia's brothers shuffled down the hall and up the stairs, but Elia hung back. She looked at her father. He was sweating. She looked at her mother down the hall, only half her body visible in the half-light of the hallway. They hadn't had a bed time for the past two weeks. She didn't want to go to bed. She thought about her the way her mother treated Gloria and her mom at the library. She felt her mother's arm wrapping around her body, from her shoulder to her hip. She remembered the burning shame she felt when she looked at Gloria, how Gloria had looked like she was going to cry before looking away.

Elia turned from her mother, walked into the living room, and sat on the sofa. She grabbed a book and flipped open to a random page. Her mother called her name once. The second time, her voice lowered into a growl. Her father walked out of the kitchen and into the hallway. She could hear him saying, let her be, we're scaring her, we're scaring all of them, I'll send her upstairs in an hour. There was more muttering she

couldn't hear, and a moment later she heard footsteps going up the stairs. Her father walked into the room and sat next to her on the couch.

"Sorry about that," he said, ruffling her hair. "You know how it is. Sometimes we yell at each other."

"I don't want to go to grandma's cabin," Elia said.

"You're not going to," her father said, reaching for the remote.

"Can I stay here with you and read for a little bit?" Elia asked.

"Of course," he said. She laid on her back, her propped up against his legs, her head resting against the arm of the sofa. She was soon lost in the book's pages. Some time later, she felt her father shift abruptly. She looked up. His eyes were wide, his shoulders lurched forward. She turned around to face the tv. Another reporting was talking directly into the camera. His voice sounded normal, but his lips barely moved, as if he were trying very hard not to lose control of them.

"This is an NBC news special report. Jafar Mohamed of *The Intercept* is reporting, and NBC can confirm, that the new smallpox vaccine being rolled out by the US Army and Centers for Disease Control's reported effectiveness is significantly lower than CDC or WHO data has previously suggested. *The Intercept* received leaked documents from the Department of Public Health yesterday morning, which allege that the US government's description of the vaccine has been disingenuous at best and purposefully misleading at worst. The vaccine, which is purported to immunize the recipient against the *neovariola* smallpox strain, does not in fact do so, but government biologists were pressured to release the most effective solution they had developed so far, due to the escalating nature of the *neovariola* crisis. The documents also show," he

paused for a moment, taking in a deep breath, “That while the government has not released data on infection or mortality rates related to the strain in ten days, during that time the CDC has received more than eight hundred thousand reported cases of infection, and more than 600 thousand confirmed fatalities due to the pandemic.”

“Oh my fucking God,” her father said, leaning forward. “No way. No way.”

The TV anchor kept talking, but his words melted into shapeless sounds. Elia felt dizzy for a moment, as if she’d been spun around on the playground. Her father was talking, his voice also incoherent and frayed at the edges. She put the book up to her face and leaned her forehead against the pages. She closed her eyes. A few moments later she opened them and the world was no longer a blur, but now it felt like there was a rock sitting in her stomach, solid and sharp.

“Absolutely not. Absolutely not. No, no, no.” Her father was pacing up and down the living room.

“Are you okay?” She asked. He continued to pace, his voice now only a bubbling mutter. She got up and tapped him on the arm. “Dad, are you okay?”

He stopped and looked at her. Blinking, he looked at the TV, then back at her. “Yes. Yes, I’m okay honey. Look! Wow, ten thirty. You should head to bed.”

A sharp pang in her stomach. Someone else was talking on the TV screen now. She didn’t want to be alone in the dark with her thoughts. She imagined staring at the ceiling, visualizing the useless vaccine floating through her bloodstream, limp and ignored by her antibodies. The medical shows she’d been watching had never said anything about dud vaccinations.

"Honey," her father said, smiling nervously at her, "You should really go to bed. You want to get back into your routine, since school will be starting soon."

School? She watched the corners of her father's mouth push into his cheeks. He was sweating. His hair was disheveled. There were bags under his eyes. But still he smiled wider. She realized he was in the process of convincing himself that she would be going back to school. She wanted to offer him a smile, but the muscles in her face didn't want to obey, so she turned quietly into the dark hall and climbed up the stairs.

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Despite having trouble falling asleep, she was woken early by screaming downstairs. Confusion blinded her like the bright sunlight pouring from the window, but after a moment she remembered. She lay still while they continued to scream. The words were mostly indecipherable, apart from a few clear punctuations, like the word *coward* or *insane* or *please.* Soon her parents' voices drifted closer, louder, the outlines of their words rebounding more clearly up the stairs, down the hall, and under her bedroom door.

"All of these TV stations, they're all owned by massive corporations," Her father sounded out of breath. "They're in it to make money. They want to make people afraid, drive up their ratings, charge more for advertisements. They're inflating rumors for money!"

"First you tell me that my talk radio is a bunch of conspiracies and fearmongering, but as soon as your news stations, reporters, and Sunday morning political shows tell you what you don't want to hear, then *they're* full of conspiracies and lies."

"Diane, please don't do anything drastic. You're not thinking critically."

"Fuck you."

"There are plenty of rational, healthy ways to vent your frustration. You could go to the protest this afternoon! You could express your anger there, with other people from the community. Running away won't solve anything."

"I'm not running away," her mother said, outside Elia's door now. "I'm removing myself from the situation."

The door opened, and suddenly her mother was sitting at the foot of the bed. She smiled at Elia. Her eyes were bloodshot, her hair in a sloppy pony tail.

"Hi sweetie," she said, squeezing Elia's foot through the covers. "We're going to go for a trip."

"Where?"

"To your grandmother's cabin in the Poconos."

"Are we going to get away from the plague?"

Her mother winced. "Yes, honey. We're going to go on a vacation until everything settles down."

"But Dad isn't coming."

The tired smile wilted. "Your father is more than welcome to come, if he wants." She got up. "I'm going to pack some clothes for you in a bit. There's breakfast downstairs. Why don't you pack some toys or books after you eat?"

Just as Elia was about to protest, they heard a mucus-choked coughing, followed by a succession of bangs. They both ran to the foot of the stairs. Her father lay on the floor his legs splayed on the first steps, his skin pale, his hair soaked and pressed against his forehead.

"Oh my god," her mother screamed. "Are you okay?"

He sat up and opened his mouth as if to speak. Green liquid splashed out of his mouth and onto his wrinkled clothe. He cupped his hands under his chin in surprise, as if to catch it.

"Oh my god, oh my god," Her mother grabbed Elia. "Go back to your room. Go back to your room!"

Terrified, Elia scurried back to her bed. She knelt next to it, leaning her arms on the mattress as if preparing for prayer. She stared out the door in terror. More vomiting sounds. Her mother was speaking in quick stutters, telling her father to get up and lock himself in the basement powder room.

"Diane, no, this is just – just dehydration, I haven't eaten anything since dinner yesterday,"

Then another *thud*. Her mother screamed "I'm warning you!" and seconds later, the powder room door slammed shut.

Elia listened as her mother mopped the pool of vomit. Her father moaned downstairs in the bathroom. Elia stared out the door. Finally her mother reappeared in her doorway. "Elia, please, get dressed. We're leaving now."

"What about Dad?" Elia asked as her mother walked down the hall to the boys' room. "Dad's sick." She stood in the doorway as her mother woke her brothers and started

rummaging through their closet.

"Elia, please put on your clothes." Her voice was flat.

"Why did you put him in the powder room?"

"Pack some books. Pack your favorite books."

"We can't leave until Dad is better."

Her mother froze. Her shoulders sagged forward. She looked up at Elia. She was crying.

"Please, please don't worry about Dad right now. Please go pack some books. I'll help you pack some clothes in a few minutes."

"I don't want to go to the Poconos."

Her mother stood. Elia felt the rage in the way her body moved: shoulders straight up, knees unbending, her entire torso, arms, shoulders, and neck rigid, as if she were trying not to lash out at any moment. Elia cowered as her mother loomed over her.

"If you don't go back to your room and start to pack, I'm going to smack you until you listen." Her voice was low, as if she didn't want anyone else to hear. Her brothers were still clawing the grogginess from their eyes.

"I am going to count to three," her mother said in the same low, strange voice. "One."

Elia got up and walked quickly back to her room. She grabbed her backpack from school. There was one book already in there. She looked at her bookshelf: She didn't want to have to go without any of them, but despite how hard she tried, only nine fit in her backpack.

A few minutes later her mother marched in and opened her closet. Elia saw her roller bag that her father had bought for the week-long family trip to Disney World two years prior. Elia and her mother had packed the night before, laughing at her father's exasperation about the sheer amount of clothes they were trying to fit. The suitcase had

been filled to the brim, evenly folded clothes pushing the zipper to its limits. Now, her mother was taking clothes off the shelves and dropping them into the suitcase in clumps.

Five minutes later she was following her brothers downstairs, their suitcase wheels clattering against the hardwood. They stepped over the mop and tried their best to pretend they didn't hear their father moaning in the powder room. Elia watched her brother's faces: they too were pale, the blood drained from their cheeks, their eyes wide and roving around the room, their hands clenching the suitcase handles.

Their mother rummaged in the pantry, dropping cans of food into brown paper shopping bags. Her father's moans were low, barely audible over the crinkling of paper and clanging aluminum. Soon she placed three bags by the door before running upstairs. Flares of pain and tension burned her torso and shoulders. It felt like her chest was going to rip in two. How could her mother just throw her Dad into a closet and leave him here? Elia knew her mother thought he had the smallpox. But she'd watched a lot of TV with him over the last couple of weeks, and it had said over and over that the early symptoms could be easily mistaken for something as simple as the flu. He'd been interacting with a lot of people, and there were a lot more diseases out there than smallpox. She detested how her mother treated other people who she thought were sick: first Gloria and her mom, now her own husband. What happened if one of her brothers got sick? If Elia came down with a fever on the ride to the Poconos, would she be left on the side of the road?

Her mother was back downstairs, piling toilet paper into a trash bag. Elia wanted to do something. She wanted to hit her mother, to rip open the paper bags and send the cans of food rolling down the hallway. She wanted to keep her family here and help her father. He just needed water and rest, just like when Elia had had the flu when she was

five. She started walking towards the door. Her mother didn't notice, but Tyler did. He let out a little yelp, like someone had stomped on his foot. Elia kept walking.

"What are you doing?" her mother's voice frantic.

She grabbed the doorknob and turned. It stuck for a moment, like it had always done.

The scuffing of shoes on wood. Her mother's gasps and grunts getting closer.

She wrenched the door open. Her father lay crumpled in the corner, his chest heaving slowly between the wall and the toilet bowl. More vomit puddled on the floor next to him. The skin on his arms and face was covered in round white blisters. They crunched in his elbow. They protruded from his cheeks. Just as his eyes opened, she felt her mother's arm around her stomach, her ragged breath against her ear. The door slammed shut again. Later, Tyler would tell her that he and Dylan were weeping as her mother dragged her to the car. That she didn't speak at all on the car ride up to the Poconos, instead staring out the window at the passing landscape. She doesn't remember those hours between opening the powder room door and arriving at the cabin. The only thing she remembers, after finding her father covered in hives, were his wide eyes and low whimper.

Chapter 5

Compared to most of the resettlements scattered around the valley, New Hope is a bustling metropolis. People carry baskets of laundry uphill from the banks of the Delaware River while others converse at the street corners. Dogs bark from the windows of repurposed shops and houses. Vendors shout their prices for fresh venison, fish, potatoes, and tomatoes over the crowds of both open-air markets situated in former parking lots. Thin alleyways and avenues wind around and intersect with Main Street, where most of the businesses are located. Many of the buildings along the wider Bridge Street and Main Street are large, old-style brick structures, while the homes along the side streets are thinner, taller, and crumpled together, stacked horizontally like oversized accordions of plaster and wood. At the top of the hill it's possible to see the sun rise and set over the river. Residents sometime stop at dusk to watch the water melt from clear grey, to deep fuchsia, then crimson, before it settles into an inky black.

Before the *variola prodigium* epidemic, most of the Main Street establishments had been artisanal and boutique businesses offering organic ice cream, handcrafted home décor, and overpriced knickknacks. The streets were quiet during weekday afternoons, when most of the residents were busy at the biotech and pharmaceutical companies located at the edge of town. But once the evening rolled around, they would pour into the street, pushing baby strollers or restraining small, yipping dogs. The city had been white and wealthy. The men wore cashmere cardigans and wing-tipped loafers in the autumn, plaid shorts and neon polos in the summer. The women sported silk scarves during the colder months and designer dresses in the warmer months. Arguments over which

antique dresser to put in the spare room floated out of open-door shops and into the streets.

Once the plague burned through the country and the looting and pillaging slowed, survivors sought out places to earn a living. Towns situated along the Delaware and Susquehanna rivers stirred with life. People fished along the riverbanks, hunted in the woods, and picked through the abandoned villages. Others preyed on the vulnerable and the weak, slitting their throats, taking their belongings, and disappearing into the night. Some groups camped at crossroads or hid away in the abandoned downtown, demanding payment in food or flesh when scavengers scuttled through. Those who made more honest livings chose to live together and form security patrols as protection.

In New Hope, the fishermen living close to the docks soon allied with some of the old residents who had returned and scavenged the abandoned shops and downtown residencies. They lured in mercenaries and marauders alike with promises of free food and shelter, and then drove away the troll clan that had set up shop on the bridge over the river. When the stores of canned food started to dwindle, some of the scavengers reclaimed the farms outside town, or started new ones. The trade between farmers, scavengers, fishermen, hunters, and old residents created the need to repurpose most of the old shops. The useless contents of the abandoned stores were swept out and new businesses moved in. The antique dressers, ornate picture frames, and other useless knickknacks were shredded for scrap. Some old shops, like Ahmed's Independent Bookstore and Casey's Food Co-Op, opened their doors once again.

Word spread about the ample supply in New Hope, and many people who had spent three years scavenging flooded into the town in search of a stable, secure life. More

businesses popped up: two taverns and a hotel for travelers, an herbalist, and a blacksmith. The residential areas adjacent to downtown were quickly reclaimed and renovated. By the beginning of the fourth year after the plague, the population was nearing a thousand people; they needed a government to manage the thriving trade and social life. The town reorganized, instituting a five-person council elected every three years and a mayor elected every four years, splitting powers between them. Many of those pouring into the city were old residents who had fled during the riots. They restored town landmarks like the Bucks County Playhouse and the New Hope Historical Society. Those who had spent their entire lives in the town before the plague offered tours to visitors, and a troupe put on productions at the playhouse several times per year.

New Hope's pre-plague municipality had included spacy residential areas along its outer-limits. When the town was reorganized, these were left outside its boundaries; it was easier to protect and maintain the smaller and denser downtown. Some of the large suburban houses outside the new city limits were torn down. Their scrap was used to build the six-foot, mile-long wall that now crawls from the route 202 bridge at the western corner of town, curls around the old high school and elementary schools, and cuts southeast through residential areas before terminating feet from the river. Fused together from the stone, plaster, and wood of nearby abandoned houses, it stands eight feet high. Barbed wire gleams atop it like spider webs. Guards keep an eye on the surrounding woods and fields from small watchtowers erected along the wall, whose farthest corners stretch half a mile from the business and residential areas at the heart of town. The Delaware River serves as an eastern boundary, patrolled by the militia to check all of the trade ships sailing in from the north and south.

While Caleb and Elia make their slow ascent up Route 309, Quentin Baker, the Mayor of New Hope, stands at the edge of the docks. No boats have arrived yet today and the only sounds are the lapping water and creaking wood. He sips a morning tea. He likes to clear the fog from sleep while watching the sun rise over the river. The clouds fold over each other in the water's waves. A breeze rolls off the river, splashing water against the wooden planks. The earthy aromas of churning sediment and brine waft off the surface of the water, invigorating his senses and waking his mind for the day's work. There are reports from the school principle to go over, numbers to highlight; over two dozen children passed their literacy exams, and even more have completed their first course of algebra. Then there's the numbers from the trade ledgers: tax funds are higher than any year on record since the plague. He met last night with Claire, the architect responsible for building new housing in the fields beyond the northwest quadrant of town, and wants to go over his notes so that he is able to discuss the projects with authority.

Once the sun rises over the trees on the other side of the river, he turns around, walks back to the street and turns towards city hall. The crisp morning air and honey sunlight match his mood: there is almost nothing but good news for New Hope. The last smallpox case was eight years ago. The population continues to grow. There is a surplus of food. The town guard's campaigns to snuff out marauders along the roads and bridges within a five-mile radius have all proven successful. The children are being educated. There is room to grow, as long as it takes place at a slow and steady rate. The town is the biggest resettlement along the Delaware river, perhaps anywhere in the valley, and for the tenth year in a row not a single citizen will go hungry this winter.

He stops by New Logan Tavern for a bite to eat. Fishermen and farmers chatter inside. After exchanging brief greetings and making an order with the tavern owner, Quentin sits at a table by himself. He smiles to the other patrons, who wave and nod at him. They're familiar with his morning routine. While he enjoys the company of others, he prefers to be alone for the first couple hours of the day, in order to gather his thoughts and build energy for the talking and listening that come as a part of his job. He still laments the loss of coffee, which used to help accelerate this process. But bowl of oatmeal and a buttered roll have done the job well enough over the last ten years.

An older man ambles into the tavern. By his faded argyle sweater, wrinkled kaki pants, pasty white skin, and thinning grey hair, Quentin knows it's Tom Connor, and braces for the worst. While most of the tavern's regular patrons know to leave him alone during his breakfast visits, Tom either doesn't understand or doesn't care. After Quentin was elected Mayor for the first time, Tom approached him about rehabilitating the New Hope Historical Society, which had been located in an 18th century mansion on Main Street. Despite what others in the town and on the council had thought, Quentin had agreed about the importance of preserving town history, especially after so much had been lost during the plague, so he granted Tom a stipend of food and shelter, as long as he repaired and maintained the house. Tom had taken that act as a gesture of friendship, which despite his thorny personality, Quentin has tolerated.

As expected, Tom settles across from him at the table.

"Morning Quentin, this cold is a bitch, right?"

"Good morning Tom. Winter's on its way, for sure."

"The summers are too damn hot. The winters are too damn cold. Fall and Spring get shorter every year. It's a load of horseshit, if you ask me."

Quentin munches on his buttered roll. "Fall certainly feels shorter than last year."

"Tyrone Birmingham keeps leaving his fishing equipment up against the mansion wall. It's a 300-year-old building, not a place for him to leave his shit. I've told him not to do it and he ignores me."

"I can talk to him."

Tom munches for a few moments. Quentin begins to think he might be able to finish his breakfast quickly and leave before he thinks of something else to complain about, but then Tom opens his mouth again.

"And on top of all the regular shit, there's those rumors about the refugees."

Quentin grimaces. "That's just talk, Tom. There's always rumors about refugees."

"Sometimes the rumors aren't anything but hot air, and sometimes there's some truth to them. But these rumors are different. I've heard the fishermen and traders down by the docks talking about it for the past week. They say the drought out west got even worse this year, and there's thousands of people trying to get here before winter."

Part of Quentin's job as Mayor is to sift through the gossip traders bring through the gates or up the river. They are a dubious source of news, carrying stories of real happenings inevitably fractured and distorted through word-of-mouth transmission. But they are the only source of news available, and so Quentin listens to them intently regardless. Sometimes the stories they carry are true: political squabbles in nearby resettlements like Washington Crossing, Morrisville, and Croyden, which crops have failed and succeeded, which towns have suffered from superpox flare ups. He must take

in the gossip and rumors, do his best to separate fact from fiction, and determine how the developments outside New Hope's walls affect the wellbeing of the town and its citizens.

"Well, I haven't heard anything definitive," he says, brushing his mouth with a napkin. "If there are refugees, the council and I will handle the situation just like we've handled others in the past." He doesn't want to validate Tom's complaints, but he has been keeping track of these rumors: thousands of refugees from central Pennsylvania fleeing drought, tent camps sprouting up like pustules around Pottstown and West Chester. Even though they sounded outlandish, he had treated them with the seriousness he gives any issue that might face the town and sent a scout from the town guard to West Chester two weeks ago. The scout was supposed to report back before the town meeting tonight, but so far hasn't returned. Quentin expects him back today; moving quickly on foot, the trip out to West chest and back can take about ten days at minimum, and two weeks at maximum.

He starts to say goodbye when Tom pipes up again. "It's all gone to hell. But things will start looking up once the government gets its shit together."

Quentin waits a beat before saying goodbye as politely as possible. He drops his dishes off at the counter, scoots out the door, and sighs once he's out of Tom's sight. There have been times when he didn't escape quickly enough, and he got caught waiting for Tom to work through some of his fantasies of glorious restoration, about how the government will turn the power grid back on, how it'll rebuild the highways, or give them all bug zappers so they can sit on their porches again without being eaten alive by the god damn little pieces of shit.

There are rumors about those kinds of things, exasperated whispers about remnant government and military factions warring in the ruins of Washington D.C. There might be some truth to these stories: surely some military groups survived the plague. But Quentin has learned that on the whole these whispers are fables meant to reassure people like Tom, who cling to the belief that life could return to a pre-plague normality. He hadn't met Tom, who says he used to live about an hour's drive north, before the plague, but Quentin suspects that he hadn't been nearly so bitter before. There are people who live in a state of denial about how their lives have changed. Tom is one of the many who handle it by refusing to enjoy anything about their lives after the plague. Many people who live in the town see him as ungrateful, but Quentin tries his best to be kind, because Tom Connor seems, to him, like someone caught in an unending state of grief.

His thoughts turn once again towards the rumors of drought in the west. He doubts there are thousands of hungry people marching towards the valley, but the whispers have only persisted and grown louder in the last week, so there must be some truth to them. They last had refugees a couple years ago, and while a few of them caused some trouble when they saw that the people working at the school and the clinic were black, most of them had been overjoyed at the opportunity for food and shelter. He kept certain corners of town vacant for new arrivals, whether they be those voluntarily moving in, or those forced out of their homes elsewhere by natural disasters or human violence. If there are indeed refugees, he will find give them what they need to make it through the winter, and if they choose to stay by spring, there will be many ways they can be put to work: fishing, farming, hunting, building repair, the town guard.

The refugee rumors slip from his mind as he walks to city hall, works on his presentation for the town hall, and meets with various people from town. It isn't until the sun starts to sink in the sky that he remembers the scout. No one in town hall says they've seen him, so he walks over to the front gate, where the town guard report that he has yet to return. While they say nothing, their faces betray their worry. The town guard are trained by former military officers; a scout hasn't gone missing in years. He asks them to send word if the scout doesn't return by the start of the town hall. If he hasn't returned by the end of the first night shift, they will have to send out a scouting party at dawn. The first pangs of worry stab in his gut as the sun sinks below the wall.

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A couple hours later, as Quentin watches townspeople file into the old high school auditorium, the pangs of worry have sharpened into gnawing anxiety. This morning, the rumors hadn't even been on his radar. He wanted to go into the meeting with solid information instead of rumors. He smiles at a few people. One of the most helpful farmers walks up with his son; they shake hands and Quentin comments on how much the son has grown over the summer. While chatting with them, he plots out different ways to address the rumors. He has always been good at keeping up a pleasant public face; it was necessary when meeting with belligerent students in graduate school, and even more so when conversing with angry parents as New Hope High School principal. It has proven invaluable during his tenure as mayor.

After the farmer and his son take their leave, Quentin listens for talk of the rumors. The gymnasium's acoustics are designed to bolster someone speaking loud and clearly, but anything else sounds like a cloud of incoherent mumbling, spread thick

through the room like a fog. He walks a slow lap around the edges of the seats. He catches a few words here or there; it is difficult to discern what most conversations are about, but towards the back of the room he thinks he overhears the words “refugees” and “drought” several times. The words flutter among concerned faces and tight scowls, so it’s unlikely he misheard.

Five minutes before the meeting begins he assumes his seat on the stage, next to the five council members. Elaine, the only member remaining from the first elections, leans over and asks him what he’s heard about the refugees. He offers her a slight smile and says that as far as he’s concerned, it’s nothing to worry about. She squints her eyes and leans the other way to whisper in another member’s ear. He has worked with her long enough to know that she wasn’t satisfied with his answer. The gymnasium is now almost full, a couple hundred people filling most of the seats. A crowd has arrived, filing along the walls when the last seats are taken. Once there seems to be minimum movement along the aisles, he clears his throat, and shouts down the crowd’s murmurs.

He resolves to put the rumors at the back of his mind and only address them if they come up during question and answer. He moves easily through his pre-planned talking points; the town is thriving in almost every way, and there is room to grow. The people towards the front look impressed when he and the architect discuss the development of the new houses, slated to start in the spring. Several parents rise and give testimony to how solid the new school curriculum is. He beams each time they stand and offer their thoughts; the school is really one of the town’s crowning achievements. Ten years ago, their goals were to ensure some semblance of safety, and to avoid anyone

dying of hunger. Today, children who were born to a world savagely different form the one their parents knew are learning how to read and write.

The council members offer no criticisms or complaints, and Quentin answers all of their questions with ease. The first couple questions from residents are concerned with food stores and trade. The pressure in his abdomen starts to relax; the rumors might not come up after all. But then Razan Affes, one of the tavern owners, stands and clears her throat.

"I'll guess I'm not the only one with this question on my mind," she says, as the light buzz of chatter from the crowd fizzles into silence. "There's been a lot of talk over the last week about people coming from central Pennsylvania. What do you know about this?"

Quentin frowns. Everyone's eyes are on him. He can feel Elaine and the rest of the council starting at the back of his head. He sighs and offers his knowledge, but omits the missing scout.

"So we know that there have been droughts in that area, yes, but that doesn't mean we're going to have thousands of people showing up at the town gates," he says, forcing himself to look directly in Razan's eyes.

"But if there *are* refugees, how many could we feed without losing our surplus?"

He doesn't hesitate: "About one hundred, presuming the majority of them are adults." Murmurs rise from the crowd. "But like I said, there's no evidence that there is actually a horde of starving people slowly making their way to New Hope. There is nothing to fear."

“My sister said that she heard Pottstown and West Chester have been overrun with the refugees,” a woman Quentin does not recognize stands up. “She says there’s thousands of them, and when they don’t get food, they’re violent.”

“Wouldn’t you get violent if you didn’t have food?” a voice shouts from the crowd.

“It’ll be just like right after the plague, all over again,” Another voice cuts through the murmurs.

“Now, please,” Quentin says, stretching out his arms to try and quiet the crowd.

“What do we do if the rumors are true?” Gloria Melendez, one of the militia captains, stands up. “New Hope’s success isn’t exactly a secret. What if a thousand people show up wanting what we have? What if they try to take it?”

“Whatever rumors you’ve heard, it won’t come to that,” Quentin appeals to the crowd instead of Gloria, because the mumbles are growing into an anxious buzz.

“We also need to be honest here,” Gloria continues, raising her voice louder than Quentin’s, “Harrisburg, Lewistown – these are white-only towns. They think they deserve our food and security more than we do.”

“Gloria,” Quentin pleads, looking directly at her now.

“I know how they are,” she continues, looking at the faces around her, “I’ve been there.”

The buzz dies down a bit as she continues: “I stayed in Trenton during the second wave of the plague, because there were tanks and Humvees parked on my street. When they were abandoned and everything seemed to come undone, I went west. Like most of us, I heard that was the only chance for survival. I lost one of my children to a troll gang

in the night, and another died from a festering wound. When I got to Harrisburg, they turned me away," She pauses, grimacing. "The first time, they said I couldn't be let in because I might carry the plague, because *people like me* were immune to it. I told them hell no, my husband had died of it in a hospital bed while I was sleeping at home. That's when they got mad: they called me a cunt, a spic, a walking talking piece of biological warfare. They told me to go back to Mexico with the rest of my diseased friends, that I should leave this small sliver of their world left for them. I'm fucking Puerto Rican!" She pauses, furrowing her brow, before continuing: "I was starving. And they turned me away. What goes around comes around. If they show up at our doors, we keep them out, by any means necessary."

There was a general clamor of approval, light cheering with a smattering of applause. Before Quentin could speak again a white man stood near the back of the seats. "What they did to you was horrible, sure," he said, looking at Gloria, "But there was a lot of misinformation. There was a lot of fear. They had probably seen their loved ones die. What some people may have done a long time ago shouldn't dictate how we would act now. How could they have known?"

Gloria's face contorts into a mixed expression of shock and disgust. "The fuck you mean, how could they know? Of course they knew," Her voice drops and her eyes narrow. "You people have always known."

"You're still bitter," the man says softly, "but we have to be better than that."

The crowd buzzes again with agreement and a louder chorus of applause. Gloria looks furious and opens her mouth to speak, before someone starts shouting behind

Quentin. He turns around and sees Elaine on her feet, arms raised in the air, trying to return order.

"Hey there, hey there," she says as the assembly grows quiet. "Like Mayor Baker said, we don't know if there are any refugees at all," She looks down at him. "But, considering the sudden volume and velocity of these rumors, it doesn't hurt to plan for the worst."

"I'm not sure what you're suggesting," Quentin says after a waiting a couple beats for her to continue.

"The people deserve to hear how you would handle a couple a thousand starving people showing up at the gates."

He frowns. If there is one thing that has always bothered him, it's when politicians talk about "the people," instead of simply saying "people." He turns around and scans the crowd. Everyone looks at him expectantly. He thinks for a few moments before sighing. "There is plenty of space outside the town walls. There must still be dozens, if not hundreds of houses within a mile from town. And they could build their own shelters if need be." He pauses. Some of the faces looking back at him are blank; others are angry. "They would be free to hunt in the woods, just like us, and we could let them use parts of the river, farther south, to fish. But we would also have to ration."

There are the murmurs again, rising viscously from the crowd, a churning, low rumble of molten discontent. The town hasn't needed rations during winter in years, and Quentin had just said half an hour earlier that there wouldn't be any need for the foreseeable future. Everyone in this room had come to this town to escape hunger. They wouldn't like the idea of sharing what was theirs with strangers.

“I think it’s safe to say that the people would rather not ration again,” Elaine is standing again. She looks back down at Quentin. “The council would like a more detailed proposal in the next 24 hours,” she gestures to the other four council members, who each nod, “so we can look it over, submit it for debate, and vote on it in the next couple days. Thank you everyone!” She shouts, and people turn to each other as they file out of their seats. The buzz of hundreds of voices fills the air again. She offers him a curt smile before walking down from the stage, up the aisle, and into the crowd.

One of the other council members, an older Hispanic gentleman who was just elected earlier this year, approaches Quentin. “I personally don’t think this drought business out west is anything to worry about,” he says, “especially since we’ve been doing pretty well. But,” he leans in and raises his eyebrows, “the idea of a possible crisis now, just a couple months away from the Mayoral election, seems like an awfully convenient moment for Elaine.”

“What do you mean?” Quentin asks.

“You haven’t heard? She’s thinking of running against you in January.”

Quentin tries not to look surprised. He’d won in a landslide during the first elections, and went unopposed during his first reelection effort. The council races were the only ones that had proved competitive so far. He hadn’t really expected to run against anyone either.

“I’m going to be honest with you, that’s news to me.”

The councilman slaps him on the back and grins. “Like I said, the drought and the refugees, she just wants the opportunity to look like her ideas are better than yours. There’s probably nothing to those rumors, after all.”