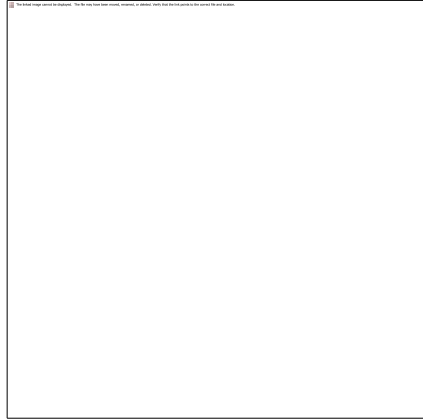


~ Rabbits of the Apocalypse ~

by Zipplic

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1st Place

The Athenaeum's 2009

SF/Fantasy Contest

Content Warning: For the past two weeks, I have been sleeping very little, mainlining caffeine, and sustaining myself almost exclusively on cut-price tofu and pink candy given me by a kindly minister's wife, so I make no apologies for anything. This story contains: violence, more violence, smoking, drinking, lechery, road warriors, adorable bunnies, lots of swearing, exploitation, lies, unflattering comments about religion, and a couple of not-particularly healthy relationships. Still- bunnies.

Pirate Warning: Yarr. Thar be no pirates at all in this story. Ye have my apologies. But thar be switchblades and crazed cultists instead.

Teaser: Civilization in shatters, human trafficking, rabid religious groups...There's no doubt about it, the future kinda sucks. In the remote desert town of Lafontaine, Casey Prentice is trying to survive the endtimes by keeping her head down. But that ceases to be an option when the Anastasian League descends on the town. When Casey takes in one of the League's escaping prisoners, she brings herself into conflict with the powerful cult, and invites a whole new kind of danger into her life. Because the town of Lafontaine has a secret...and if the League discovers it, then the apocalypse will be the least of Casey's worries.

Chapter One: In which my sister is wrong about the world ending, and we drink champagne nevertheless.

I was reading *The Stainless Steel Rat* for the fifty-third time when my little sister Emily slammed open the apartment hatch.

"Aliens are attacking the city!" she yelled at me, and then she slammed straight back out again.

My reaction surprised even me. "Thank God," I said out loud, and I dropped my dog-eared book and hurried after her.

Four of us lived in the apartment back then: me, and Emily, "Malice" Hiroyama, and Emily's stupid boyfriend. (There had been so many of them, I had long since given up trying to learn their names.) We lived in a so-called "eco-eco" unit, which was supposed to mean Economical and Ecological. In practical terms, that just meant Far Too Small, and since four people lived in there, it was crowded beyond reason or description. You didn't walk across the floor, you kind of waded across it, kicking things out of your way as you went- my tools, Malice's porn magazines, the stupid boyfriend's enormous smelly sneakers, Emily's hoarded tubes of cheap lipstick. I managed to reach the hatch with no injuries but a scraped ankle. Not bad, considering.

My sling was hanging on its hook by the hatch. I thought about leaving it behind. If I was going to be killed by aliens tonight, I planned to go out kind of graceful-like. And flinging rocks at a hovering mothership isn't the most graceful form of activity known to man. But old habits, as you may have heard, are very hard to break. I clipped the sling to my belt, then opened the hatch and slid down the ladder. Then I remembered about the bottle that we had been saving under the weapons rack for just such an occasion. I hurriedly pulled myself back up the ladder to grab it.

The streets outside had begun to fill. There was Emily, of course, who was wrapped around her stupid boyfriend as if she was trying to imitate a sweater. There were the labourers from the artesian well and the generator station. There were the working girls from the brothel down the street- most of them were older than forty, and they were the only people in sight with shaved legs. There was Orelle Johnson, her baby blue dressing gown fluttering around her bulky body- she owned the entire block of eco-ecos, and carried a sawn-off shotgun in case she had to defend them. There were other tenants from the building, store-front vendors and small time farmers. Then there was a smattering of the usual debris: beggars and beggar-children, most of them with missing limbs or eyes; vagrants, pickpockets, and street prophets. Plus a handful of the sackcloth-clad pilgrims who sometimes drift through the desert looking for God knows what- quite literally, I suppose. And there was "Malice" Hiroyama, who was perched on the rusting hulk of a truck that was parked in front of our building. Permanently parked, since the engine and tires were missing, and it sat propped up on concrete blocks.

Every last one of them was gawking up at the sky.

It was worth gawking at. Hovering up there, shimmering against the flat-black of the starless night, was a ring of blue light, an energy beam that hummed and crackled with electricity, pulsing and glowing and rippling.

Interesting.

I hoisted myself up on the truck next to Malice. Her spikes of black hair reflected the pulses of blue energy, making it look like her whole head was electric. Malice is only half Japanese, by the way- her father was Roma. Emily and I, on the other hand, are a mix of Korean and Filipino, with a little Greek and Irish in the blend. Pretty average.

"Aliens attacking?" I asked Malice.

"That's the working theory."

She didn't offer any more information, so, along with everyone else, I studied the sky. What was it, that ring of electricity? The landing lights of a flying saucer? A death beam? A transdimensional portal that would whisk us all off to a planet where we would be used as livestock? Or something even more exciting?

"I guess this is it," I told Malice. "In a final kind of ultimate sense."

Malice had her switchblade out. With it, she scratched delicately behind her right ear. "Maybe not. Maybe the aliens have no germ resistance. Maybe they'll catch a bunch of earthling diseases and croak before they can enslave all of humanity."

"Maybe. Worth a try. Tell you what, when tentacled beasts come after us with anal probes, let's you and me cough on them real hard."

She bared her teeth at me- the Malice version of a smile. "You cough on them," she said. "I'll see if I can give 'em an STD. Let's cover all the bases."

Now Malice was the kind of friend that you need exactly *one* of- the kind of friend who criticizes everything you do, steals your belongings, and laughs at all your mistakes. The kind of friend who sleeps with women you've been secretly pining after for months, and does it in your bed. The kind of friend that you hate half the time, but can't live without. We forged our unholy alliance soon after we arrived at the Brownstone Children's Home, and it had endured through our rather stormy lives. We had panned for gold together, built a church, spent some time on a chain gang, and beaten each other bloody on a number of occasions. For the past few years, she'd been my roommate, which suited me fine though I wished she would wait until I was asleep before she started to wank.

Her real name was "Alice," but her nickname described her better.

Malice spat deliberately, as if commenting on the situation. "Did you remember to bring the end-of-the-world champagne?"

I clucked my tongue sadly. "Malice, my Malice, why would you ask me such a question? Of course I brought the end-of-the-world champagne. I know how to accessorize for the apocalypse."

I began to work the cork out of the bottle with my thumbs- my corkscrew had died a horrible death a few months earlier, when Malice threw it at a roach with more than her usual enthusiasm. As I did that, I looked around. The pilgrims had formed a circle, and were kneeling to pray. All of the prostitutes had joined them, and some of the street merchants as well. The pickpockets had come to their senses, and were moving delicately through the crowd, lifting jewellery and keys from oblivious bystanders. Other people had gone inside to get weapons. Orelle Johnson had

already hoisted her shotgun into position. She was pointing it at the ring of blue energy, ready to shoot as soon as she saw the white of something's eyes. The drone of the electricity overhead was getting louder, turning into a shrill whine, and then a roar. Something was heating up, something was about to happen.

But still the street looked normal, with clotheslines of drying diapers strung between piles of scrap, with the concrete fouled by urine and garbage and broken glass. Bare poles overhead which used to be streetlamps stood empty, their bulbs blown out or stolen long ago. From the crowds, as always, wafted the stink of unwashed skin and homemade liquor. An ordinary day in a time when no-one was ever really safe and nothing was ever really clean and everyone was always at least a little bit hungry.

And I thought- if the world had to end, it had picked a pretty good time to do it.

Emily bounced over to us, dragging her stupid boyfriend behind her like a little red wagon. "You see? Didn't I tell you? Alien invasion. Do you have the end-of-the-world champagne? Can we drink the end-of-the-world champagne?"

"Hold your horses." I gave the cork one more tug, and it eased free. It came out without much of a pop, and without anything in the way of fizz. A sour vinegar smell wafted from the bottle. But when you live in the endtimes, you take what you can get.

As soon as the bottle was open, Malice grabbed it from me, and, with her free hand, she pulled a string of rosary beads from her pocket.

"This is gonna suck," she said. "I can just tell."

She took a long swig from the bottle, and then bowed her head over the beads to say her rosary. This was a slow and laborious process. Malice had said the rosary every night since she was a small toddling thing- but she still didn't know all the words.

She would improvise sometimes. "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, you've got the virgin thing going, I really like what you've done with your hair." Like that.

I relieved her of the champagne and hopped down from the truck. Emily snatched for the bottle, but I held it out of her reach. "Now are you sure you wanna be drunk for the end of the world?" I asked her. "I don't want to hear any complaints later."

Emily rolled her eyes. "Casey, who wouldn't wanna be drunk for the end of the world? Besides- *you* may be able to get drunk off a quarter-bottle of shitty champagne, but *I* sure as hell can't-holy CRAP!"

At least, I think that she said "holy crap," but I can't be sure. Her words were drowned by the sounds that suddenly erupted overhead- a *hiss* and then a *crack* and then a BOOM! The *hiss* sounded like a thousand red-hot frying pans were being tossed into cold water; the *crack* sounded like a pane of glass the size of Australia was being hit with a hammer the size of New

Zealand; the BOOM! was ten times as loud as either of these and made us all clap our hands to our ears. Some people in the crowd lost control of their weapons, and bullets went barking up into the air above the tenements. Some people in the crowd lost control of their bladders, and that didn't help much either.

The ring of energy was expanding now, growing larger and larger, like a giant blue rubber band being stretched. And as it expanded, it seemed to be coming towards us, hovering lower and lower in the sky.

"It's like a boundary line," Malice said, clambering down from the truck. "Looks like it's going to surround the whole town."

I frowned. Why did that sound so familiar?

"Like an electric fence?" Emily asked. "Why would they do that?"

"Dunno, kid," Malice said. "It's *my* first apocalypse too."

Emily's stupid boyfriend spoke up for the first time. "But shouldn't we run? Try to get out of town?"

"Outrun the alien energy beams? What makes you think that'll end well? Casey, quit hogging the champagne."

"I haven't had any yet," I said. "Wait a minute."

The blue ring of energy had sunk almost to the ground. Bits of it still winked through gaps between the buildings. I imagined it- a long pulsing line enclosing the whole town. If we'd ever had a chance to fight back, it was too late now. So this would be the end, and what the hell. I raised the champagne to my lips.

And that was when it clicked in my brain.

"God damn it!" I roared, lowering the bottle again. "It isn't aliens!"

"What?" Emily said, as she tried to take the champagne from me. "What is it, then?"

I raised my voice, addressing the street. "It's the League! It's the goddamn motherfucking League! An Inquisition gang and a bunch of League thugs!"

Recognition hit instantly. The pilgrims rose to their feet, looking crestfallen; the brothel girls blew out tired breaths. Orelle Johnson swung her shotgun down from her shoulder and wiped her face. "Christ," she said, "that's worse than aliens."

Malice raised her head from her rosary beads. "You mean, the Anastasian League?"

"No, I mean the 'Give Everybody Chocolate and Puppies League'- of *course* I mean the fucking Anastasian League. Oh, *crap* in a bucket. This is the absolute last thing that we needed."

"Are you sure?" Malice pressed me.

"I'm sure. The trader who came here six months ago- the one with red hair? You remember him, he sold kerosene. He told us about the Inquisitors. Told us how they move, in roving salvage gangs. He said they've found a way to project an energy fence. So they can box a town before they go in and strip it."

"Red hair," Malice said. "Yeah, I do remember. Right. You're right. Fuck it. You'd think that people who had electricity to spare would find a better way to use it. They're gonna work us over- they'll take the water, the stockpiles...*Dammit*. We are screwed like lady bunnies."

"Anal probes sound almost civilized by comparison, don't they?"

Emily looked kind of let down. "So it definitely isn't aliens?"

"It's nothing new," I told her. "Let's put it that way."

There was still a very good chance that some of us would end up dead, but there was no need to discuss that, not at that *particular* moment. Break bad news at breakfast, my mother used to say.

"So it's not the apocalypse," Emily said, disappointed. And then, "Can we still drink the champagne?"

I quirked an eyebrow at Malice and she nodded. So we sat down on the steps of the apartment building and passed the bottle around.

Chapter Two: In which I give helpful background information.

The things I'm going to tell you about happened in the year two thousand two hundred and seven. Last year, that is. And they happened mostly in a town called Lafontaine.

Lafontaine is not where I was born. Actually, funny thing, the city where I was born is a big smoking crater these days. Long story. Involves a bunch of slightly deranged religious types who thought they could speed up the Second Coming with a few cans of gasoline and a butane lighter.

Religion, impatience, and fire- almost always a bad combination.

Lafontaine, on the other hand, was built around water. The town was fed by an artesian well- a crack in the earth where underground, unseen pressures sent fresh spring water bubbling to the surface. It bubbled more sluggishly with each passing decade, but it bubbled still, and that was why the town was still alive. Ranging the empty expressways for hundreds of miles around were the dried-out, deserted husks of settlements that hadn't been so lucky.

The year that Malice and I turned eighteen and left the orphanage, we turned vagabond for a while and explored some of those deserted towns. There wasn't much to see. Old walls stripped to mason brick, stretches of hot bare tarmac; rubble softened by the odd bloom of sage or scrub brush. Here and there, a cockroach or scorpion scuttled along the baked cement. All of these towns had been picked clean- fixtures ripped out, doors and roofs torn off, the last drops of fuel plumbed from the tanks of the ancient gas stations. Some towns held predators, of either the four-legged kind or the two-legged kind. The two-legged ones were always worse.

One time, Malice unwisely wandered out of earshot while we were rooting around. She tripped, fell through a few rotten planks, and into an old cellar that was being used as a den. The men sleeping down there had gotten roaringly drunk the night before, on a concoction of sugar beets and water left to ferment in the sun, and when Malice came crashing in, they woke up angry, thirsty, and horny. Malice is fast and brutal with a switchblade, sudden death with either hand, but there were three of them, and they had her on the ground and her pants half off before I could get there to even the odds. We managed to get away intact, but it wasn't the kind of experience that you laugh about later.

It all kind of killed my taste for travel, if you want to know the truth. Not just the deserted towns. The farms and colonies we reached were just as depressing, and they were all pretty much the same. Blinding sun, wizened vegetables growing in every patch of soil, hungry children, cheap drugs, and cheaper booze.

There were minor differences, sure- local flavours of misery, variations on the general theme of dust, grit, and itch. Some settlements had more murders each night, and some had fewer. Some had electricity, from a generator or solar plant; others burned wood or dung or garbage for heat and light. Some had colonies of feral dogs living nearby; others, disease-ridden rats.

Money was different wherever we went. It depended on what was scarce, depended on what was valuable. In some places, seeds could be used as cash; so could water, sometimes. The best kind of currency, the one accepted nearly everywhere, was a compressed fuel called carbite. Immersed in boiling water, it becomes liquid, and you can use it to power a generator or an engine. In its solid form, it looks like shiny metal, but it can be cut like cheese. When Malice and I had any carbite, we would slice it into tiny cubes and hide them in the hollowed-out soles of our boots. More often we didn't have any, and we had to get creative. When we were completely broke, I would buy supplies with pages torn from Malice's porn magazines. (I tried not to do that too often, because afterwards she would sulk for days.)

Slavery was another thing that differed from place to place. In some towns, people were actually held as property, bound to named masters, marked with brands, tattoos, collars, or mutilations. Other towns didn't have slavery in a formal kind of sense, but had people so poor that they would do anything for food. That was always turned out equally ugly.

Particularly prized as servants were so-called "Naturals"- people with special inborn abilities, like abnormal strength or memory, or a talent for predicting the weather or working with animals. Naturals were more common by then, because of rising radiation levels, but they were

still unusual enough to fetch high, high prices at market. On a good day, a Natural could be sold for twenty pounds of carbide, or fifty pounds of wheat seeds, or ten entire folios of naughty photographs. Serious business. The one business in the world that still turns a good profit every year.

One of the biggest slave markets is in Little Juarez, a few hundred miles away from Lafontaine. In one auction I saw there, they sold off a woman who could echolocate, like a bat. The winning bid consisted of a power coil, a box of cacao beans, and a live miniature orange tree. The price would have been even higher if the woman hadn't had a scar on her cheek and a slight limp. Apparently she and her old master had a difference of opinion about something and a heated discussion ensued. The kind of heated discussion in which one party screams and the other party wields a bull-whip.

The more colonies Malice and I visited, the more they all clumped together in my memory, into one big bleeding sore. There's only one place that really stands out for me: a settlement ruled by a man known as Brother Blessed. He spent seven hours every day lying on a couch, praying for all the sins of the world, while his fourteen wives tended his cornfields and his thirty-six children took it in turns to bring him snacks. Malice and I wouldn't have stayed there long in any case, but we ran into a problem. The problem was twenty-three years old and had rather fetching brown eyes; her name was Delilah and she was, most unfortunately, Brother Blessed's seventh daughter. Now I want to be clear about this- Malice did *not* seduce Delilah. If anything, it was the other way around. But we found it hard to explain that to Brother Blessed while he was bashing away at Malice with both fists- one of his beefy hands gripped a stick of firewood, and the other a thick hardcover Bible. I've thought of that scene ever since, when people mention the power of faith.

Our departure was kind of hasty, as you can imagine, and as we swung our old truck back onto the highway, we didn't even have to discuss it. We both knew that it was time to call it quits.

So we headed back home to Lafontaine. After everywhere we'd been and everything we'd seen, our ramshackle town seemed to offer endless comforts. There was a tiny little power station, where you could generate a trickle of electricity by working a crank by hand. It was a government project, left over from the time when there was still a government. There was a scoop wheel for dipping water into the gardens where we grew squash and corn and beans. The brothel had chairs and *beds* and- luxury of luxuries- a composting toilet with an actual *seat*. I've never been a big brothel-goer myself, but for a month after we got back, I found an excuse to go and use that toilet at least once per day.

And there was the Brownstone Children's Home. Most towns have an orphanage, the same way most towns have a graveyard, but it's a rare orphanage where the kids aren't for sale. Many an enterprising asshole has made a wad of cash by collecting children from desperate parents, and then auctioning them off as whores or labourers. The Brownstone wasn't like that. It supported itself off of a big vegetable garden and small donations from people of goodwill. And for the life of me I don't know how such an oasis of sane managed to survive in a whole damn world of crazy. I think it must have had a lot to do with Orelle Johnson, who ran the Home when Malice and I were growing up there. She already had her shotgun back then, and she wasn't the least bit

shy about using it- either to scare raiders away, or to gently encourage locals to make a donation to the cause.

I'd left my sister Emily behind at the Brownstone when I went off to explore. By any measure, it was a ballbreakingly *stupid* thing to have done. In this day and age, in this world of slavers and famine and Brothers Blessed and drunken predators, you don't leave your ten-year-old sister anywhere you can't see her. But the Brownstone was a good place, and Orelle was a good woman, and Em didn't have to pay any price for my stupidity- not that time. Once Malice and I found a half-decent place to live, we brought her out of the Brownstone to stay with us. Then Orelle got into real estate, picked up the big apartment building, and let us have an eco-eco at a rent we could almost afford.

And that was it, really. It was as quiet a life as anyone could expect to live in these days. Malice and I worked, when we could find work. Emily watched over the garden patch and *sometimes* did a little cleaning, if Malice asked or if I begged. The old truck that had once carried Malice and I down ancient superhighways now rusted away on its cinderblocks. The furthest that I travelled was to the outskirts of town, to bring down a bird or lizard for the pot.

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I did pay attention to news from outside, because you're asking to get screwed over if you don't. News comes in mainly by word of mouth, carried by the traders in the caravans, the peddlers, the travelling dentists and oculists. Pilgrims talk a lot too, and they're a good source if you can deal with all of the praying and wailing of hymns. So I knew about it when the Anastasian League started to become a power in the world.

The reports we got were patchy, but the outline was clear enough: The League was a well-equipped and well-organized group, with its own command structure, vehicles, fortresses, and personnel. It got its resources the simple way, by taking them from other people. For this purpose the League sent out roving bands of looters, each band headed by a glorified thug called an Inquisitor. A graceless tactic, but it was working. The League wasn't making many friends, but it was getting awfully strong, awfully fast.

From what I'd heard, the League wasn't quite a cult and wasn't quite an army, and nobody was really sure about its goals. The only clue was its name: *Anastasian*, from "Anastasis." Greek for "Resurrection."

That suggested that the League had an agenda, of the big and ambitious type. Probably it wanted to bring back the good old days, the days when *humans* ruled the world and roaches were a poor second. How it planned to do that, I hadn't the foggiest notion. There were a few whispery rumours that the League had a large research base, a place where most of the resources that it took ended up. But I tended to dismiss those rumours as wishful thinking. People always wanted to believe that someone else was looking for a solution. People always wanted to believe that someone else had answers. I had given up on that, myself.

Sometimes, very rarely, as I wandered on the borders of Lafontaine, the horizon would light up

all purple and gold (pollution makes for pretty sunsets). Then a sharp, acid craving would hit me in the pit of the stomach and sink down to tingle in the soles of my feet. Call it wanderlust. Or call it self-delusion. Some part of me hoped, I guess, that somewhere out in the wide wide world was a place that sucked even less than Lafontaine. But I didn't really believe it and the feeling always passed quickly.

I knew I was lucky to be where I was.

But I didn't know quite *how* lucky. I only figured that part out when I was forced to leave.

Chapter Three: In which the festivities commence, and Malice asks a good question.

The night that the League arrived, and a giant blue energy ring flopped down over Lafontaine, Malice and I didn't bother to go to sleep. As soon as the champagne bottle was empty, we walked out to the town limits to see what was what.

The electric hum got louder and louder as we got closer to the boundary. By the time we were a hundred yards away, we could see that the blue-white line of light had become a blue-white web. Humming strands crossed and crisscrossed over each other, to form a pulsing fence woven from strands of electricity. It extended in both directions as far as we could see.

Malice and I walked along it a ways, looking for a weak spot. We didn't really expect to find one. We didn't.

So we threw some rocks at it. It was petty, but I think it made us both feel better.

When we ran out of rocks, Malice pulled out a scrap of paper and a leaf of cured tobacco and rolled a clumsy cigarette. "You see the trucks?" she asked me, between drags.

"I see them."

There were two trucks, both black, both parked about thirty yards away, on the other side of the fence. I squinted- couldn't make out many details, but I couldn't see any horses or mules. No gang of human haulers, either. Those trucks were powered by engines.

This didn't add up.

"Something stinks," I said.

"You know it." Malice snorted smoke. "They've got two trucks out there- converted diesel, I'm guessing. With enough fuel to run them."

"And they've got enough power to put up *this* bastard." I waved at the electric fence. "Why would they waste so much fuel and manpower, just to send an Inquisitor into Lafontaine? We don't have anything that would make the investment pay off. We don't have anything that would be worth the effort."

"We've got your succulent ass," Malice said absently. "That would be worth some effort."

"Shaddup."

She shot me her feral grin, knowing she'd provoked me, but a second afterwards, she grew solemn. "Seriously, though," she said. "We *do* have something they would want. Hell, we have something that they would crap themselves for. You know that damn well. Let's just hope that *they* don't know."

She was right and I didn't want to think about that, so I just grunted in reply. The flat champagne had soured my stomach. I needed a very stiff drink.

There was someone moving out there, by the trucks. Pacing. Back and forth. Back and forth.

"She looks nervous," Malice noted.

"How do you know it's a she?"

"It's the hips. They waggle kinda. Why's she pacing? Think she's nervous about whatever's going to happen tomorrow?"

"No. Have you got another cigarette?"

"No. Think we're gonna survive this?"

"Maybe. It's getting cold out here. Let's go back."

Turning from the pulsing fence, we headed back into town. I turned my collar up as I went and shoved my hands in the pockets of my threadbare jeans. It does get cold in the desert after the sun sets.

"Casey."

"Yeah, what?"

"They know we're hiding something. I'm pretty sure."

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Next morning: a smoky orange sunrise, like the yolk of an overcooked egg. I watched it as I leaned, arms folded, against the broken-down truck in front of our building.

Emily, sleepy-eyed, wandered up to me. "Jesus," she said. "I haven't gotten up so early since the last time I had alcohol poisoning."

"Which would be- what, last week?"

"You're cranky when you haven't slept. Tell you what- make me coffee and I might forgive you."

Making coffee meant fighting for a spot at one of the outside fire pits, shoving through the competition until you found a place to boil your tin can of water and ground chicory root. I only offer to make coffee for someone if I think I'm going to get sex out of it- and not always then. So I gave Emily an icy glare.

She shrugged it off. "Fine. Fine. Be a jerk, see if I care. Malice'll make coffee for me when she comes back. She *likes* fighting for a spot at the firepits."

"She likes fighting, period. Where is she now?"

"Changing her clothes. She just came back from checking the stashes one last time. She said to tell you that she piled some real big rocks on the top."

"Real big rocks are not gonna save us if the League does a full search, but I'm glad she's having fun." I pulled a packet of cold cornbread from my pocket. I had planned to eat it myself, but my appetite was gone. "Here. Have your breakfast."

The higher the orange sun rose, the more people spilled out onto the streets. All of them looked sleepy, and most of them were armed- with guns, with nail-studded planks, with homemade knives.

Orelle Johnson stomped out while Emily was still chewing the cornbread's tough crust. Orelle's eyes, shot with red veins, were sunken; her salt-and-pepper hair was a halo of frizz around her brown face. She still wore her baby blue bathrobe- she always wore her bathrobe, as a matter of fact- I doubt that she ever took the damn thing off. She gripped her shotgun like it was the only thing connecting her to reality. But she still greeted me in her usual way: "Casey, child, when you gonna marry that nice roommate of yours?"

Malice is not nice, of course, any more than she is Jewish, but I let it slide. "Not today, Orelle. Got better things to worry about than that."

"Maybe," she agreed, rattling a handful of shotgun shells. "We may get hurt, but I don't think we'll get bored. Wish we had a few more gunmen in the crowd. You got a plan, in case a League thug tries to get fresh with you? Are you packing?"

I tapped my sling. I had been carrying it all night- didn't plan to put it down any time soon.

"That little toy? Child, we have got to get you a big-girl weapon one of these days."

"The sling's enough."

And it was, it really, really was. This is one of the main rules for wasteland survival: Do not

underestimate a sling. Goliath did that, three thousand years ago, and look where it got him. A sling's not that different from a gun, really- it spits out a lethal little projectile, and spits it out very, very fast. If you're any good, and you're in range, you can use a sling to rip a hole in a man's head. Even a glancing blow from a slingstone can make a raider wish very poignantly that he'd taken up some other career. And a sling has some advantages over a gun. Upkeep is easy and ammo is free, you can hide it in your sock during a pat-down search, and you won't blow your foot off if you step on it by accident.

Orelle shook her head. "Sad. Just sad. Thirty years old, and you don't have a girl and you don't have a gun."

"Yeah, well. What can I say? I'm unconventional." I paused. "Hear the rumbling?"

"A'ya." She fed the shells into the shotgun, gently, like she was popping sweets into a child's mouth. "You stay behind me, now. These assholes make trouble, they're gonna get it right back, and I don't want to blow holes in you. Not by accident, anyway."

"Aren't you sweet. Didn't know you cared so much."

"Course I care. Your head explodes, I'm gonna have to find someone else to fix the plumbing around here." She pumped the shotgun. The hammer cocked. "Get behind me and get your kiddie weapon good to go."

You don't disobey Orelle when she's toting that gun. You just don't. I backed up, got five paces behind her, and then I stooped to look for ammunition. There were small stones on the street, jagged scraps of metal. None were perfectly shaped, but I filled my pockets anyway. They'd inflict pain, and that was all I really cared about. I wasn't looking to make clean kills.

While I was still bent and groping, hard knuckles rapped my skull. I glared up at Malice's smirking face. "It's almost go time," she informed me. "Guess it's too much to hope that you made coffee?"

"Die in a fire."

"Thought not." Malice squinted off at the horizon, wagging her switchblade between two fingers. "They're coming."

I didn't need her to tell me that. The air was clogged with unfamiliar noises. Engines groaning; a hum of tires along the tarmac. Then wavering shapes on the dawn horizon. Two trucks.

Those trucks had been on the other side of the barrier the night before. So there had to be some way to cross it. I filed that away as something to think about.

Then I glanced over the crowd, looking for a skinny shape in a pink-and-white t-shirt. "Emily, get back here!"

Obediently, Emily trotted to me, with a quick curious backwards glance at the trucks. Malice and I each grabbed a shoulder and we pulled her behind us.

"Stay there," Malice and I ordered her in unison.

She rolled her eyes, exasperated. "You really think that I'm going to run up to the desert thugs and bitch-slap them?"

"Don't argue. And help me with this."

To fire a sling, you whirl it, and then you release one of its cords, while hanging onto the other. I was trying to tie the retention cord around my wrist. Usually I can manage that one-handed, but my fingers were trembling. Emily took over.

"Where's your stupid boyfriend?" I asked as an afterthought.

"Out by the energy fence. He took a bottle of moonshine and some crackers. He's going to hide there until all the violence is over." She smirked as she pulled the knot firm. "So who's stupid now?"

It was a fair question. I pondered it as the trucks groaned steadily nearer. We stood there and waited. Orelle's finger twitched on her trigger, and she wasn't the only one looking antsy, but nobody moved.

Trucks move fast when they have engines in 'em. A minute after we saw them coming, they had arrived, slowing in front of the crowd. The two of them were exactly the same. Big armoured front cabs; dark intimidating glass. Looked bulletproof. They were sheathed with some kind of panels- solar panels?- and bunches of wires spiralled into their interiors.

I barely had time to notice all this before the lead truck veered and braked sharply. The other rolled to a stop behind it, but nobody was looking at that one, because the doors of the lead truck were crashing open.

All I saw to begin with was- *green*. A mass of people in green camouflage outfits, spilling out of that truck by every exit. They came through the driver's door and the shotgun side and the back hatch, and I shit you not I think some of them jumped down from the roof.

There were twelve of them, men and women both, but holy hominy, every one of them was *big*. Not fat, but big in the frame, half-muscle and the rest softness. That's something that you barely ever see these days, and we all knew what that meant. Every last one of them was getting enough to eat.

Not good, if we had to fight them. In almost every battle, the people who win are the ones who ate better that morning. Breakfast trumps no breakfast, every time.

The League thugs weren't armed, though. Not with guns, anyway. Most had short truncheons,

wrapped around and around with electrical tape; others had hunting knives strapped to their trouser legs. A few of them- maybe four- had something else: narrow black sticks, about a foot long, and the width of two fingers. Magic wands? Novelty dildos? I couldn't guess and I didn't try.

The point was- all of those truncheons and knives and wands were hanging from belts or shoved in back pockets. Not one of those big soft Leaguers pulled a weapon. By the truck, in grim and silent rows, they waited. For what?

Among the townsmen, the citizens of Lafontaine, knuckles whitened on gun-butts, and the muzzles of those guns crept upwards. I slipped a stone into the pocket of my sling, and gave it a single experimental whirl. My mind had gone all dim and fuzzy, as it always does before I have to fight. It's not good to be too clear-headed when facing painful death.

"You ready?" I asked Malice.

Oddly, Malice wasn't concentrating on the imminent violence. Furrow-browed, she was studying the second truck, the one whose doors still hadn't opened.

"The back of that truck," she muttered, with detached, intellectual interest. "Why is it padlocked? To keep people out, or to keep people in?"

Chapter Four: In which I meet a woman who is not good-looking, and another woman who is.

Two minutes, three minutes, the stand-off lasted, and then Orelle's last nerve snapped in two like a banjo string- *sproing!*

"Now you assholes listen here!" she boomed from behind her shotgun. Orelle's voice wasn't musical, but she could make a hell of a lot of noise with no apparent effort. "You're taking up space and you're wasting daylight! You got exactly five seconds to tell me exactly what you want, and you got another five seconds after that to decide you don't want it after all and get your pasty asses out of my street! Otherwise you're gonna get blasted until there's nothing left of your freak show but shrapnel and a damp spot! You get me, punks?"

No reaction from the green-uniformed Leaguers. Not so much as a twitched eyebrow or a smirk. Orelle's chest inflated.

"Five!" she bellowed.

Still no motion.

"Three! Four!"

I could hear Emily's quickened pulse behind me.

"Two!"

The truck trembled on its old tires- and one more woman stepped down from the front cab.

Not your average run-of-the-mill thug, this. Her uniform was midnight black, and crisply creased, with silver epaulettes and belt-buckle and a visor cap. This was the head honcho, this was the woman in charge. This was the Inquisitor, the boss of the League gang. And I felt my jaw dropping as I stared.

Now, I know what you're thinking, and- no. It's true that I have a habit of falling for people that I really shouldn't fall for (doesn't everyone?). And yes, I do have a bit of a thing for pushy women in uniforms (don't you?). But trust me. I didn't feel a shred, a scintilla, a *flicker* of sexual interest in the creature who'd just come out of the truck. I was staring because- well, because she looked weird.

Clothes first. The uniform itself was pretty sharp. But it fit the Inquisitor like a tube top would fit a hippo. The thick flesh of her neck poured around the tight collar, like sausage meat bursting from its casing. She was tall- six feet at least- and an inch or two of bare white skin glared from beneath her pant cuffs. The tightness of the trousers almost forced her to waddle.

And she wasn't well put together in other ways. Her face was thick-jowled, pouchy. Her hair was a colourless grey-brown, and wisps of it flew from her braid.

But when she addressed the crowd, her voice carried just as well as Orelle's, flooding the open space.

"My name," she said, "is Inquisitor Nora Russe. I am a representative of the Anastasian League." Her voice sounded like she was reading from a script. Flat and uninflected. "We have learned that you have resources that the League requires. Therefore, the League has assigned me to search your district. Your cooperation would be appreciated, but it is not essential. We will use lethal force if provoked. Drop your weapons now."

Orelle answered with a sharp jerk of her trigger. The bullet howled as it erupted from the shotgun barrel, and it kicked up a pattering hail of gravel, inches away from the Inquisitor's feet.

Orelle's sure hand pumped the shotgun again and then hefted it back into position. "Sorry, you were saying?"

I had to give the strange-looking Inquisitor credit. She didn't recoil at the sound of the gunshot. "Let me make this very clear. There's an electric barrier around your town. It'll prevent anyone from getting in or out. The controller will respond only to my fingerprints and my voice patterns. The barrier stays there until we get what we need from you. Until then, I will not give orders to have it taken down."

"Thanks for letting me know," said Orelle. "So how many of your limbs do I have to blow off to

convince you to get rid of the barrier?"

"Put your guns- "

"Three or four? Give me a ballpark here."

The Inquisitor, Nora Russe, gave an impatient snort. And what happened next, happened in about three heart-staggering seconds.

The Inquisitor's right hand, which had been resting against her trouser leg, turned gently over, and we could see that it was holding one of those narrow black wands.

They call those black wands "nightsticks." And if I had known back then what a nightstick was, then I would have done something productive as soon as I saw that the Inquisitor had one. I would have grabbed Orelle's gun away from her, maybe, and shot the Inquisitor three times in the head and once in the guts and again in the head for good measure.

Needless to say, I didn't. I didn't know what that black wand was, and I couldn't guess. Which frankly seems strange to me now. A few months down the road, nightsticks were to become one of the most important facts governing my daily existence. Weird that there was ever a time when I didn't know what they were. But I guess there was a time when Adam and Eve didn't know what an apple tasted like, either.

Anyway. That morning was the first time I ever saw a nightstick used, and this is what it looks like:

The Inquisitor's hand gave a tiny, careless sort of twitch. The tip of the nightstick poked upwards. And a sizzling rope of blue lightning erupted from it- to crash straight into Orelle's chest.

It didn't knock her down. Her arms flung themselves wide, as though she was about to embrace someone; her fingers went limp and the shotgun clashed to the ground. Her eyes went bare and blank as marbles, but she didn't fall. The pulsing, sickly rope of electricity that ran from her chest to the nightstick held her upwards, as she lolled like a puppet.

"This wasn't how I wanted to do this," the Inquisitor announced to everyone and no-one. "But the faster you people learn to be smart, the easier all of this is going to go."

She jerked the nightstick, and the coil of electricity whipped upwards. Orelle's feet left the ground. She crept higher, higher- two feet, three feet- her dressing gown fluttering around her, and her neck at a horrible angle, as if it was already broken.

"Stop it!" a voice screeched- Emily's. "Please stop-!"

Her voice was choked off, suddenly, and I dared a backwards glance. Malice had clapped her hand over Emily's mouth, and was gripping as hard as she could.

Malice knew, as I did, that it was a bad idea to call attention to yourself when somebody angry and heavily armed was looking to make a point.

Everyone else in the crowd knew that as well. If we had really been serious about resisting, that would have been the time- but no-one fired a shot. People gripped their gun-butts so hard that the guns ended up clenched against their chests, like dolls.

For ten whole seconds, Orelle hung in the air. For most of it she was motionless, but at one point, her chest heaved, and a strangled something came out of her throat. It could have been a sob.

Then the Inquisitor lowered her hand. Orelle tumbled, hit the ground with a loud *smack*- almost splattered on the road, with her dressing gown smeared around her like a blue pool of paint.

There was a second's stillness, as we all stared at the Inquisitor. But she had lost interest in Orelle. She let her hand drop, and tapped the nightstick idly against her thigh.

That was all the permission we needed. Malice was at Orelle's side first; Emily and I were a second behind. We all knelt on the asphalt beside Orelle's splayed body.

She was alive. Her eyes were unfocused, but they were open. Red red blood pulsed thick and wicked from both nostrils, and her breath came in and out in painful-sounding grunts.

One look, and Malice's eyes went flat, and her hand flicked to her switchblade.

"Don't," said the Inquisitor- she sounded almost bored. The nightstick bounced twice in her hand.

Malice hissed, a long hiss like a boiling kettle, and though she tucked the knife away, there was murder in her face.

Emily, meanwhile, had taken Orelle's head onto her lap, smoothing the frizzy pepper-and-salt hair. Her muscles were still twitching. Spasmodic little jerks.

I realized, belatedly, that Emily shouldn't have been on the street. She should have been hiding out with her stupid boyfriend, drinking moonshine and having stupid teenager sex and hopefully not making babies. And I was opening my mouth to tell her so when the Inquisitor's voice rang out again.

"Anyone else want to try their luck?" she asked. "If you're going to start attacking, now's the time! Let's get the stupidity out of the way!"

A hush hung over the crowd, like a bad smell.

Then somebody fired. Just the once. The bullet emerged with a dry bark, like a branch being snapped. I didn't see what it hit- from the sound of it, concrete- but I saw Nora Russe whirl. She was fast, for such a big woman, and the nightstick was faster. It sent a rope of lightning

scorching through the air, searing the chest of the man who had fired. His name was Tito, and his gun was a relic, over a hundred years old. He kept it around mainly for the look of the thing-kind of a security blanket. It didn't do him any good that day. The nightstick blast made him howl and screech in languages he probably hadn't spoken since childhood.

Almost at once, there was another crack of lightning. It wasn't Nora this time, but one of the green-clad guards of the convoy. And this time, his target wasn't armed. It was one of the brothel girls, and her scream was earsplitting. Another guard pulled out a nightstick, and another, and again and again the air was split with blue energy. And someone else was screaming. And someone else again.

I don't really think at times like that. My lizard brain takes over. I must have knocked Emily to the ground and thrown myself over her as soon as the firing started, because that's the position we were in when the noise finally quieted. The noise of the nightsticks, anyway. There was still soft moaning, and crying, and somewhere near me, Malice's voice, cursing.

I raised my head. It was easy to identify the people who had been hit by nightstick blasts. Their hands were twisted up into twitching claws, their eyes were wide and unbelieving, and their clothing smoked.

Emily started wiggling beneath me then. I pulled away and let her get up.

In the middle of it all stood Nora Russe, the Inquisitor, looking supremely unconcerned. The bitch had even put her nightstick away. Now she just stood there, arms crossed. "Anyone else?"

I breathed hard, my sling clasped in my fist, looking from Orelle, to Emily, to the nightstick. The hush hung and hung and hung and hung...

"Good," the Inquisitor said crisply. "That was less stupidity than I expected, frankly. Let's get on with it."

-

The League guards began to move through the crowd, confiscating guns. Now understand this: a gun was not something that you just gave away. Not when you lived in the wastelands. It's not like you could go buy a new Smith and Wesson at your local corner store. And ammunition was just as precious. Most of the guns in town were old, like Tito's, passed down as family heirlooms. Finding ammo for them was a matter of one third evil cunning, one third dumb luck and the rest plain miracle. A loaded gun was worth more than a good milk-cow.

But the League guards didn't face any real resistance. People blinked at them, opened their hands, and let go of the heirloom rifles. The Inquisitor's brutal demonstration had done its work.

While that was going on, two more League men climbed into the open truck and hauled out a folding table and a folding chair. These they set up in the middle of the street, to create an improvised kind of office. The Inquisitor, Nora Russe, settled her ponderous bulk into the chair,

sighed heavily, and perched a pair of reading glasses on her nose. Someone else set a thick sheaf of papers in front of her.

Stunned though we were, we all looked at those papers longingly. And not for artistic or scholarly reasons. Toilet paper has been a luxury beyond price for a good long while now, and that stack would have lasted any of us a couple of months.

But I didn't have time to think about that, because Malice was plucking at my sleeve. "Are we gonna let them have it all their own way?" she whispered fiercely.

I looked down at Orelle, heard her breath rasping wetly. "It's no use," I muttered. "You saw how those things work. They're too fast- and too accurate. We couldn't put up a fight even if we *had* guns, which we don't."

"We could swarm the Inquisitor. Take that bitch out, at least. Casey, tell me you're not just gonna roll over and take this one in the rear!"

A League man looked sharply in our direction, and I grabbed Malice's arm to quiet her. Once the guard had looked away, I went on more softly. "I've got Emily to think about. I can't make like a cowboy just to soothe your hurt feelings."

"Casey, you piece of shit!"

"I know you are, but what am I?"

"Line up in front of the desk," the Inquisitor was calling out. "Single file, please." And then, to a hefty blond guard at her side: "Delacroix, I want to process all of them this morning, if possible. You'd better get the tools."

The guard, Delacroix, gave a nod, then jogged towards the second truck, pulling a ring of keys out of his pocket.

The heavy padlock clicked open. The guard heaved up the back door of the truck. The air that drifted from the inside smelled of rust, and old old sweat. There's no mistaking that stench.

There were two dim shapes inside- sitting on the truck floor, leaning on the truck walls, blinking in the sudden sunlight.

Both of them were women. One was brown, tiny-limbed, less than five feet tall, with smooth hair so shiny that it looked like it had been oiled. The other was black, rawboned and a little gaunt, with just a fuzz of hair covering her knobbly skull. What they had in common was their eyes. They were narrow and wary. The taller woman, the black one, used her forearm to shield her face from the sunlight, but her gaze never moved from Delacroix.

It came to me then that they were waiting- waiting to see which one of them was needed, which one would be pulled from the truck.

Delacroix didn't even bother to talk. He pointed at the black woman, and snapped his fingers. She didn't nod or acknowledge him. Silently, she pulled herself up and out.

Like the other woman, she wore a faded blue jumpsuit. It was loose on her, hung on her bony form like curtains. The sleeves had been pushed up to the elbow, exposing knobbly wrists.

I saw her taking everything in: the groaning people, with their still-smoking clothes, splattered on the tarmac, the rows of grim League guards with nightsticks and knives, the Inquisitor at her table, and the huddle of dispirited villagers.

Her expression said, so far as I could tell, *Oh crap, not this again.*

"Pax!" the Inquisitor snapped.

The woman flinched, almost, as she looked at Nora Russe. It was then that I noticed- there was a piece missing from her right earlobe, a triangular wedge, as if a parrot had bitten a chunk out of it. The cut edges were healed- it must have happened some time ago- and they were clean. It had been done with a sharp edge.

The Inquisitor glared at her. "Are you finished sight-seeing?"

The black woman named Pax ducked her head. A half-hearted kind of a nod.

"Then get over here and do your job."

Again, the half-nod. The muscles in Pax's jaw jerked.

I knew why- had felt my own jaw muscles jerk in exactly that way. Pax was gritting her teeth, trying to keep herself from saying something that she very much wanted to say. *Had* to keep herself from saying it, because she knew exactly how much she would be made to hurt if she didn't keep it under control.

The Inquisitor slapped her nightstick against her thigh. The skinny wand didn't make much noise, but Pax jumped at the sudden motion, and after seeing what the little thing could do, I wasn't surprised. "Are you stoned, Pax?" the Inquisitor asked. "Are you high? Are you capable of moving? *Move!* We have to be out of town in three days if we're going to stay on schedule. I swear to Baby Jesus, if we run overtime because *you* can't stop standing around with your thumb up your ass, you and Amanthi will *both* be on half rations for a month. Do you understand me?"

Pax's head jerked again- that same reluctant nod. "Sir," she said.

That was all she said- one word- but she managed to get a lot of meaning into it. Literally it meant *Sir, yes sir, I'll get right on that, sir*- but the true sense was, all too obviously, *Sir, fuck you sir, the minute I get my hands on some poison you're a dead woman, sir.*

After what had just happened to Orelle, I had a lot of sympathy for that point of view.

But what caught me completely off guard was the sound of her voice. That single word, that was all she said, but the *sound* of it- deep and resonant, just the slightest bit hoarse. Like a strong, spicy-sweet fruit. It made an electric thrill run up my spine, a tiny snake darting.

When your town is being ravaged by crazed cultists, you really should try to focus on *that*, and not the vocal tones of random strangers. But I couldn't help it. My hormones keep a-flowing, even when it is inconvenient to me that they do so, and yours do the same and don't try to tell me anything different.

My eyes zoomed over Pax like scout planes, noticing- oh, a thousand tiny little things. The arc of her back as she bent, and the curve of her ear where it met her close-cropped skull, and her large hands with the bitten-off nails and above all, the roundness of her shoulders.

The tiny snake wriggling along my spine became a Burmese python, thrashing.

And again, I know what you're thinking.

And this time, you're right.

Chapter Five: In which I almost do something very stupid.

"I know what you're thinking," Malice told me some time later.

"Oh, I doubt it," I said. "Maybe you know the outline of the fantasy, but not the glorious details. It involves a feather bed and lots and lots of yogurt."

"*NEXT!*" yelled the Inquisitor, up at the front of the line, and we all moved up one place. Malice was still shaking her head in disgust.

"Have I ever told you that you're an ass?" she asked. "Have I ever told you that you fall for the worst possible people at the worst possible times?"

"Have you ever *stopped* telling me that?"

"And the worst part- the **WORST**- is that when you have a crush, you don't do anything about it."

"I so do."

"You stare at them and fantasize. That doesn't count. And sometimes you try to talk to them and you don't know what to say so you talk about the weather and you get flustered and then you run away and beat your head against a wall. Casey, this isn't rocket science. All you have to do is follow the majestic rhythms of the mating cycle. What you do is this: You walk up to the girl you're crushing on, and you say, 'Wanna have lots of orgasms?' You've gotta get into the habit of doing that with every girl you like."

"Well, maybe I would, if *you* didn't always get to them first!"

"Hey- survival of the fittest, kid. That's life in the jungle."

A very pointy elbow hit me in the ribs. I glared at Emily. "Cut it out."

"*You* cut it out. Both of you! Stop it with the sex thoughts! Think League invasion! Think self-preservation!"

"You know what I'm thinking now? I'm thinking, why the hell are your elbows so pointed? Really though. Do you, like, *sharpen* them?"

She almost screamed: "*Casey!*"

I stopped. She was right, after all. The situation was a bit too serious for sexy talk and yogurt.

We were in the line-up that stretched down the main street, slowly shuffling our way up to the Inquisitor's desk. Inquisitor Russe was questioning each person as they reached the front of the line- a slow process. It took almost half an hour for her to finish up with the madam of the brothel. The woman named Pax, the woman I had been watching with such enthusiasm, stood next to the Inquisitor's chair during the interrogation. I couldn't see what she was doing, exactly- taking notes perhaps- but I could see her stance. Though her face was impassive, her whole body was stiff with fury and frustration. When she lifted her head, I could see how her brown eyes smouldered.

Guards walked up and down the line, slapping nightsticks against their thighs. Most of the people who had been hit by nightstick blasts had recovered, and were standing in line with the rest of us- though Tito kept rubbing his chest and grimacing, and Wanda spat out a wad of blood every few minutes, because she'd bitten her own tongue.

But Orelle hadn't recovered enough to stand. Malice and I had been permitted by League guards to half-drag-half-carry her into the shade. They didn't stop us, but they didn't offer to help, either. Orelle sat there now, slumped against a wall with one hand resting on her heart, and her breathing was far too shallow.

The scene as a whole was a bit of a mood-killer. Even for me.

"All right," I said reluctantly, with a last longing glance at Pax. "Go ahead and talk about real stuff. If you must."

"Orelle's sick. She's really sick."

I shrugged. "Orelle's tough. She'll be fine."

The stare Emily trained on me was absolutely acidic. "She's sixty-three, Casey! Do you really

think she can handle a taser blast to the chest?"

It didn't matter a rat's left kidney whether or not I thought she could handle it. If someone is badly hurt and you can't do a thing in the universe to help her, then this is what you do: you shrug and you say, "She's tough. She'll be fine." Then, if you possibly can, you get drunk.

"NEXT!" yelled the Inquisitor.

-

It was mid-afternoon by the time we reached the front of the line. We hadn't eaten, and Emily had gone pale and big-eyed, stumbling a little as we moved up to the table. I kept a hand on her arm.

Pax watched us come forward, and her angry eyes softened. I glared at her. Yes, she was very and extremely hot, and yes, my hormones were bubbling like a witch's cauldron, but I don't like it when people stare at my sister.

The Inquisitor barely looked up. "Names?"

We gave them, and here came the first surprise. Because the Inquisitor didn't bother to write anything down, and neither did Pax, at her side. Instead, Pax closed her eyes halfway. "Alice Hiroyama, alias 'Malice'," she repeated mechanically. "Casey Prentice, Emily Prentice, siblings female."

"Great," Malice muttered. "Your girlfriend's a Collector."

Collectors are a medium-rare kind of Natural. They're the ones who have abnormally good memories. The best of them can glance through a book, and then recite it back to you word-for-word a year later. They also tend to be disgustingly brilliant. If Pax was a collector, if she had that kind of gift, it seemed like a waste to have her working as a secretary. But, whatever. It wasn't up to me to critique the League's staffing decisions.

"What kind of work do you do?" the Inquisitor went on. "Hiroyama, you first."

Malice had that blank expression, the one she wore when someone was going to get hurt. "I'm an assassin," she said.

The Inquisitor glanced up at her, unamused. "You're telling me that you murder people for a living."

Malice smiled- a serene and frosty smile. "I'm unemployed. For now."

Now I enjoy needling people in authority as much as the next woman, but not when so many bored and twitchy people are standing around holding lethal weapons. So I interrupted with the truth: "Malice is a welder."

"Welder," Pax repeated, and then, more softly, "And psychopath."

Nora the Inquisitor, pointed a pen at Emily. "You?"

"I'm a moocher," Emily informed her.

"What?"

"A moocher. I mooch. Off my sister. I'm a freeloader. I don't really do any work. I just hang around and watch her do stuff and then criticize. Oh! Sometimes I water plants."

The Inquisitor slammed her pen down. "In case you're confused- this is really not the time for jokes."

"No, no," I said hastily. "No, that's not a joke, that's just the sad truth."

"Can I ask a question, though?" Emily continued, unrattled. "I mean, will you shoot me in the chest if I do?"

The Inquisitor looked back at Emily as if she was a mouse or desert lizard who had suddenly learned to speak. "I really couldn't say. Let's find out together."

"Why are you here?" Emily asked. "I mean, what are you looking for? You said we have stuff that you need- but come on, we're a desert town. We've got sand and we've got rocks. If you're looking for sand and rocks, you're in luck. If you're looking for anything else, you may want to reconsider."

"I'll keep that in mind," the Inquisitor said. "Now- what about you? How do you make a living?"

"Me?" I said, startled. "Oh. Um." I had to think about that one for a second. "Well. Um. I do a few things, I guess. I'm a pretty good practical mechanic. I do some carpentry. Plumbing, too, though there aren't many buildings around here that have pipes in them. Roofing, I can do roofing, and bricklaying if I have to. Farming. A little dentistry- you know, sometimes we don't have anyone else around who can pull teeth- YOWCH!"

That "YOWCH!" was what came out of me when Emily's needle-sharp elbow rammed into my left side, while, at exactly the same moment, Malice's slightly blunter elbow rammed into my left. It felt like I was getting smashed between a pair of pincers, and for a few seconds I could do nothing but gape and wheeze.

Pax raised her eyebrows, but I don't think that the Inquisitor herself noticed. She just looked up and said, "Go on."

"Um," I said, gingerly feeling my ribs. "I think that's about it."

-

"What the hell was that for?" I asked in a fierce whisper, as the three of us walked away from the table.

"Do you *have* a brain?" Emily asked me witheringly. "Or did you trade it for booze a while back?"

"It's the damn hormones," Malice said, striding ahead. "Casey's hasn't got the time to think. Too busy drooling over yet another woman that she'll never get up the nerve to talk to. Let's get Orelle."

I ran a few steps to catch up with them. "Cut out the double talk and draw me a diagram. It's been a long day already."

Malice ground to a halt. "You really don't get it?"

"Get what?"

"Casey." Malice groaned. "Why the hell you think that cunt was asking questions? Personal interest? Bitch wants to find out who's useful. You made yourself sound way too fucking useful. You get it now?"

She only paused a second, but my blank expression must have spoken for itself. "Jesus fucking Christ. All right. Look at your girlfriend, over there."

She pointed at Pax, who was still standing obediently behind the Inquisitor's chair. It struck me then that she had been standing in the same position for kind of a long time.

"She look like she's having fun?" Malice asked. "You think she locked *herself* in the back of that truck this morning? You think that clipped ear is a fashion statement? The League takes useful stuff. It's what they do. From the look of it, the League takes useful people, too. Your girl got taken by them, somewhere along the way, and they're not letting her go. So start acting useless, or it might be *your* dumb ass locked in that truck tomorrow."

"...oh," I said, as it all sunk in. "Oh."

"No shit, 'oh'. Move your arse. I saved you from looking useful in front of the damn League-fucking *least* you can do is make me lunch."

-

Orelle seemed better. She had managed to sleep a little bit during the interrogations. Between the three of us, we hauled her up the stairs to her apartment, and then into bed.

"Stop fussing," she said, as she pulled her quilt over her. Her hands were shaking, but her voice

sounded almost normal. "Faces like yours would make anyone feel worse. What's the word? When's the damn League pulling out?"

"They're done grilling people for now," Malice said. She was lounging in Orelle's armchair, a thing of threadbare red velvet, with springs bursting through its worn back and seat. Orelle's apartment was full of things like that- elaborate junk from a by-gone area, most of it more than a century old. There was even an air-conditioner, a bulky beige box that I had never seen used, but which apparently guzzled electricity like it was beer.

Emily was perched on the arm of the big chair, and I was prowling restlessly back and forth. Somehow I couldn't sit.

"My guess," Malice continued, "is that they'll grid out the town and search it square by square. That's how *I'd* do it. And if they don't completely fuck up, then- "

"Then they might start to find stuff," Orelle concluded. "But I don't think they'll find what matters most. Not unless someone spills the beans. Look! So far as I know, the four of us in this room are the only ones who know about- you know- the thing. Right?"

"A'ya," I confirmed. "Some folk have suspected, over the years. A couple have even asked questions. But then they came down with a bad case of...being hit in the face by Malice, and decided that they didn't care any more."

"Just the four of us, then. Good. Casey, child, quit tramping around, you're making me nervous. Grab that other pillow for me. You can put it behind my head. And listen to me, all three of you."

Orelle had her own kind of faded grandeur. It radiated from her now, as she lay propped up on a few lace pillows, with a blue-and-pink quilt drawn almost to her chin.

"I practically raised the three of you," she said. "Known you since you were too short to see over a windowsill. But I tell you this and I shit you not. You have got to be *so* damn careful. If you say *anything* that lets the League fuckers figure out what's going on, then I will beat you down and turn what's left of you into slippers. We clear?"

"Jesus, Orelle," Emily said. "You really think we're going to go running up to the League and spill the big goddamn secret of Lafontaine? Us of all people?"

"I don't want you to give anything away by accident, is all. Especially you, Casey. You get all mellow and confiding sometimes, when you're horny."

Orelle fidgeted uncomfortably, and rubbed her chest. "One of you better get me a cup of tea. And put some vodka in it. Actually, second thought, just bring the vodka. We'll have something to eat before things get real interesting. Shit, fan, hitting- you know."

Chapter Six: In which there is a single glancing reference to rabbits, and the Inquisitor gets

confirmation that there is more in Lafontaine than sand and rocks.

The next day, the League began its search.

It's an understatement to say that I didn't enjoy the experience. It was invasive and humiliating and relentless and slightly ridiculous. It was, in fact, like a cross between losing your virginity and going to jail, and I've done both of those things, and didn't enjoy either enough to want to repeat them.

The League guards, in their green fatigues, went through the buildings of Lafontaine like a bacterial infection through a large intestine. They scoured basements and cellars, emptied boxes and chests and hurled the contents into the street. They studied the earth inch by inch for signs of recent digging, checked the stairwells and rooftops, then compared the inside and outside measurements of buildings to check for secret rooms

As I've said, the apartment I shared with Malice and Emily was no bigger than the average shoebox. But a League guard still spent the better part of an hour shaking it down. It was Delacroix who performed the search- the hulking man with the blond crew cut who seemed to be second-in-command to the Inquisitor. He went through the place with silent, maddening care: kneaded cushions to be sure that nothing was hidden inside, shook out blankets, and poked thick fingers into canisters of beans and flour.

That was annoying enough. What pushed me over the edge was when he started to rip down our decorations. We each had our own wall. Emily's had a collage of old magazine ads- lipstick, nail polish, skinny jeans, stuff like that. Malice's wall had what she referred to as her harem: six Playboy centrefolds in homemade frames. Next to them, she had hung a homemade wooden cross and a picture of the Virgin Mary (her face turned decently away from the leering models). And a small hand axe, because, as she said, you never knew when a hand axe was going to come in handy.

Delacroix tore all of them down, scattering them on the floor, where clutter was already piled high. I seriously considered throttling him, but fortunately, it was his parting shot. After he ripped the last Playboy centrefold from the wall, he glanced around, gave a snort of frustration, and stalked towards the exit. "You'll hear from the Inquisitor later," he tossed over his shoulder as he left.

As soon as the hatch clashed shut behind him, Malice spat deliberately out the window. Then we began to sort out the chaos. Emily smoothed her crumpled adverts, Malice dusted off her Playboy girls and checked her axe, testing its edge on the calloused ball of her thumb. I only had one ornament on my own wall- a flat box of pale grey cardboard, emblazoned with black block letters that read, RABBIT FACTORY™. It sat on a shelf of nails driven halfway into the brick, and its contents rustled as I carefully set it back there.

We had barely finished when there was another rap at the hatch.

"Emily, please to see who that is," I said testily, as I adjusted the Rabbit Factory on its shelf.

"Then kill whoever it is. With a spoon."

Em went to the hatch willingly enough. The knocking stopped, the hatch creaked open, and then a voice, a woman's voice, said: "Hey. Sorry to bother you. I'm looking for Casey Prentice."

A voice like a strong, spicy sweet fruit...I turned to see the woman named Pax, standing just outside the hatch.

I barrelled for the door, wading desperately through the trash that covered the floorboards, and got there just as Emily said gravely, "Hang on for a minute. I have to go get a spoon."

I shoved her out of the way, and faced Pax, panting. She was wearing the same blue jumpsuit that she'd worn the day before, her hands shoved into its pockets, her sleeves rolled up to reveal strong arms etched with a spiderwork of scratches. When she saw me, she gave a half-smile- at *me*, actually at *me*. And only then did I realize- I didn't have a clue what to say.

Malice called from somewhere behind me: "Remember what we talked about, Casey? Majestic rhythms! Survival of the fittest!"

Pax raised an eyebrow at that. "I don't want to pry or anything, but I won't pretend that I'm not intrigued."

"Come on, Casey!" Malice yelled. "Find your inner me! Live the dream for once!"

I hurriedly ducked through the hatch, stepping onto the narrow landing where Pax stood, and I slammed the door shut behind me. "That's just my roommate," I tried to explain to Pax. "Being- you know- my roommate. She feels this warm glow of accomplishment every time she manages to humiliate me."

Pax nodded seriously. "My condolences. Have you considered taking your revenge? Perhaps by throwing things at her head?"

"I've tried. But she has much better aim and a lot more patience." I took a deep breath. "Sorry about that. I'm Casey."

"And why the hell are you apologising? I'm the one who showed up at your place unannounced. It could have been considerably worse."

"How?"

"Well. Your roommate could have been having a big orgy or something. That would have been awkward for all concerned."

"Then it's a good thing you weren't here last Thursday."

She gave me a dubious look. "You *are* joking, right?"

I decided not to answer that. "I heard them call you Pax- is that your name?"

"Pax da Costa. Right. And unfortunately, I'm not here to chat about orgies. Inquisitor Russe wants to see you."

That tore me out of Romeo mode, and brought crashing back to earth. No matter what Pax looked or sounded like, she worked for the bad guys. Even if it wasn't exactly voluntary.

"Me?" I said, treading carefully. "Why me?"

"They've found a couple of your stockpiles. The buried stashes."

That was a hit, but I managed to keep my face expressionless. "Good for them. And again I repeat- why would she want to talk to *me*?"

She shrugged. "You may not have noticed- but I'm not exactly high in the League chain of command."

"I've noticed." Up close, I could see how old her jumpsuit was, how the knees were almost worn through. Her hands were sandpapery with callous. She was a Natural, with a photo-perfect memory, and she was probably a genius, but she'd still been made to do hard labour, somewhere along the way.

"You should understand, then," Pax said. "The Inquisitor and Delacroix are the ones who make the decisions. They don't exactly discuss their devious plans with me."

"Maybe not *with* you, but- come on. I've seen how they treat you. They think you're a piece of furniture. Don't they ever discuss a devious plan or two when you're in earshot?"

She hesitated, and I didn't need her to answer. I knew that I was right.

"Why me?" I asked again. "Please. It's important."

We were three stories off the ground, but she still glanced behind her, and then lowered her voice when she answered. "The Inquisitor seems to think that you're more talkative than the others. Especially when you're nervous."

Which was no more than the terrible truth. And here I'd thought the Inquisitor was dumb as a box of rocks. Or maybe I'd just hoped.

-

The League had set up their temporary camp in the best part of town, right next to the well, where the water was clearest and coldest. It was about a five minute walk away, and Pax walked it next to me. I might have enjoyed that, if our destination had been different. As things were, I

found that romance was the last thing on my mind.

"How's your friend?" Pax asked me, after several blocks.

"How's my- oh. You mean Orelle?" My mood went down another few notches. "She's- all right. Not great. She still hasn't gotten out of bed."

We both bent as we walked beneath a clothesline loaded down with dripping blankets.

"I was so pissed at the Inquisitor," Pax said, with sudden venom. "I could have *murdered* her. She's not allowed to do that. Not even remotely."

"Not allowed to do what? Not allowed to shoot up angry townsfolk with electricity? I thought that was pretty much part of her job description."

"She's not allowed to use a nightstick on someone that old! And *never* in the heart! Inquisitor or not, she could get in fifty kinds of shit for that. If the top brass in the League found out-

"So why don't *you* tell the top brass? Would that be a fun plan?"

Pax looked down at her feet as she trudged on. Her running shoes had been white once, and now they were pale grey. They were the ultra-cheap kind, made of recycled cotton waste.

"Ah," I said. "You won't. Well. Good to know. What's the problem? Do you lose your year-end bonus if you criticize your boss?"

Pax ground to a halt on the tarmac. "You've gone awfully fast from crushing on me to judging me. Did you get whiplash?"

"Hey!" I said, stung. "Who said I had a crush?"

"Oh please."

"No, really! How the hell did you know?"

She pointed at her face. "These two things? Right here? They're eyes. I use them to see things. It's fun. You should try it sometime. And listen to me, Casey. You don't know me, and you've got no reason to care about me or my life, and I'll spare you the sob stories, but let me explain one thing. Inquisitor Russe is not a fluffy feel-good person, and she can make things very unpleasant for someone standing in her way. At the moment, the one standing in her way is you. So be careful tonight. That's all. Just be careful."

She started walking again; her hands were balled into fists inside her pockets. After a second, I ran to catch up.

"How afraid should I be?" I asked her.

"You tell me. *I* don't know what it is that this town is hiding."

-

The Inquisitor's tent was a giant thing of billowing green canvas. It was windy that day, and a guard had to wrestle a fold back to let me and Pax inside.

The Inquisitor had let her hair down, so to speak. She wasn't wearing her too-tight uniform, but a black tank and camouflage trousers. In them, she looked far more comfortable, much less ridiculous, and about ten degrees more dangerous. Her upper arms had real muscle.

She barely glanced up as we entered, because she was busy with a corkscrew and a dusty bottle. I recognized that bottle. Tito had been hoarding that brandy for the past fifteen years.

"Pax," she said, sloshing a tin mug full. "Nice to see you again. I was beginning to think you'd gotten lost. Maybe I should tie one end of a long rope to your ankle before I send you out on errands in the future."

Pax's jaw tightened in a way I was beginning to recognize, and she moved to stand behind Nora Russe's chair. The Inquisitor blocked her with her free hand, as she took a great gulp of brandy with the other. "Oh, come on, girly," Nora said, broad and expansive. "What do we say when we keep the Inquisitor waiting? What do we say, now?"

Somehow Pax managed to ungrit her teeth enough to open her mouth. "I'm sorry...sir."

"Better," Nora announced, and gulped more brandy. "Much better. Get behind me now. Time to work."

There were two other bottles, empty ones, under the table. The Inquisitor had gotten started early. I clasped my hands behind my back, trying to steady myself. If the lines of tension running through Pax's face were any guide, then the Inquisitor was a dangerous and unpredictable drunk.

Inquisitor Russe took yet another long swig, then smacked the cup down on the table and gave me a nasty grin. "Let's you and me talk."

"About what?" I said, treading carefully.

"Those." She jerked her thumb in the direction of the tent wall. "I thought you might want to tell me something about those. Before I draw my own conclusions."

I looked where she pointed, and my stomach plunged. Shit, shit, shit, shit, and shit.

Neatly stacked on the ground was a row of power coils. They were the mid-sized kind, about as big as two fists pressed together, and they had the faint bluish cast that means a full charge. I counted them quickly. Twelve. That meant that the League had found at least two of our caches.

"Twelve fully loaded power coils in one town. Now I find that interesting," the Inquisitor said. "Don't you find that interesting, Pax? Doesn't it fill you with all kinds of interesting thoughts?"

"It's very interesting, sir," Pax said dutifully. Her eyes rested on me for a second, and with something close to shock, I saw worry in them. She was worried for *me*, and that almost made me smile, before I realized how bad the situation really was.

"I don't know anything about those," I said, far too late.

"Mmm-hmm," said Inquisitor Russe, over the lip of her glass. "Of course you don't. Why would you know about the incredibly valuable objects buried all over your town? So. Twelve power coils. Fully loaded. Pax, if I hooked one of those coils up to a lamp, how long would it burn?"

Pax swallowed. It looked like she didn't want to answer. "The bulb would blow out long before the coil was used up. But assuming that didn't happen- one of those coils would power a fluorescent bulb for approximately..." Her eyes half-closed for a moment. "Nine hundred forty five point three five days."

"Not bad," the Inquisitor noted. "Not bad for a town where there's supposed to be nothing but sand and rocks."

I tried to pull myself together. I had probably given away too much already. If Malice had been there in my place, she wouldn't have turned a hair when she was shown the power coils. She wouldn't have shown any interest in anything but Nora's brandy and Pax's boobs.

"All right," I said, trying to sound off-hand. "Good for you. You've gotten something valuable out of this trip. Go team, and all of that. Can I leave now?"

"Not just yet," the Inquisitor said, and she swirled her glass so that brandy slosh-sloshed back and forth. "We need to have our talk first. Casey- can I call you Casey?- thank you- Casey, how did these power coils get charged?"

It was the obvious question, and I had braced for it. I shrugged. "I had no clue that there were power coils in Lafontaine. I told you that. So I have likewise no clue how they got charged. Maybe they were already charged when somebody brought them into town. Or- I don't know- we do have a generator. You've seen it. Maybe someone used that."

The Inquisitor's fingers tapped lightly on the tabletop. "You might have been telling the truth up to this point," she said. "But now you're either lying, or a complete moron. Pax, how long would it take someone to charge one of these coils to maximum, using the tiny crappy government generator that we saw this morning?"

Pax didn't answer right away, and the Inquisitor gave her light slap on the thigh, as if she was a toaster that wasn't working. Only then did Pax's eyes close halfway so that she could make the calculation. "Twenty-six months and three days," she said after a moment. "Assuming that

someone cranked the generator day and night."

"There we are," the Inquisitor said. "I think we can discard the theory that somebody used a tiny crap generator to charge *twelve fucking power coils*. Don't you?"

I breathed harder. The Inquisitor's voice was getting steadily angrier- more high-pitched, more sarcastic, more impatient- as the woman downed more brandy. Every last one of Pax's muscles was drawn tight. She was braced for something.

"I told you," I said to the Inquisitor, fighting to keep my tone level. "I don't know anything about this."

"Really."

Once again, I saw how fast the Inquisitor could move if she wanted to. With one jerk of her arm, she sent the table crashing to the ground. It was a cheap, melodramatic thing to do, but I still jumped ten inches when the thing smashed over, and piles of paper went wafting all over the tent. And suddenly the Inquisitor was on her feet, and in my face, her forefinger hovering an inch from my chest.

"You have a power source in this town," she said. Boozy breath, but her eyes were cold and clear, stabbing. "You have a power source that gives you all the electricity you want, whenever you want it. Maybe it's a geothermal vent, maybe it's microfusion, maybe it's something else, I do not fucking know, but *I do fucking know that you fucking have it, you little fucker*."

"We don't- "

"Shut your fat mouth. I'm not asking you. I don't need to ask you. I *know*!" She lunged, grabbed a fistful of paper, and shook it in my face. "You must think you've been pretty fucking subtle, but guess what? People notice shit. And here's what I've been told. From June to August, *every fucking year*, there's a hum of electricity from the fucking Lafontaine orphanage, *every fucking night*. Electric powered fans, in *every fucking room*. So that the kiddies can sleep. Now, to me? That seems pretty telling. So here's the question, and I will keep asking it until I get an answer. Where are you getting the electricity from, Prentice? How are those coils getting charged? What is the power source?"

"I! Don't! Know!"

All of a sudden the nightstick was in her hand, the tip of it digging into the soft part of my throat. I froze.

"You know, I had this on a low setting when I used it before," the Inquisitor said. "Ramped up to full power, a nightstick can do all kinds of things. It can cook flesh and tissue from the inside out. Burn out the nerves, paralyze the limbs." She used the tip of the nightstick to force my chin up, so that I had to look her in the eye. "I could make you a cripple. I could strip your muscles from the bones, make it so that you could never pass another day of your life without pain. Think

about that, think about that *hard*, before you answer this question. *Where is your source?*"

Her bloodshot eyes were so close to me- red veins ribbing around a ring of watery blue. The nightstick was pressed so tightly against my chin that I could feel my pulse ticking against it. I couldn't swallow.

The Inquisitor had my full attention, as you can imagine, but in my peripheral vision I could see Pax as well. I saw her shift her weight back and forth, before she finally made a decision. But once she made that decision, there was no hesitation. She bent, picked up a chunk of polished rock that Nora Russe had been using as a paperweight, and lobbed it at the Inquisitor's back.

It hit between the Inquisitor's shoulder blades; there was a double thud, first when the stone hit flesh, and then when it toppled to the ground. It couldn't have been a very hard throw- on impact, Nora Russe just straightened, giving no sign of pain. But then the drunk Inquisitor *roared*, as she spun around and smashed Pax across the jaw with all the momentum in her large ungainly body. Pax didn't just hit the ground- she rolled twice with the force of the blow. Nora Russe stormed over to her, twisted one hand into Pax's jumpsuit, and dragged her up. Pax tried to cover her face with her hands, but the Inquisitor delivered a clout to her ear that made Pax's whole body convulse. The Inquisitor let her drop, and Pax's shorn skull bounced on the ground.

I started forwards. I have no idea what I intended to do, but I couldn't just stand there. Instantly, the Inquisitor wheeled on me. "DON'T- YOU- DARE!"

She still had the nightstick, clenched in her shaking fist, and I didn't come any further. I just stared at Pax's crumpled body. Pax was moving now, pulling herself stiffly to her knees, and the Inquisitor's gaze swept back to her.

"That was *stupid*, Pax," the Inquisitor said. "I thought we got rid of your independent streak a long time ago. And even if that's not true, then you shouldn't have let me see."

"Sorry, sir," Pax got out, with some difficulty. When she spoke, I could see blood on her teeth.

The Inquisitor stared down at her- and I swear I saw her lips jerk into a smile. Then, once again, her arm rose and fell. Pax ducked her chin and did her best to move with the blow, but it still rocked her. She didn't even have time to brace for the next strike, and when that one landed, she did scream.

Kill her. That was what my body was telling me; that was what my blood was howling as it soared into my head. I had to take this woman, this bitch, the Inquisitor. Nightstick or no, nearby guards or no, I had to do it, I *would* do it, I didn't give a damn what happened afterwards- didn't care if the Inquisitor beat me down, didn't care if the League crucified me, I was going to do it, I was going to do it...

I didn't do anything. Pax's fast breathing rasped through the tent, but I didn't do anything. I couldn't save this woman. And if I lashed out now, I would bring the League's anger down on me, on Emily, on Malice, on Orelle. There was no way out of that. There was no way around it.

The Inquisitor's back was towards me, stiff and square. She spoke to me without turning around. "Get out."

I hesitated, and Pax looked up. Blood was streaming from a cut in her scalp, but she gave me a quick, desperate nod. *Go. Just go.*

My mind reeling, I stumbled from the tent.

-

Home. That was what I wanted. To get home, away from the muffled noises still coming from the Inquisitor's tent.

But just as I cleared the League camp, a small woman moved into my path, blocking me. I skidded to a halt, and instinctively, I brought my fists up.

"Stop it," the woman snapped. "There's no need for that."

This was the tiny person I had seen sitting in the League truck beside Pax. She too was dressed in a threadbare jumpsuit rather than a uniform, and, now that I saw her up close, I realized that she too had a triangular wedge cut from her earlobe.

I dropped my fists. "You're like Pax, aren't you?"

She tensed. "What do you mean?"

"The two of you- you're not in the League by choice. You're being held against your will."

She threw up her hands. "Yes. Correct. Brilliant. Do you want to comment on anything else that's patently obvious?"

"I wasn't trying to insult you."

She softened. "You didn't- you didn't. Sorry. I've been in a permanently bad mood for the past five years." She breathed hard, and it seemed to calm her. "My name is Amanthi- Amanthi Vaas. I'm a doctor."

"A doctor. Is that why they took you?"

"Yes," she said shortly. She didn't elaborate. "The Inquisitor sent me to take a look at your friend. Orelle Johnson?"

My fists came back up again. "Why would that *bitch* Russe do a damn thing for Orelle?"

"Because it'll look very, very bad for her if someone dies during a search. That isn't supposed to

happen. I gave Mrs. Johnson a full check-up. Her cardiac arrhythmia seems to have resolved. She's weak, but I think she'll be fine. I left her some pills. Stop looking fierce. They'll help her. Make sure that she takes them."

I forced my muscles to unclench. I didn't want to accept anything that came from the League, but I couldn't buy heart medication on my own. Not unless fist-sized diamonds or chunks of carbide suddenly started to rain from the sky.

"Thanks," I said grudgingly.

"You're welcome." She paused. "The Inquisitor's been talking to you."

"Talking, not so much. More threatening, and yelling, and beating on Pax."

Amanthi ducked her head at that. Her long black hair spilled around her face, hiding her docked ear from view. She fiddled with a fold of her jumpsuit. "Would you do something for me?" she said suddenly. "Please?" She didn't wait for an answer. "I just want you to remember- None of this was my idea. And I don't have any control over it. If it were up to me, then none of this would be happening."

This didn't make any sense at all. "I know this wasn't your idea."

"Good. Keep remembering. And you'd better get out of here. The Inquisitor- the Inquisitor is dangerous. No-one ever really understands how dangerous she is."

"I think I'm beginning to understand how dangerous she is."

The muscles in her face flickered, and I wondered how bitterness got so permanently etched into her face. "No you aren't," Amanthi said flatly. "Not yet."

Chapter Seven: In which Lafontaine acquires another secret.

"It can't go on much longer now," Orelle said some time later.

The League had been searching now for seven days. Every day with more frustration. They had stopped even pretending to be careful with people's possessions. Broken beds and chairs lined the street.

There had been minor skirmishes. A couple of kids from town had gotten drunk enough to sneak up on the League camp with homemade knives. They had found out what any sober person could have told them in an instant- that the camp was closely watched, that there was always at least one guard on duty with a nightstick.

Malice was nearing breaking point. I wouldn't let her go out on the street anymore, knowing that if she saw the Inquisitor face to face, she would probably take a swing no matter how many

nightsticks the woman was holding. The third time Delacroix shook down our apartment, I had to throw a blanket over her and sit on top, just to make sure she wouldn't launch herself at him.

But the League hadn't figured it out our secret- no matter how many loose bricks they heaved loose, no matter how many metal detectors they ran over the soil. And maybe, just maybe, they never would.

-

One night, I woke without knowing why. There were all of the usual night-noises surrounding me- the whining of cicadas, Malice muttering in her sleep, Emily's slightly nasal breathing. The only thing missing were the rattling snores of Emily's stupid boyfriend. (He had decided to stay in the desert for the entire length of the search, coming back only to get more moonshine.) But- no. There was something else missing as well. An undercurrent, a hum, that I had only just begun to get accustomed to.

I threw back the sheet I slept beneath, stretched out, and poked Malice in the shoulder. "Hey!"

She woke immediately, of course. "If there's a problem, it had better be a stab-with-a-knife kind of problem," she said with her eyes still closed. "Or I'm going back to sleep."

"I don't think there *is* a problem. I think that the boundary around the town has gone down."

Together we climbed to the roof. I'd gotten used to that line of electricity, pulsing blue-white around the border, but there wasn't even a flicker of it now. The desert surrounding Lafontaine was deep purple straight out to the horizon.

"Sheeeee-it," Malice, soft and unbelieving. "The bastards are giving up."

-

It was the middle of the night, but still the news travelled. Before long, there were several raucous and impromptu parties going on, at which people drank whatever was left of their liquor and made up rude songs involving the torrid sexual exploits of Nora Russe. They had a lot of trouble finding rhymes for the word "Inquisitor," but they kept at it.

Malice and I walked through all that, the shrill catcalls in the streets and the howling of revellers- stopped about a block away from the League encampment. They weren't gone yet, but they were packing up. Grimly, stiffly, four guards were striking the tent. Many of the others were loading up the trucks. They hadn't found what they really wanted- the source- but they'd found other things. The precious power coils, but also food, lumps of carbide, some hoarded jewellery, the best of the weapons, things like that. Consolation prizes. Better than nothing, I guessed.

Through the centre of everything stalked Inquisitor Russe like a rabid bear. Her uniform jacket hung open, and a bottle swung freely from her right hand. She was, if not three sheets to the wind, at least two and a half sheets and a large pillowcase.

And she was roaring: "Hurry up, you useless bastards! Don't you know we have a fucking schedule to keep?"

"What do you think?" Malice murmured to me. "Is there a beautiful soul beneath all of that, if you just look hard enough?"

Pax came into sight then, hurrying across the street with an armload of boxes. She kept her head down, as if she was trying to avoid being seen. The entire left side of her face was bruised deep blue, as if her head had been repeatedly bounced off the ground, like a basketball. I turned away so I wouldn't have to see.

"I'm thinking 'no'," I told Malice tiredly. "Come on. Let's go home."

-

We didn't go home, in the end. I didn't want to be trapped sleepless in the dark, with my thoughts and the memory of Pax's battered face. So we went to one of the wild street parties and I had a few shots of moonshine so strong that I all but started to speak in tongues. Emily came to join us before long, and I had my work cut out for me, trying to make sure that she didn't follow my bad example.

When the sky took on that pale steely glow of pre-dawn, the party split up. Emily and Malice decided to go on a quest for coffee. Me, I was finally tired enough to go to bed. My muscles growled as I pulled myself up the ladder, one step at a time. I trailed slowly across the apartment, eyes closed, automatically veering around the larger bits of debris. I gave a fond pat to the top of my Rabbit Factory, pulled my shoes off, and threw myself onto my bunk.

Which was when a voice said, "Um. Hello?"

That voice sounded an awful lot like the voice of someone who absolutely should not have been in my apartment. I jerked up, suddenly wide awake.

Pax was less than two feet away from me, sitting gingerly on Malice's bunk. My jaw dropped. "How long have you been here?"

"I was here when you came in. You didn't see me. You were pretty out of it. What the hell have you been drinking?"

I was trying desperately to collect and assemble my alcohol-pickled thoughts into something resembling order. "Are you here to tell me that the Inquisitor wants to see me? Because I think that I have gotten over the talking-to-the-Inquisitor phase of my life. I think it was just a stage."

"No," she said hurriedly. "The Inquisitor..." She stopped, and from what I could see, it took a physical effort for her to go on. "The Inquisitor doesn't know I'm here."

"What, you snuck away to say goodbye to me? You couldn't just have sent a note?"

Pax waited. She hadn't slept that night any more than I had, that much I could see. Her eyes, in her bruised face, were rimmed bright red. But she waited for me to catch up.

"Oh, *hell!*" I yelled, leaping from the bunk. "You're running away!"

She stood up too, and she was talking quickly, the words tumbling out and over each other.

"They don't know I'm gone yet. I don't want to get you in trouble. I just came to see if you could give me some supplies. The boundary line is down. I'll be gone before they realize what's happening."

"Yeah?" I grabbed a handful of my own short black hair, and yanked it in frustration. "Where do you plan to go? Seriously?"

"There are settlements near here, right?"

"Christ. The nearest is over seventy miles away."

"I can walk that."

I didn't bother to answer that; I just gave a snort of suitable scorn.

She was frustrated now. "Well, what the hell else can I do?"

"You could have thought this out, maybe, perhaps? When the Bitchquisitor realizes that her favourite punching bag is AWOL, she's going to have a holy hell of a tantrum. The kind of tantrum in which people die from nightstick blasts, maybe. Then she'll search the whole fucking town again. This time for you."

"She's on a tight schedule and she's stayed too long here already. She'll move along soon. She *has* to."

"So? How long do you think it would take her to find you? She knows all of our hiding places- everything! Even if she didn't, you're kind of a lot bigger than a power coil."

I didn't say the other thing I could have said- how anyone found hiding Pax would be in for a whole universe of hurt. I didn't have to. She was thinking about it already. I saw it in her eyes, before she pressed them shut.

Pax gave her head a single, brief shake, then spoke low: "I'll go now. I'll just run. Seventy miles, whatever. Miracles happen. Just- please- don't tell her you saw me. Let me get that much of a head start."

Desperate, I stared out of the window. The grey of pre-dawn was giving way to pale wan yellow. "How long do we have?"

"Until they notice I'm not there? We have until they finish loading. Amanthi promised to cover for me for that long. They won't leave without making sure I'm in the truck- "

I interrupted her, impatient: "How long will it take them to finish loading?"

"Half an hour? More? Less? I'm not sure."

"Shut up for a moment then," I said unhappily. "Let me think."

-

"This," Pax told me ten minutes later, "is so goddamn dangerous. For all of you. I don't think we should go ahead with this. I might still have the time to run."

I was working with furious speed, slashing a hole in Orelle's mattress with a long razor knife and a pair of wire-cutters. And I didn't have the breath or the time to waste responding to such a ludicrous suggestion. So I just glanced up at Orelle, and raised my eyebrows, so she would know to field that one.

Orelle still wasn't well enough to stand. I had helped her into her floral-print armchair before I started messing with her bed. Truthfully, though, she seemed better, either because of the rest or Amanthi's pills. Her hands still trembled every now and then, but the snap was back in her eyes, and her mood was as onery as ever.

"Girl," she said to Pax, "if you keep talking like that, I'm gonna call the League up here and I'm gonna *let* them take you."

Pax made a short impatient noise. "I just think- "

"You just think nothing! You're a woman. You're a Natural. You're pretty good-looking. And you got no gun. How long you think you can last out in the hills, with no weapon and no transportation and no damn clue where you're going? Even if the League doesn't find you? I'd give you a week, max. Then your dehydrated ass will get picked up by a bunch of road thugs. They'll rape you 'til they're bored, then sell you in Little Juarez. So don't be a damn fool."

"I know the risks! But what about *you*? Why should you risk *your* lives? I don't think you realize how pissed the Inquisitor is going to be. Things could get ugly."

"Then things will get ugly whether you're here or not. You think that cunt Nora Russe will believe us, if we tell her you're gone?"

Pax's face fell. "Christ incarnate."

"Exactly. Now, just you be still and be quiet a while. You be all right. My Casey is gonna give you your life back, so long as you don't mess with the plan. How's it going there, Case?"

"Just about done," I said, brushing fragments of mattress foam from my sleeves. "Try it out, both of you. Hurry up."

Pax hesitated only a second. Then she stretched out on the mattress, stomach down, and pressed her face against the fist-sized hole that I had cut. Her mouth and nose fit neatly into it.

"Is that gonna be enough air?" I asked her.

She raised her head. "I think so. Feels like it."

"Good. Orelle, your turn."

I had to hold Orelle upright as she staggered the three steps over to the bed. She sank down with a massive sigh of relief. "All right, girl," she said, swinging her legs up onto the mattress. "Brace yourself."

She scooted over, settling her wide body on top of Pax's lean one. They were top-and-tail, so Pax's feet were underneath Orelle's shoulder-blades. I drew the blankets over both of them, and stood back to check the effect. Not bad. Not bad at all. No-one could tell just by looking that there was more than one person lying in the bed. Under the thin quilt, and Orelle's bulky frame, Pax was completely invisible. And with her mouth pressed to the hole, she'd be able to breathe, even if the search went on for hours.

Orelle was uncomfortable, and she looked like it. After all, she was lying on top of a woman who seemed to be entirely made up of jutting elbows and lumps of bone. But that helped the effect. The more sick and miserable Orelle appeared, the less likely it was that they would move her. I hoped.

"That's fine," I said, peeling back the blankets. "You can lie next to each other now, until the search starts. Malice will be outside in the hallway, playing drunk. When she starts yelling, you get into position. And don't move until one of us gives you the okay. Understand?"

"You got it," Orelle said approvingly. "Man alive, Case. For a minute there, you almost sounded like an adult."

Pax's face poked up. "I really think- "

"Shut up," Orelle told her, and shoved her back beneath the blanket.

-

"They're ready," I told Malice as I jogged down the stairs. She was lounging against a wall, in position, ready. She grinned sweet and wicked, and saluted me with the bottle she held.

Everyone but me seemed to be taking this in stride. Emily had begged to be allowed to stay on

guard duty, but I had sent her up to the roof. The League would check there, of course- they knew every secret stairway and door by now- but it was out of the direct line of fire.

The timing of all of this was terrible. Mind you, there's never a really good time to piss off a psychopathic, heavily armed cult leader, but with Malice hung over and Orelle still weak, and me so tired that I began to nod off whenever I stood still, this time was worst than most.

Why, I suddenly wondered, was I doing this?

One of the most important survival rules where I come from (second only to "Don't underestimate a sling" and "Rattlesnakes hide in the durndest places") is this: Try not to care about too many people. The more people you care about, the more people you have to defend, and the harder it becomes to circle the wagons when things get bad. (And things *will* get bad. They always do.)

In my days on the road, I turned walking away into an art form. I've mentioned that woman I saw auctioned off in Little Juarez, the one with the terrible scars, the one who could see in the dark with echolocation. Did I feel bad for her, when I saw her getting sold off to a fat man with a leering smile and a leather dog-whip that he kept flexing between his sweaty hands? Yes, yes, of course I did, but I also ate a giant helping of fried plaintains while the auction was going on. And I slept well that night.

I had to save my energy for the people closest to me.

Malice had been my wingman for most of my life, but there was a limit to the risks I was willing to take even for her. We had both been rattled by the time we spent together on the road- the dozens of close calls. We were young and we were stupid, but our wandering stripped us of the illusion that we were immortal. There were so many incidents that could have ended with both of us dead: the botulism scare, the pyromaniacs, the time when Malice stumbled into the lair of those four highway drifters. Not to mention the three weeks we spent on a chain gang for vagrancy, when Malice not-quite-accidentally insulted the biggest woman on the squad (they called her Grift, and she had a thing for cracking walnuts between her thumb and forefinger).

It wouldn't have mattered to most of the world if Malice and I had never come home. But it would have mattered to Emily. She couldn't have relied on the kind but preoccupied care of Orelle Johnson all her life.

That was why Malice and I made our pact. For Emily's sake, one of us at least would have to stay alive. That meant that we couldn't get too gung-ho about rushing to each other's rescue. And it was always understood between the two of us that Emily had to come first. If Malice and Em were both being shot at, and I could only take one bullet, I know which way I would leap. I *would* let Malice die, if I had to, for Emily's sake. Malice wouldn't hesitate to do the same. That was always understood between us.

Emily wasn't a kid anymore. But kid or not, Emily still took a lot of protecting.

So- once again, what the hell was I doing now? Why was I risking an epic-sized disaster for Pax? Had my libido, once again, wrestled with my common sense, trussed it up, and left it for dead by the side of the road? Or was I just sorry for Pax? And if so, why hadn't I handed her a bottle of water and a packet of cornbread, patted her on the back, and pointed her towards the settlement of Bobcaygeon, seventy miles away?

I was so wrapped up in these unhelpful thoughts, as I ran down the stairs two at a time, that I didn't look where I was going. "Look where you're going" is, of course, one of the rules for wasteland survival. It may not be in the top five, but it's up there.

They were waiting at the bottom of the stairs- Nora Russe and Delacroix. I almost fell on top of them. Instead, Delacroix grabbed me by the upper arm. He squeezed hard, as if my arm was an orange and he was waiting for juice to drip out.

The Inquisitor had reached the white-hot stage of fury. You know it. The stage where the anger has reached such a pitch that it almost feels cold.

"One question," she said, so very softly, "and I'll only say it once. Where. Is. She."

I wrestled briefly with the question of what to say. So many options. I could play the clueless yokel: "Durr, lady, *I dunno*." Or I could be the valiant rebel: "Death before treachery, vile tyrant!" Or I could simply go surreal: "Haddock frizz? Cor blimey twanging underpants!"

In the end, I didn't have to decide, because, while I was still dithering, Delacroix thrust me away. Then the Inquisitor's hand flashed down, and came up again holding the nightstick. Nightsticks are like snakes, the way they rear up so suddenly, and then there's the faintest hiss before they strike.

The blast didn't hit me in my chest. That was, as Pax had said, forbidden. The Inquisitor had been pushing her limits before- now, it seemed that in spite of her anger, she wasn't going to take any more chances. The blast hit my shoulder, a little above the breast, a little to the left.

Oddly enough, the first thing you feel when you get hit with a nightstick isn't pain, but pressure. Imagine having a fifty-pound weight thrown at you. The blow spun me around, smashed me against the wall, and held me there. And then came the pain: searing, cauterizing, withering. I didn't cry, not exactly, but tears came from my eyes in spurts. I couldn't help it.

In my tear-clogged vision, the Inquisitor loomed nearer and nearer. The arm that held the nightstick was shaking- with fury, I guessed- and I wondered whether she would hit me once she got close enough. But then I felt a soft *pop!* somewhere at the back of my head. Liquid streamed through my nostrils, and I saw red drops plop down on my shirt, before my knees crumpled. And then everything was grey and quiet.

-

"Is she awake?"

"Doesn't look like it."

"Try hitting her."

Ow, I thought, as a sharp slap was delivered to my cheek.

"Nope. Didn't work."

"Try again. Harder."

"For the love of Pete," I said, opening my eyes quickly. "You two need to work on your bedside manner."

Malice gave me a hand and hoisted me up from the floor, and Emily fussily dusted me off. Then she looked at my bloody face, frowned, and slapped me again. "Don't you freakin' *do* that."

"Do what?" I asked, rubbing my cheek. "Get blasted in the shoulder by a nightstick-wielding commando? I'll try to remember that. Where is she?"

"The Inquisitor?" Emily made a dismissive gesture. "Old news. She's gone."

"The hell she is!"

"She is," said a new voice, a deeper voice- and Pax came down the stairs.

Malice and Em had already found something different for her to wear. Just jeans and a button-down shirt, but they fit her, more or less. The clothes must have belonged to the stupid boyfriend, because Pax was at least three inches taller than I was.

"They only looked for a couple of hours," Emily reported. "During which time, the Bitchquisitor's face turned a fetching shade of purple-blue. Then she looked at her watch and screamed, and they all piled into the trucks and got out so fast they left a hole in the air."

"But they'll be back, won't they?" I asked, watching Pax narrowly.

Her shoulders rose a little, fell a little. "Probably. But not necessarily to look for me. Maybe they think I'm out on the road somewhere." She paused, and looked me full in the face. "*Should* I be out on the road somewhere?"

Emily and Malice glanced at me sideways. This question was mine to answer, and I hesitated, maybe, longer than I should have. I thought about circling the wagons, and the rules of survival, and Emily, and searing electric pain through my shoulder as I was pinned against the wall.

But there in front of me was Pax's tired, battered face.

And in my mind's eye, I saw, again and again, the slow arc of Pax's arm when she tossed that paperweight at the Inquisitor's back. Diverting the Inquisitor's attention away from her interrogation of me. Making herself the target. Even though she knew perfectly well what would happen to her afterwards.

And for no real reason at all, I remembered the auction in Little Juarez, and the slump of that woman's back when the auctioneer's gavel came down.

"Don't be an idiot," I told Pax. "You don't need to go anywhere. Say- would you like some coffee?"

Chapter Eight: In which, much to my astonishment, I end up discussing my childhood.

Orelle didn't seem surprised, when we went to tell her that Pax was moving in with us.

"Casey, child," she said, "if you're going to clutter up your unit with another lost soul, then I need a pound of flesh from you."

I braced myself. "What?"

White teeth flashed at me. "Oh, no. Oh-ho-ho, no. I'll tell you when you need to know. Until then, you can have the fun of anticipation."

"That sounded serious," Pax said, as the four of us- Pax and Malice and Emily and I- headed back to our much smaller apartment. "I hope like hell she's not going to ask for sexual favours."

I shuddered. "Worse, much worse. She'll probably ask me to re-shingle the entire roof, or mix a load of manure into the gardens."

"Whatever it is, I'll help with it. Not that I'm a specialist at shingling."

"I'll teach you," I promised, and when she smiled back at me, heat flooded my face.

We gave Pax a quick tour: the gardens, the firepits, the outhouses, the wood-burning stoves where we baked bread, the workshop that Malice and I shared. We showed her the gutted truck- it was a Land Rover- that had once taken Malice and I up and down the continent. We didn't take her into the brothel, but we pointed it out and we explained to her about the toilet. Then, because the sun was directly overhead, and it was getting hot enough to make a camel keel over, we went back to our eco-eco and closed the shutters. Early afternoon is usually a good time for a siesta, as you wait for it to get cool enough to go back to work. Instead, we talked.

It was Emily who began the talking. She was always desperate for new forms of entertainment, and she was eyeing Pax like a television set.

"How long were you in the League?" she asked suddenly.

If someone had asked *me* a question as personal as that, I would have jumped out the damn window to escape. So I said, "Em, don't."

But Pax looked loose and peaceable, as she lounged on the stupid boyfriend's bunk, and she grinned at me. "Casey. Really, I don't mind."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure." She nodded at Emily. "Go ahead, kid. Let 'er rip."

Emily didn't hesitate. Not for an instant. "How long were you with them? Was it the Bitchquisitor who kidnapped you? Did you ever try to get away? What the hell is up with your ear?"

"That's a lot of ripping," Pax said, and she thought for a second, getting things in order. "Well- they took me when I was thirteen."

Malice had been sharpening her switchblade, but this made her look up. "That long ago?"

"A'ya. The League's been around for a while. And no- it wasn't Nora Russe who took me. It was a special detail. They were collecting brainy kids- not just Naturals- kids with an aptitude for science."

"I knew you were disgustingly brilliant," I muttered, mostly to myself. Then, louder, "What did they do with you?"

"They took us all to the Institute- you've heard of the Institute?"

"I've heard some things about it," I said. "Kind of a giant laboratory? Or a fortress?"

"Something in between. It's a long way south of here. Very well guarded. Six fences, attack dogs, mercenaries- all the goodies. It's where the League carries out its research."

I sat up straighter. "Human vivisection? Biological warfare? Killer androids?"

She blinked at me. "What the hell would the point of that be? The League researches sustainable agriculture, resource extraction- new ways of mining, farming, manufacturing. But their *big* obsession is power."

Malice, Emily, and I all glanced at the wall. There was a visible dent where Delacroix, half-insane with frustration, had kicked the plaster during his fruitless search. "We noticed," I said.

Pax winced, apologetic. "The people on Inquisition gangs are mostly bastards. But the League itself does have a purpose other than bashing up townsfolk and stealing their stuff. They're looking for solutions. Looking for a way to make things better."

I snorted. "And- what, they kidnapped a bunch of brainy kids because they didn't have anything better to do on a midsummer's day?"

"I'm not saying it was fun. I'm saying that they had their reasons. They took us to the Institute for intensive training in physics. They wanted us to get started young, to specialize in fields of study that might lead to the discovery of a new energy source. Some of the kids they took turned out to be nothing special, but they had high hopes for me." Her smile turned bitter. "I was supposed to be the next Einstein."

I looked her over: work-hardened hands and bruised jaw. "I guess it didn't work out."

"No." She looked briefly away. "I was reassigned to an Inquisition gang when I was nineteen. I went through a couple of them, landed with Nora Russe about five years ago, and that's where I've been ever since."

I tried to picture the transition- from pampered little scientist to Nora Russe's whipping boy. "That must have been rough."

She smiled, a little bitterly. "Believe it or not, I preferred it on the road. It may sound strange, but I had a lot more freedom in the League gang than I did in the Institute. It's no joke to be locked in a ten-foot-by-ten-foot room, with sixty pages of math equations to memorize for the next day. They kept it freezing cold in our rooms. It was supposed to help us concentrate. Shit."

We were all silent a while, picturing that, as we sprawled in the muggy heat. It was so warm and humid in the eco-eco that I could imagine we were all sitting at the bottom of a mug of tea.

Predictably, it was Emily who broke the silence. "But why did they cut off part of your earlobe?"

Pax fingered the three-cornered cut. Lightly, almost caressingly. "It means that I'm a League Resource. Amanthi has the same mark. They do it when you're taken under League protection- that's the official term for it. The mark means that we have essential skills, so we're not eligible for resignation or reassignment."

"In layman's terms," I said, "it means that the League owns your ass, and everything attached to it."

Pax shrugged. "Maybe. But for a lot of people, it's just a formality. There are hundreds of League Resources who would never want to leave."

Emily pounced on that. "But some do?"

"Some do."

"Like you?"

"Like me."

Emily digested that. "If they found you, would they make you come back?"

"Yes."

"Would you be in *trouble*? Would something *happen* to you?"

"Yes."

"What?"

Pax leaned with her chin on her hand, studying my sister with opaque grey eyes. "I don't know," she admitted. "I've never run away before."

It was her calm, her dignity, more than anything else, that made me want to shut Emily up, but before I had a chance, Em jumped in again. "Why do they cut your ears, though?" she asked. "Doesn't it hurt?"

Pax smiled ruefully. "What do you think?"

"Gross. Couldn't they just give you a snazzy nose ring? And how do they cut the piece out of your ear? Do they just, like, slice it with scissors?"

"Not scissors. No. They use something else. And I guess they *could* give us snazzy nose rings instead. But the ear stamp is a lot more distinctive- and it's very hard to hide."

Emily thought about that. "You could just cut your ear off," she suggested brightly.

"You could," Pax agreed. "Actually, I knew a guy once, a League Resource, who did exactly that. He was about my age. A car mechanic. Kind of a genius. The guy could fit an engine on *anything*- anything from a ginger biscuit to a sofa cushion. But he went sort of loopy one day, and found a pair of wire cutters and...well, you get the picture."

Emily leaned forward- a young carnivore scenting blood. "What happened?"

"Well, then he had no ear."

"Did he *escape*?"

"He tried." She sounded tired now. "They caught up with him about ten days later, near a settlement by the edge of the desert. He was living under a piece of corrugated tin. Half-crazy with hunger and dehydration and exposure. His head wound- where he'd cut his ear away- it was horribly infected, slick with pus. Claw marks along his ribs. So you see. Being taken under League protection is not the worst thing that could happen to a person."

I had a bad taste in my mouth. "I think there's a flaw in your logic there, Commander Hardass.

That guy didn't return to the League on his own. He chose to deal with the pus and the hunger and the claws rather than go creeping back to his lord and master."

Pax just stretched lazily. "All right. That's true. But then there was the part where he was crazy. That might have had something to do with it as well."

When Emily gets an idea in her head, it stays there for a good long time, and she was still wearing a fixed, thoughtful frown. "What about his *ear*, though? Did they give him a fake one to wear? And if they did, did the fake one have a piece cut out of the earlobe?"

Pax thought for a second. "I don't really remember. But I think that they might have marked his other earlobe. You know, just in case. All right," she said, and she looked at me. "Your turn. Life story. Spill."

When someone asks you a silly question like that, there are two possible ways to respond. You can make them hurt until they give up asking, or you can run in the opposite direction. But Pax had been pretty patient with Emily, and she was- let us be frank here- very very hot, so I shrugged and I gave her the potted version.

Emily and I were born in a more or less middle class family, but that didn't prevent our parents from being hit by a pipe bomb during one of the religious riots. I was about fourteen. Right after they died, we got placed with our uncle, but that didn't last long. He started getting a little too interested in Emily, and I broke his face and various other bits of him in the course of convincing him that he should find a different hobby. He did end up finding a different hobby- her name was Rebekah and she didn't have two brain cells to rub together, but at least she was overage. Anyway, I figured it was time for us to be somewhere else.

Em and I, we wandered around for a few dark and hungry weeks, then hopped a truck without any idea where it was headed. The driver found us and kicked us off when the truck stopped for water, but that turned out to be a lucky break. The truck had stopped in Lafontaine, you see, and a night-guard found us when we were trying to break into a warehouse, and half an hour later we were both in the children's home, having our dirty faces scrubbed raw by Orelle Johnson and eating our first good meal in a month.

Malice was at the Brownstone already, having lost her mother to a stray bullet and her father to a stray cow. (She never got into details, but I understand that the cow-related death was a whole lot uglier.) She was, as a teenager, exactly what you would expect- messy and angry, talented and insolent, just as I was myself, and so of course we hated each other from the moment that our eyes locked.

We stuck it out for a while, and then one night in the dormitory it all blew up. I don't remember exactly who started it, and I don't remember exactly how. I know that she bloodied my nose and I know that I tore a chunk of her hair out, but I don't remember which of those came first. No matter. Things got very interesting very very fast. The other kids- and a few of the staff- made a howling circle around us. Someone even went and got Emily from the little kids' dormitory, and someone else let her stand on his shoulders so that she could watch.

It lasted a full half-hour, though, by the end of it, we were both falling down far more than we were landing punches. In the end, we collapsed on the floor and wheezed. Blood was streaming from a tear in my scalp, and three of Malice's teeth were loose. It was completely obvious that we would kill each other if we went on the same way. So we decided to swear eternal friendship instead.

Pax interrupted me: "What, just like that?"

"That's the best way to make a friend," I argued. "Get all of the grief out of the way right at the beginning."

"Wasn't Emily frightened when you were fighting?"

"Emily? Hell no. She was cheering all the way through, yelling out advice: 'The eye! Give it to her in the eye!'"

Pax glanced at Emily. "Really wanted your sister to win, huh?"

"Hell, no," Emily said. "Malice was the one I was cheering for. I liked her."

Pax laughed helplessly. "You know, I can't help but think that your life story is better than mine. Mine has math equations. Yours has gladiatorial games."

I flushed again. "My story's pretty normal, really. Normal for these days."

"Except for one thing. How big was your uncle?"

"How *big* was he?...I don't know. I didn't take his measurements while I was beating him up. He was regular size."

"Regular size for a guy."

"A'ya."

"Five foot ten? Eleven?"

"About that. Sure."

"And you were- what, fourteen years old?"

"So what?"

"You're five foot three," Pax pointed out. "Maybe five four, if you stand on your tippy-toes and comb your hair straight up. And you beat an adult male to the ground when you were fourteen? Did you have a gun? Did you have a magical boxing robot fighting at your side?"

"No gun, no boxing robot. But I did have powerful motivation."

"Oh, Casey." She smiled, part unbelieving, part admiring, and just a fraction bitter. "If only motivation were always enough."

Chapter Nine: In which there is a great deal of talk about rabbits.

I woke up the next day when a hesitant finger tapped me on the shoulder. Malice and Emily usually woke me by slapping a wet towel against some part of me, so this made a nice change.

I opened my eyes.

Pax crouched beside my bunk, biting her lip. "There was a guy poking around in here," she said. "I think he's out in the courtyard now."

I probably should have showed a bit more concern, but I couldn't hold back my yawn. "What'd he look like?"

"Tall, dark. Greasy. Shaggy."

"Nothing to worry about, then." I dropped back to the pillow. "That was Emily's stupid boyfriend."

"You don't understand. I met Emily's boyfriend last night. This is some *other* tall dark greasy shaggy guy."

"Let me save you some time, Pax. So long as you live here, you are going to see an endless parade of tall dark greasy shaggy guys going in and out. Emily must have met a new boy in the time since the rest of us went to bed.

Pax gaped. "We went to bed about six hours ago...!"

"Now you know why I don't bother to learn their names. Any other mysteries of life that I can clear up for you?"

"Yes, actually." Her eyes tracked past me, and rested on the wall. "Sorry, Casey, but I have to ask. What the hell is a Rabbit Factory?"

-

Now, I don't know whether you've ever seen a Rabbit Factory. You might have. The merchandising barons sold about a zillion of them after they were invented in the year two one oh oh. But then the bottom fell out of the market, as has happened since markets and bottoms began, and the craze subsided. By the time I'm talking about, the only Rabbit Factories around were antiques like mine- the cardboard of the boxes worn and soft. Mine must have been at least

seventy-five years old, but it was intact, the contents still sealed in their dusty plastic packaging.

And the contents of a typical Rabbit Factory are these: petri dishes, an incubator, freeze-dried sperm and ova, saline solution, powdered formula, and instruction manual. The deluxe versions (which cost exactly twice as much) threw in an extra incubator and a bag of pressed alfalfa pellets.

There used to be advertisements for those things everywhere. I once found an old scrap of newspaper that featured one. It had severe block type that somehow looked like a frown.

**WE LIVE IN DANGEROUS TIMES
DO YOU HAVE A PLAN?**

In these troubled times...you have to be ready for disaster.

YOU need a way to provide for yourself...AND YOUR FAMILY...if the worst comes to the worst.

YOU CAN'T COUNT ON THE GOVERNMENT TO FEED YOU!

One Rabbit Factory™ contains everything you need to produce six pairs of breeding rabbits- IN YOUR OWN HOME OR LIVING AREA.

Rabbits- which breed rapidly and eat any available vegetation- are the smart bet for anyone who wants to grow their own meat.

An AFFORDABLE and SUSTAINABLE source of high-quality protein.

Be smart- be prepared.

Buy RABBIT FACTORY.™

At the bottom of the ad were two photos: a fuzzy black-and-white rabbit, blank-eyed, its nose twitching at the camera, and on the opposite side, a steaming bowl of meat stew.

The Rabbit Factory campaign was one of the most successful in history, so I hear. They couldn't stock the shelves fast enough. *Everyone* bought the things- everyone except the very rich, who had private islands or underground bomb shelters, with air-renewal systems and tiny hydroponic farms and warehouses of freeze-dried foodstuffs. The Rabbit Factory was a poor man's disaster plan. That was what was supposed to keep us alive after the nuclear bombs hit or the ozone layer dissolved or the melting ice caps sent ocean waves scudding over the prairies. We would retreat to high ground, whip out the old Rabbit Factory, and hunker down to produce some high-quality protein.

Did they work? Sorta, kinda. About as well as any do-it-yourself kit. If your kit wasn't too old, and if it hadn't been stored in the damp, and you had a quiet place to work, you had a chance of getting three bunnies from the average set. If you were damn lucky, you might get four, and if

you were *really* damn lucky, all of them would have the regulation number of heads.

Most people, I hardly need tell you, were not really damn lucky.

-

"I guess I have a screwed-up sense of humour, but the whole thing really amuses me," I told Pax.
"All the people who try to sell hope, in one form or another. And all the desperate people who buy it. It's like religion."

Malice raised her head at that. "Hey!"

"You don't count. You're just a fallen Catholic."

"Am not!"

"You so are. You think nuns are incredibly sexy."

She scoffed. "Like you don't."

We had this conversation in the community garden, as we tried to repair the damage that the League guards had done with their boots and probes and spades. At least, Malice and Pax and I were trying to repair the damage. Emily sat in the shade and gave us nods of encouragement every so often.

"You can see the overlap between religion and marketing," Pax mused. " 'Verily, verily, I say unto thee, he who buyeth the Rabbit Factory for the low low price of \$19.50 shall not die, but shall have life everlasting'."

Emily piped up: "Hey Pax, are *you* religious?"

Pax smiled at her, as she tossed a weed over her shoulder. "No, my darling, I am but a cheerful pagan. I like stories, though, and religion seems to have most of the good ones. Now- could you lend me a hand here, Emily? We'll be at this all night otherwise."

And damned if Emily didn't get up and go to help her.

-

The better I got to know Pax, the more I wondered how the Inquisitor could even have dared to look her in the face. Let alone hit her in that face.

She had a dignity about her- I've mentioned that. A calmness. A steadiness which let everyone know that she wasn't about to be pushed off balance. Had that developed in spite of her years as the Inquisitor's punching bag- or because of it?

And then there was her mind: her vast, well-stocked mind. Pax was a highly gifted Collector, it turned out. She had perfect recall, not just of everything she had read, but everything she had heard, seen, felt, and done. All of which must have made her very useful to the Inquisitor to whom she belonged. She was an entire array of equipment: tape recorder, video camera, voice recognition software, calculator, and scientific library, all in one.

And yet her intellect was anything but mechanical. Pax was fascinated in everything and everyone, and when you told her something- whether it was a narrative about your deep dark past, or an amusing anecdote about a goat and a watermelon- her attention was total. And she always laughed in the right places.

She was curious about everything: what we grew in the gardens, how Orelle had managed to run an orphanage in the badlands, how the bake ovens worked, where Emily got her lipstick, and whether it contained real cochineal. She was even interested in the Land Rover that Malice and I used to travel in, though it wasn't much more than a rusting hulk. She found the graffiti that Malice and I had cut into the dashboard, and the circular mark on the roof, like a stain from a giant coffee-cup, where the gun-turret used to be welded. And then she had to hear all about Malice and I during our road warrior phase, and all the places we had been before the Land Rover came back to park in Lafontaine for good.

"Where did you get the truck in the first place?" she asked.

"Orelle. She wanted to get rid of it. *She* wasn't going anywhere."

"And neither are you, anymore." She had been looking under the hood, at the space where the powerful electric engine used to be. "I guess you sold the motor when you came back into town."

"A'ya. And the tires. And the turret. Someone would have stolen them anyway. And we got pretty damn good prices for them individually."

"But why sell them, instead of hiding them somewhere? What's the point in tearing down a working Rover? You could have disassembled it and hidden the pieces. Then you could just reassemble it, if you needed it for an emergency."

"Ha. Lucky we didn't. Or the League would have collected them when it blasted through. Besides, Pax- the only reason to have a truck is if you're going to leave town. And that's not part of the plan for me. Not anymore." I paused, wet my lips. "Do you think *you're* going to stay?"

She smiled at that, leaning back against the truck's fender. It was a clear bright day, with a breeze blowing away from the city, so for once the air didn't smell of diapers or burning trash. It didn't escape either of us how quickly I had changed my tune: from grudging willingness to protect Pax, to mild desperation lest she leave.

"I think," she said, "that I could very easily be convinced to stick around."

-

Pilgrims came into town shortly after that.

I do not like pilgrims as a rule. I do not like the singing, I do not like the praying, and I do not like how oily their smiles get when they're explaining that the Baby Jesus forgives all my many sins. But there are two things about pilgrims I like quite a bit. One, they tend to have money, and two, they tend to have sore feet. So I opened up the storefront and turned shoemaker for the day. With a hunk of car tire and a knife, I can turn out sandals in no time flat. I can even do a fairly decent pair of boots, using rubber tire for the soles, and pieces of old inner tube for the uppers.

At the end of the day, I counted my takings twice, stowed them in the breakaway heel of my own boot, and climbed up to our eco-eco.

Where I stopped dead, in utter horror.

My Rabbit Factory had been raped and pillaged. The cardboard box it came in had been opened, actually *opened*, and lay on top of Malice's bunk. Pax was sitting cross-legged on the floor, with the various packages from the kit strewn around her.

"What are you *doing*?" I said- or rather I shrieked- my natural coolness seemed to have deserted me.

Pax ripped a bag open with her teeth. "I think it's about time to rev this sucker up."

"It's sacred! It's an antique! It's my wall decoration, Pax!"

"So? I'll put the box back up on the wall when I'm done."

"But it won't be the *same*."

"Good," she said, pulling the incubator out of its plastic swaddling. "Someone needs to shake you up a little."

-

Neither Malice nor Emily shared my horror. "It's about time," was the general sentiment. So I had to go along with things. I did so with a very poor grace at first, and then with more interest.

The clear bubble on top of the incubator became beaded with perspiration. For a few days it was cloudy, transparent- then it cleared and we all clustered around for a look.

"There's definitely something pink in there," Emily said.

"Mmm," Pax agreed. "It looks like a jellybean."

"Wonderful," Malice murmured *sotto voce*- "now I'm hungry."

We all found excuses to go and look at the incubator during the next few days, even when there was no noticeable change. Pax read and memorized my entire library, and Orelle became strong enough to climb stairs on her own, while we were waiting for the embryo to come to term. On the tenth day, as the instruction book directed, we unscrewed the bubble and lifted it off. What was inside would have fit into my palm, if I'd been remotely interested in touching it.

Emily looked horrified. "It's not alive, is it? It can't possibly be alive!"

It was. It was blind and tiny and nearly motionless, and blue veins throbbed in its transparent skin, but it was alive.

"But it's so small!" Emily protested. "Can't we put it back in the incubator and let it finish cooking?"

"It's the right size for a newborn," Pax said, re-reading the directions. "And these rabbits are built for quick growth, so don't worry. We just have to feed it."

"Yeah, about that," said Malice. "I mixed up some of the formula, but...I dunno. It seems pretty funky."

"Seventy-five year old formula, funky?" I asked. "You astonish me. I *knew* this was a bad idea."

Emily's eyes grew to the size of golf balls. "But he needs food! He could die! We have to get him milk!"

Pax glanced at me. "Are there any mammals in town?"

"There are rats. You want me to go out and look for a lactating rat? Seriously, Em. Maybe you should just let Malice or me snap its neck now."

Her voice reached a whole new pitch. "*DON'T- YOU- DARE!*"

"You know that the whole point of a Rabbit Factory is to breed them for food."

"Well, not this one! Not Floyd!"

Floyd. Sweet angels of mercy.

I was opening my mouth, about to try and make her see sense, when Pax caught my wrist and pulled me aside. "As a favour to me, Casey," she said. "Don't."

"Oh, don't what? Don't let my sister find out that there isn't a Santa Claus? The rabbit's going to die anyway."

She shook her head. "Your sister is a gentle soul. She wasn't meant for this time."

"But it's where she lives. Seriously. There are things she has to get used to."

"Maybe so. But not today, I hope." Pax sighed. "Don't do anything drastic yet. I'm going to go have a look around."

-

I don't know how Pax came up with the nursing bottle of milk, nor how she got the next one a few days after that. But, as she said, you couldn't be in an Inquisition gang for years without picking up a few tricks.

Because Rabbit Factory spawn were designed for fast growth, Floyd reached full size in just a couple of weeks, and whatever the milk was that Pax had found for him, it gave a particularly lustrous sheen to his coat. He turned out to be a brute of a bunny, who kicked and bit whenever he was touched, oblivious to all the love that Emily and her new boy lavished on him. I tried again to persuade the others that his obvious destiny was a stewpot, but was outvoted.

"Why did you bother?" I asked Pax, as we watched Floyd daintily nibble on Malice's sleeping bag. "Seems like a lot of effort to waste on one very ungrateful rabbit."

"Well, we learned something."

"What?"

"A Rabbit Factory is not the way to feed your family through the apocalypse."

"Well- not if you're going to refuse to eat them, no."

Pax held a sprig of grass near Floyd's mouth; he eyed it suspiciously and then ignored it. "You're not big on the finer things in life, are you?"

I snorted. "What finer things?"

"Well. I think that's the point. They're only there if we make them. Maybe you're happy with a totally stark existence, Casey- though I doubt it. But Emily isn't. People like Emily- " She stared out of the window slit, one hand rubbing slowly at her fuzz of black hair. It had grown a little. "People like Emily really do need the world to change."

"Lovely thought. Don't know if it's possible. And what the hell does it have to do with Floyd?"

"It doesn't, really. I'm just saying. Even with everything that's wrong with the League- at least they're trying."

"To change the world. Christ. The League did get to you. Do you have propaganda written all over your undershorts?"

She snorted, impatient. "This will astonish you, Casey," she said. "This will make you jump. But- "

At that second, there came a solid *thump* from overhead, like a sack of sand being hurled down. There was nothing about the noise to suggest danger, but you don't stay alive by ignoring strange happenings.

I was on my feet, about to go, when Malice swung through the apartment hatch. It was then I knew that something was deeply wrong, because she was smiling.

And she only had to say one word to let us know what was going on: "Orelle."

Chapter Ten: In which I come up with a plan. Sort of.

Pax had three inches and ten pounds on me, but I had no trouble dragging her bodily to Orelle's apartment. In my adrenalin-high state, I could have punched through walls and dragged speeding trucks to a halt.

"Help her," I ordered Pax, as soon as we got inside.

Orelle was curled on her side, eyes glassy as marbles. The right side of her face was twitching; the left side was a blank, frozen mask. Her forehead and torso shone with sweat.

Pax glanced at her, then back at me, bleak-faced.

"I don't want to hear it!" I said fiercely, cutting her off before she could even begin to talk. "Just *fix it*, damn you!"

"I'm not a doctor."

"You spent a lot of time with Amanthi when you were in the League."

"A'ya. And I spent a lot of time in hen-houses when I was a kid. It didn't turn me into a chicken."

I was so furious, everything in my vision was drenched in red. If I had cried that moment, I think I would have cried blood instead of tears.

"You know more about medicine than anyone in this town," I said through gritted teeth. "And you're all we've got, so don't argue. You see that woman? You hid *underneath* that woman, when your sadistic overlord wanted to find you and use your head as a soccer ball. She put her damn *body* between you and Nora Russe. You damn well owe her, Pax. You owe me!"

I was yelling by then, and Pax swiftly grabbed my elbow and pulled me into the hall.

"She's had a stroke," Pax said. "That much is obvious."

"A stroke," I said, breathing hard. "Fine. How do you cure a stroke? Sponge baths, bed rest, or foot massage?"

"She needs a brain scan, clot-busting drugs, blood thinners, physical therapy..."

"...none of which she'll get around here, so what else? Tea? Cabbage leaves? Group hugs?"

She shook her head. "Casey. Casey. I am so damn sorry. But there might not be a fix for this."

I clamped my eyes shut. Maybe if I couldn't see the world, it would cease to exist.

"Orelle's tough," I said hoarsely. "She'll be fine."

-

All that afternoon, turn and turn about, Em and Malice and I kept vigil over Orelle. When it was my turn, Pax appeared at the apartment door, carrying a mug that steamed. She handed it to me, then slid down the wall to sit beside me.

I bent my head over the cup, letting steam wash over my face. It was mint tea- not something I'd ever enjoyed, but it was different when Pax made it. Now, the warmth of it somehow made my chest feel less tight.

We sat some time in silence.

"You love her," Pax said. It wasn't a question.

I sipped scalding tea. "She brought me up. Whether she did a good job is an open for debate, but still."

She stared at her hands, and seemed to nerve herself. "There's something you should consider."

"I'm listening."

"The Anastasian League has medical facilities. Medications, too."

"I'm not listening anymore."

"No, I thought you wouldn't. But- "

"Pax, I'm not going to track down the psychopaths who almost killed Orelle and beg them for aspirin! Hell, they're the ones who *caused* this fucking stroke!"

"Maybe. Or maybe it was the bunches of raw tobacco that Orelle's been smoking since she was twelve. Either way. You might be able to get help for her through the League."

"And what'll it take to get help from the League? Do I have to give them one of my kidneys on the spot, or will they take an I.O.U.? Or- hell. Don't tell me you want to pull some self-sacrifice shit and offer to turn *yourself* over."

Her smile twisted up her face. "No, I have to admit, I didn't have that in mind. But Casey. Here's what I promise. Tell me that you want to get help for Orelle from the League- and I swear I will think of some way to make it happen."

"Thanks, and all that," I said. "But I think I'd rather ask a jackal to babysit."

"Look- do you have another plan?"

What loomed up in my head then was the blocky black text of the Rabbit Factory advertisement. **WE LIVE IN DANGEROUS TIMES. DO YOU HAVE A PLAN?**

"Plans," I said, "are vastly overrated. Since they never seem to work."

"But- "

"I said *no*, Pax!"

"All right," she said, after a pause. "All right. Your call."

She sat with me in silence for some time afterwards, and I kept catching her looking at me with a strange, soft expression. As if I was the one who was sick, and wouldn't get well.

-

Eventually I dozed, but lightly. I heard it when a cracked voice whispered, "Hey."

I started up. Some time before, Pax had fallen asleep- she was resting on my shoulder, curled against me. And Orelle's eyes were slightly parted.

I carefully eased Pax down to the floor, and then scooted to Orelle's bed. "Hey," I told her. "How you doing?"

"Like hell," she said, and tried to smile. The right side of her mouth moved; the left side didn't. "Know what the worst damn thing is? I would commit triple homicide for a smoke."

Orelle's eyes tracked to Pax's sleeping body. "She's a funny one," Orelle noted. "Likes to spin you around. I don't think you hate that."

"No."

"Good." Her eyes drifted shut briefly; with an effort, she opened them again. "Guess you won't

have to pay any rent once I'm gone."

"Don't. Orelle, shut up." I couldn't stand a rash of sentences ending with the words "once I'm gone." I would strangle myself with a pillowcase rather than listen to that.

Her voice sunk even lower. "Casey."

I leaned closer to her.

"I need to ask you for something. Something...selfish."

"You've got it. Whatever it is."

Her eyes opened all the way. Sweat pooled in the creases in her face: the furrows in her forehead, her eye sockets.

She said: "There's gonna be a heat-wave this week. And I don't know if I can take it."

-

Malice was sleeping deeply. I had to overturn her mattress to get her out of bed. She woke up irritated, bruised, and ready for violence. But after I explained, she just picked herself up, sneezed, and followed me.

"How many power coils do we have left?" I asked her, as we headed down the stairs.

"Eight. If nobody's found the cache."

"More than enough."

"They're not charged, though."

"They will be."

-

I had never felt anything like the cold that came roaring out of Orelle's ancient beige air-conditioner, when Malice and I hooked up the newly charged power coils and flipped the switch. The old dinosaur just inhaled the heat out of the room. Within seconds, I had to rub my arms hard to get rid of goosebumps.

"Mary mother of God," Malice said in awe, standing in the full force of the blast. "Why haven't we ever done this before?"

"Because air conditioners drink electricity like holes?" I muttered. "Because it would have been a huge frickin' unnecessary risk?"

"Oh right," she admitted, "that."

I checked Orelle's forehead. Better already. She was sleeping, but now, with the old machine running, she wouldn't wake before dawn, itchy and gasping and breathless in the heat.

Then I saw movement out of the corner of my eye. Pax, slowly sliding up into a sitting position. She hadn't woken when Malice and I were setting up. Or maybe she had just pretended not to wake, with her usual sense of delicacy. But now the thing was running, it was impossible to ignore.

I tensed. "I don't want questions," I told her.

Pax stared at the roaring machine, and she didn't ask. She just said, "As plans go, I've seen worse."

-

Orelle died three days later, on a Sunday morning. Malice and I were both in her place when it happened, but I had fallen asleep.

Death is something that I'm supposed to be used to by now. Because I'm an adult. Because I'm a human. Because I live in this godforsaken world. But I wasn't then, and I'm not now. I wasn't afraid of dying myself. And I wasn't afraid of a quick clean alien invasion that would depopulate the entire world in sixty seconds flat. What I couldn't stand was Orelle's slow wasting, her slow dwindling. The stupid biological process that turned my friend and foster mother into a cooling sack of meat.

Burials happen in the middle of the night, when it's cool enough to dig graves. So, that evening, we held Orelle's wake in the open air. The girls came from the brothel down the street, and sang "Rock of Ages" in ten-part harmony. Mind you, I don't think the harmony was supposed to have quite so many parts. At least half of them were making up notes as they went. Which wasn't surprising, considering how drunk they all were. They brewed a powerful brand of poteen in the brothel, and they always started tipping early on the day of a funeral.

As the last wailing strands of sound died out, Malice observed, "They sound like coyotes."

"I know."

"I mean that in a good way."

"I know."

Malice was right. The howling, the rasping jangled notes- it was the perfect music for Orelle's passing. Death is senseless at the best of times, Orelle's death more so than most. Why mark it with something beautiful? Why give it the satisfaction?

Emily was sitting on the steps, huddled in a blanket from Orelle's room. When her stupid boyfriend tried to touch her, she screamed at him, threatened to sic Malice on him, tried very convincingly to kick him in the nuts- and then fell into his arms and sobbed. Floyd nosed around at her feet, oblivious.

The rest of us took turns with the shovel. I dug for longer than I should have- I felt that I would break apart as soon as I was no longer *doing* something. But in the end, my hands blistered, and the blisters popped, and my palms began to bleed. When that happened, Pax took the shovel away from me, and finished digging the grave herself.

The worst part of a funeral, always, is when the body is placed in the hole. That's when you think- my God, am I just supposed to *leave* her there?

Pax- brave or brainless, I couldn't tell which- put a hand on my shoulder after the last shovelful of earth was scooped onto the grave, and she squeezed hard.

"You know what I wonder?" I asked her suddenly. "Why do we even try to go on? Why don't we just *let* the aliens invade? Flag down a passing mothership of murderous extraterrestrials, and tell them, 'Hey, go to town'?"

Pax's thumb rubbed back and forth across my shoulder, but she didn't say anything. Of course she didn't. What had I expected her to say? The woman had spent the first part of her life locked in a lab, and the second part of her life getting kicked around by Nora Russe and saying "sir" a lot. She knew a thing or two about suffering.

"So why do we even bother?" I said. "Why do we go through the damn motions?"

Pax looked at me then. "Why do we go through the motions?" she asked. "Isn't that the same thing as asking, 'Why do we dance?'"

"That's not an answer."

"Case, what do you want from me? I happen to believe that my own life is worthwhile- in spite of everything. If you don't believe that- well. I'm not going to figure out with the meaning of all existence here, while you wait."

"I don't want the meaning of all existence. I just...want...a meaning."

She glanced at me in sudden irritation. "Well," she said. "Does it mean anything that I'm here?"

I blinked. "I- "

"As meanings go, it's trite, but it's kind of better than nothing. Isn't it?"

I was having a hard time catching up. "What are you saying?"

"I think you can figure it out," she said. "I have faith in you. So how about you make up your mind, and let me know?"

Pax gave my shoulder a last squeeze before she melted away into the dim of the street. I was still trying to figure out what had just happened when Emily came stalking up to me, her face incandescent with rage.

"What was that all about?" she demanded.

"Um. Still not sure."

"She was trying to seduce you!"

"Yes. At a funeral. Very inappropriate. I'm sorry, Em- "

"She was trying to seduce you," Emily repeated, "and you just *let her walk away*?"

I gaped. "Emily! FUNERAL!"

"Orelle..." Emily stumbled over the name, pressed her eyes shut for a second, but then went on. "Orelle spent the past fifteen years trying to wise you up. She was sick of you hiding, sick of you being afraid, sick of you not caring, and *damn* sick of you being alone. So you will find Pax, you will take her upstairs, and you will screw her senseless or I swear to God will never speak with you again." A pause. "Okay?"

Chapter Eleven: In which I decide, just for a change of pace, to be brave.

It was late, and Malice was tired, but she was still cooperative. At first.

"Of *course* you can use the apartment to seduce your girl," she said. "Why would I have a problem with that? I'll take my shoes off and keep real quiet. You won't even know that I'm there."

"...yeah. That's sweet of you, Malice, don't get me wrong, but actually...I was hoping that you could *really* not be there."

She stared at me, uncomprehending, until it sank in.

Then the era of cooperation ended.

"You want me to *leave*? That's bullshit! Who's going to critique your form if I'm not there? Huh? Who's going to give you helpful suggestions for improving your technique?"

"Malice, I'm begging you. You want me to cry?"

"Okay, look. I promise that I won't yell 'Touchdown!' when you go over the top."

She promised that every time. But she always forgot in the heat of the moment.

I tried another tack. "Look, it's just for one night."

I guess I looked sufficiently desperate, because at last, her face softened, and she heaved a gusty sigh. "I guess I can go sleep on Orelle's floor tonight. Not like anyone else will be using it. Go ahead and have tender wholesome sex with your girl without anyone else watching. Just don't make a habit of it, that's all."

-

As soon as Malice swung down the ladder, I got busy. It was no good trying to *clean* the apartment in any real sense, but I kind of raked up most of the debris and stuffed it under Malice's mattress. Everything that didn't fit under there, I kicked into a corner, and I threw a blanket over the pile. The floor became visible for the first time since we'd moved in. It didn't look that bad, actually. I think that all the junk had acted as a layer of protective insulation, like leaf mould on a forest floor. We didn't have a broom, so I scraped up dirt and dust with an old book. Threw a blanket over that, as well. I took down my mattress and Emily's, shoved them together on the floor, and arranged the cleanest of the pillows on top.

I looked around- not bad, not bad at all. Emily had taken Floyd with her to her stupid boyfriend's place, so there was no soundtrack of scuffling and nibbling. I put out a jar of Malice's moonshine, and dusted off a couple of coffee cups. Too bad that we'd polished off the end-of-the-world champagne so fast.

As a final touch, I dug out a bunch of emergency candles from the disaster kit, and set them here and there, all around.

-

Pax arrived when I was lighting the last candle. She gave a little cough so that I would know she was there, but I still jumped about four feet and almost lit my hair on fire.

"Fancy," she observed. "You want to tell me what all this is about?"

"It's...well..."

Aw, hell. I wondered if I could bluff my way out of it now. *It's an ancient Tibetan mourning ritual. First we hit each other with the ritual pillows of lamentation, then we get drunk and go to sleep fully clothed in separate beds.*

"Never mind," I muttered, my resolution suddenly gone. "I just thought- I just wondered..."

"Thought what? Wondered what?"

"Crap, don't make me say it!"

"Casey, if you can't say 'sex,' you've got no business *having* sex."

"*Sex*, all right?" I yelled. "Sex sex sex sex sex! Happy now?"

"Not quite yet. But I suspect I will be." She began to unbutton her shirt.

I cringed. "I didn't mean- "

"Casey, if I let you set the pace, I suspect that we'll never get anywhere."

-

What was it like? It was like- being taken apart, and put back together in a way that made much more sense. It was like having every part of me stripped naked, and realizing that no part of me was as bad as I had always secretly feared.

Pax was the generous kind of lover. The kind that makes sure that you keep up, no matter how often you stumble. The kind that enjoys the taking and the giving just as much, and can teach you without seeming to. Somewhere along the way, I forgot to even be afraid.

It was only after that that I could cry for Orelle. And she held me when I did that too.

"Thanks," I mumbled when it was over.

"Right back at you," she murmured drowsily. "Budge over a bit, would you, sugarlips? Half of me is hanging out into space here."

-

I lay with her like that, drifting, for about half an hour, and then woke to full darkness (the candles had gone out some time before.) I had gone to sleep with a question playing around my brain, and woke, as sometimes happens, with my mind already made up.

"Pax," I said, into blackness. "I have something to tell you."

She had been drifting too, but now she was abruptly alert, every pore of her open, listening.

I nerved myself. "Pax- "

"No," she said suddenly. "No, wait." She eased into a sitting position. "I think I know what you're going to tell me. And I think maybe you shouldn't."

I sat up as well, found her hands, and squeezed them. "I want to."

She squeezed back. "I'm glad you want to. But everyone will be safer if you don't."

"It's been over a month since the League was here- "

"They *will* return, Casey. Trust me. And their target will be just the same as before. And if they get their hands on me, then...well. No point in dwelling on that. The bottom line is this: I can't give away what I don't know."

"Emily knows already. And her pain threshold is a lot lower than yours."

She pulled her hands away from me, abruptly. "Don't talk that way."

"Don't talk what way? Don't talk about Emily being tortured for information? Hell, Pax, it's not exactly an image I enjoy contemplating, but guess what? All kinds of horrible things could happen to us. The League could come back and zap some more townsfolk. The Lafontaine well could run dry. Malice could catch syphilis. Em could die in childbirth. There's no way to avoid that kind of thing. There's no way to even prepare."

I paused, rolled over, and lit one of the candles. In the flickering flame, Pax's face became a mosaic of copper and orange, deep brown and gold.

"God damn it, Casey," she said, softly. "What can I do to make you believe that there's more to existence than bare bones survival and a painful death?"

"Nothing. I have seen the face of the world, and the world doth suck. This right here? This is as good as if ever gets. So screw the world, and the fifty thousand ways that it makes us cowardly. I'm going to pretend, here and now, that there's nothing to be afraid of."

Pax's finger came up and ran along the whole length of my jaw. "You want to spoil the big mystery of Lafontaine for me. You want to tell me what the power source is."

"A'ya. Are you going to run away now, or put your fingers in your ears?"

"I just want you to understand that I'm not asking for this. It's not necessary."

"You're not asking. I'm offering. Besides- you kind of already know the answer, don't you?"

There was that crooked smile, the one that made my entire core heat and spin. "I have my suspicions," she said.

"Of course you do. It is very and extremely difficult to keep a secret like this in the presence of a crazy brilliant physicist. So- what's your theory?"

"About what the source is?"

"About what the source is."

Pax drew a blanket up to her breasts. She studied my face for five full seconds before she said it.

"It's you," she said. "Isn't it."

"No, it's Floyd. Kidding. Kidding! Of course, it's me."

-

"Do it again," she said some time later. "Once more."

In front of us was a small electric fan, one that the League had found, but hadn't bothered to take. I had stripped the power cord of its insulation, so that I could have skin contact with the bare wires. Now, for the fiftieth time, I clapped my hands together, rubbed them hard, and blew into them. Then I carefully picked up a wire between each thumb and forefinger, focused, and *pushed*. There was a crackle, a whiff of ozone, a bright spark, as electricity started to flow- out of my right hand, through the wires and motor that made up the fan, and then back into my left. Softly, steadily, the fan began to whirr.

Pax watched, her head resting on her right hand. It's hard for me to describe what her face looked like then- it was a kind of gentle awe.

"Christ almighty, Case," she said. "What does it feel like?"

"I don't know. It feels normal, like any other part of me. Like blood, maybe, passing through a vein."

"How long can you keep it up?"

"A pretty long time. I've never pushed it to its limits. It tires me out in the end. Makes me hungry. But that's enough of that."

I let go of the wires, and the blades of the fan spun more softly, then juddered to a halt. Pax shook her head.

"I have known *dozens* of Naturals. Hundreds perhaps. I've never met one who could manipulate electricity."

"Maybe there are tons of us, and the others just hide it better than I do. I mean, electric fans in every room of the Brownstone, every summer? How dumb can you possibly get? I *knew* it was a bad idea, but Orelle insisted...and then Emily got all excited. From now on, if those kids get too hot in the summer, I'll just go in there and throw a few buckets of water over 'em."

"How long does it take you to fully charge a power coil?"

"Ten hours is my personal best. But I slept for about four days afterwards. Then when I woke up, I ate everything I could find that wasn't studded with tacks or lit on fire. So. Your turn. How the hell did you know?"

"I didn't know. Not for sure. But the hints were there. You and Malice drove the Rover back and forth across the continent for more than a year. You must have had a way to power it. Then, too, it made sense that the person giving electricity to the Brownstone was someone with a personal connection with the place. But I *first* started to wonder when you told me your life story. You shouldn't be alive Casey, you really shouldn't, with everything you've been through. Fire and revolution and homelessness and wandering. Yet here you are- a little dented around the edges, but mostly unmaimed. Which made me think that you had to be a Natural. And not just any Natural, but one with a talent that you could use in self-defence."

I rubbed my fingers slowly together. They always tingle a little afterwards. "I don't use it as a weapon very often. I have to be touching someone with both hands if I'm going to push power through them- I can't shoot it like a taser. And whenever I use it, I risk giving myself away. Which would be pretty high on the 'oops' metre." I paused, then admitted, "A few times, when I didn't have any other choice, I just had to let it rip, and to hell with the consequences."

"How many times?"

"Twice. Once when Malice and I were exploring some ruins, and a couple of drifters dragged her down and started to strip her. By the time I heard her yelling, it was almost too late. I didn't have the time to find a weapon or write a strongly-worded letter, so I just waded in and got to work. I was *wild* that day- I think two of them were dead before they hit the ground. And the other time-

"

"Was when your uncle tried to molest Emily. I *knew* it."

"Yes. You knew it. You're very smart. Shut up."

We stretched out on the bunk again, side by side, and the darkness seemed less total. Glow of grey steel through the window vent. "It's almost dawn," I pointed out.

"I know. Pretend it isn't. That's what I'm doing."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want this night to end." She was silent a while. "What was it like- using your power that way? To attack someone, to kill?"

"Well, it was a magical party. I enjoyed myself ever so much. Frack on a hill, Pax, what do you think it was like?"

She placed a hand on my chest, to quiet me. "I'm just asking. Some people in your position would have turned into real bruisers. Finding excuses to pick fights. But you kept it a secret for

most of your life. Wasn't it ever hard to hold back?"

"Only once, really...You remember that night in the tent, when the Inquisitor was beating on you?"

"I'm a Collector, Casey. I have picture perfect recall of everything that's happened to me since I was three. Chances are, if you can remember something, then I'm going to as well."

"Right. Well. I could have killed the Inquisitor then. I wanted to. Wanted to grab one of her ears in each hand, and smash electricity through her brain until her eyes turned to boiling jelly."

Pax's head turned towards me on the pillow. "But if you'd done that, you would have blown your cover. And it also would have been kind of gross."

"I should have done it anyway. I can't believe I just stood and watched."

She let her fingertips trail along me. "Don't torture yourself over it. It wasn't as bad as it looked."

"It looked pretty damn bad."

That crooked smile again. "You know, Casey, all appearances to the contrary, I do believe that you have a chivalrous side."

"I have a not-wanting-my-girlfriend-to-be-beaten-up-by-a-giant-Inquisitor-bitch side. Is that the same thing?"

"More or less." She smoothed my hair. "You're right. It *is* almost dawn. Should we get some sleep, just for a change of pace?"

"Mmph." I tucked my head into the gap between her chin and chest. It fit there. It felt right there. "I've been sleeping all my life. Sleep has nothing left to offer me. I'd rather try the other stuff again."

"Patience, Casey." Her arm circled me. "We'll have time. I promise you. We'll have time."

-

I overslept. By the time I woke, the sun was scorching through the vent, and the air had turned thick and muggy.

The grief was still there, over Orelle, but it wasn't crushing anymore. It was a weight I carried, rather than a weight crushing me down. I was even hungry.

Pax wasn't there- she was probably in the outhouse, or looking for breakfast. I rolled out of bed and cracked stiff muscles. I remember I was thinking that I wanted eggs for breakfast.

I was wondering who I would need to maim or murder to get eggs when the hatch was flung open. Emily stood there, eyes wide. "Casey! Big fucking problem!"

"What is it?"

She held up a finger. "Shut up. Listen."

I shut up and I listened. What I heard was all the usual things- the shouts on the street, the odd bottle breaking. And then- more softly, but unmistakeable, the grinding of truck engines along the road.

League trucks.

"Shit!" I thrust my feet into the nearest pair of shoes. "Where's Pax?"

"I haven't seen her."

"She has to hide!"

"Maybe she's hiding already."

"I won't take a chance on that."

I practically slid down the ladder; Malice was already at the bottom; once again, everyone was spilling onto the streets. I cast a desperate glance around. No gaunt rawboned body. No crooked smile in a lean brown face. No Pax.

And also no time, because suddenly the trucks were there, the League trucks, rearing out of the smoggy haze. The truck doors swung open, and convoy guards spilled out. The ones with nightsticks had them in hand- not firing, not yet, but forcing the crowds back. I swore.

"Casey," Malice said.

"Not now. I have to find Pax."

"Casey- "

"I'm going to check the basement and the roof. If you want to help, you can start with the stairwells."

"*Casey. LOOK.*"

Only then did I see what she wanted me to see: Nora Russe. I hadn't recognized her because she was standing amongst the League guards, wearing, not a uniform, but a faded blue jumpsuit. A jumpsuit that looked very familiar. I tensed, instinctively, when I saw her face. When she caught me staring, though, she gave me a strange, half-guilty smile.

I didn't have much time to be confused- because about that moment, the front door of the front truck swung open.

And then Pax stepped out.

And then I stared.

The Inquisitor's uniform, the one that had been comically tight on Nora Russe, fit Pax perfectly. The knife-pressed trousers hung straight, and the cuffs were draped over the insteps of her spit-polished boots. The shirt just skimmed her torso, and the silver epaulettes looked like they had been snapped into place on her shoulders. Unlike the guards, she didn't carry her nightstick. It swung from her belt instead. It wasn't threatening that way, wasn't macho. It just looked like a natural part of the picture.

The whole ensemble suited her- that was the first thing I thought. The second thing I thought: I'd been so stupid. So mindbogglingly, overwhelmingly, ballbreakingly *dumb*.

The truck bounced lightly as Pax descended the steps. She hopped to the ground, facing me.

I read this sentence in a story once: "Her face bore a look of infinite regret." Pax's face did not bear a look of infinite regret. Some regret, maybe. Nothing that a good night's sleep and a hot shower wouldn't cure.

Only then did I really truly realize. Only then did it sink in.

"Hey," she said to me.

"Oh no," I said, by way of response. "Oh *no*."

"Casey. I'm sorry that this is how it is. But this is how it is."

"*Stupid*. How could I have been so *stupid*."

"Don't think of it that way. I'm good at my job. That's all."

She gave me a sympathetic grimace. But she didn't stop. Instead, she raised her voice, addressing everyone in the street. "In my capacity as Inquisitor, and on behalf of the Anastasian League, I inform you that we have completed our search of Lafontaine, and identified the resources that we require."

Her eyes settled on me. "Casey Prentice, as of oh eight oh oh hours this morning, July tenth in the year two thousand two hundred and seven, you are officially classified both as a Natural and as a League Resource."

I found my tongue. "Charming. Lovely. Wonderful."

"I've been ordered to take you into the protection of the League."

"Oh, I just bet you have."

She lowered her voice. "Casey- I'm sorry. Sorry about the timing of this, especially. But this will go easier if you just come with me now."

I took a breath, held it three seconds, and puffed it out. Gauged the distance between me and the nearest escape route. Counted the guards in the convoy. There seemed to be rather a lot of them. None of them were smiling.

"I can't stop this from happening, and neither can you," Pax went on. She knew what I was thinking. "You can't prevent this. But at the very least, you can make it easier on Emily."

Bile bubbled up into my throat. "Are you threatening her?"

"No. No, I'm not. But if you run, if you fight, I'll have to stop you, Casey- I *don't* have a choice. And Emily shouldn't have to see her sister lashed with a nightstick, or dragged across the street in handcuffs. She shouldn't see you hoisted into the back of the truck howling and thrashing. She doesn't have to see that, Casey."

Which was true enough, so far as it went, but oh, did I hate Pax da Costa at that moment. Pax with her crisp trousers and her shiny-shiny boots, Pax with her stories and her sure hands and her endearing lopsided smile. Pax- the Inquisitor. Pax, who had spent six weeks digging all of my secrets out of me.

I wanted to punch her so hard that her nose would fly out of the back of her skull. I wanted to grab her with both hands and send electricity shrilling through her big brilliant brain. If Emily hadn't been there, I might just have tried.

I didn't see or hear a signal given. But sloooowly, one after another, the convoy guards were raising their nightsticks. Adjusting their grip.

Pax herself still hadn't moved. Her face was blank now, cool and mechanical, like a surgeon about to perform. "It's up to you," she said. "But I'll have to take you either way."

There was only one word that seemed appropriate for the occasion. It was four letters long and I said it several times and Pax gave me a tired, tolerant shrug.

Then she said, "Thirty seconds."

I don't know whether you've ever tried to say goodbye to your entire life in thirty seconds. I have. It is unpleasant.

Lightheaded, I turned and gave Emily a very jerky wave of reassurance. Which didn't seem to

reassure her much. She was white around the lips, pale and staring. I could tell that she wanted to come to me. But Malice had a firm grip on her arm, holding her back, and Malice is ever so much stronger than she looks.

I spent five of my last fifteen seconds just staring at them both. They would be all right, the two of them, whatever happened. If anyone on the continent knew how to survive, it was Malice Hiroyama. She'd still be wanking to girly mags and saying her rosary long after the last of the cockroaches gave up. And so long as Malice could scrounge something to eat and a place to sleep, she'd give Emily at least half. That much I did believe.

Malice didn't say anything, but she did give me a long, slow nod. It looked to me like a promise. I nodded back.

Then I turned away, and I hoisted myself up into the darkened truck bed. And Pax hoisted herself up after me.

Chapter Twelve: In which I make a decision which is probably not very smart.

So it turns out that the League cuts the wedge from your earlobe with a small, custom-built clipping tool that works more or less like a hole punch. And yes, it fucking hurts.

"Ow ow ow ow ow ow frigging *ow*!"

"Almost done," Amanthi pleaded. She dropped the torture tool into an instrument tray, and sprayed my bleeding ear with something cool and misty. I guess it was supposed to numb the part and take the pain away, but brother oh man, it did not work. It just felt like the raw flesh was being bombarded with tiny specks of ice. Pushed beyond endurance, I let out a snarl and gave the doctor a kick in the shins that made her stagger.

Pax raised her head at the noise. We were at a League barracks some hundred miles away from Lafontaine, in the women's dormitory. She was sitting cross-legged on a bunk, writing something, while she waited for the doctor to finish with me. "Be nice," she instructed.

"It is not possible to be nice when someone is carving an expletive deleted hunk out of your expletive deleted earlobe!"

"Fair enough, but don't kick Amanthi for it. It wasn't her idea and it wasn't her fault."

None of this is in my control, Amanthi had asked to remember, begged me to remember. *None of this was my idea*.

I still wasn't in a mood to be big about things, but I muttered, "Sorry."

Amanthi smiled- a tired smile, but one filled with understanding. "When they cut my ear, I almost bit the doctor's hand off."

She pinched something into place over the wound. It looked like a pad of cotton, except that it adhered to the skin that it touched, forming a neat tight bandage. "There. It'll heal in about three weeks if you don't fiddle with the dressing. Keep your hair away from it."

That part would be easy, at least. They had clipped my hair to stubble as soon as I got into the building. Regulations, Pax said- in case of lice and nits. I passed my hand over my bristly scalp, not feeling very good about anything.

Pax had finished writing. She scribbled a big, loopy signature at the bottom of the page and folded it, then sealed it with a gold sticker emblazoned with the League crest.

"What's that?" I asked, just for something to do.

"Report of Compliance, for headquarters. To say that I took you into League protection as ordered. I'll send it with a runner tomorrow, when we're heading off."

Amanthi raised her head at this- she had been packing up her medical kit with quick, deft fingers. "Where are we headed?" she asked.

"Along the express- southwest. We've got to cover the rest of our route by the end of the year. We lost more time in Lafontaine than I expected. I don't know what the rest of you lazy bastards were doing while I was getting the goods."

She threw me a lazy smile when she said that, to let me know that I wasn't supposed to take offence. I glared nastily back at her.

"We kept busy," Amanthi was saying. "Delacroix had us pull one of the old strip malls apart- to collect the metal. I think I spent half my time giving tetanus shots."

"Well, at least you didn't just sit around and get fat. Nothing worse than fat Leaguers. Here, Nora, take this."

Nora Russe had been looming, silent and patient, at the end of the bunk. Now she lumbered forward to take the report from Pax.

I eyed her. Nora hadn't said three words all day. It was mindboggling to see her so quiet, so obedient. "Who are you, *really*?" I asked her.

Nora looked up at me, startled, and then her eyes zoomed to Pax, and it was Pax who answered.

"She used to be an actress," Pax said, giving Nora a light backhand slap on the stomach. "If you can believe that. A teeny-tiny community theatre, out in the east. It went bust, no surprise, and the actors got kicked out onto the street, also no surprise, and then they started to starve, no surprise either. I was out there working the coast, and Nora asked if she could join up with the League. I think she begged, actually. So I took her on."

"*She* doesn't have a clipped ear."

"She's not a League Resource. I could get twenty more like her any place we visit. She's a general labourer most of the time. Except when I need her to play Inquisitor." Again, that casual backwards slap- half-friendly and half-contemptuous. "I don't do it in every town, because word would get around. But it's a handy little trick. People are more likely to talk to me if I'm not wearing my uniform."

And with Nora wearing that uniform, *she* would be the target of any murder attempts by pissed-off townsmen. Expendable, dime-a-dozen Nora, who didn't have anything special to offer the League. Unlike Pax.

I wouldn't have thought it possible, but my hatred of Nora suddenly fizzed to nothingness. The woman was clearly so grateful to be in the League that she would do whatever she was told. "Actor, huh?"

Nora lifted her chin, and the ragged remnants of pride broke through her blank expression. "I specialized in kings and tyrants. Macbeth. King Lear. Coriolanus."

No wonder the theatre went bust. "You do play a mean Inquisitor."

"That's kind of the point," Pax said.

I looked at her, at ease on the bunk and bitterness nearly choked me. "So did Nora really beat you up that day?" I asked. "Or was it all faked?"

Pax shrugged. "About half and half. I wanted it to seem as real as possible. But as I told you, it wasn't nearly as bad as it looked."

She unfolded her legs and hopped down from the bunk. "Nora, take the report to the runner's station. Casey, you'll have to come with me now."

I flinched. "What? Where? Why?"

"The League's not big on privacy. We all share space when we're in the barracks." She waved her pen around to indicate the humming dormitory. "But it's your first day and you're pissed and tired and not in a mood to play well with others. So I'm going to put you in the infirmary for the night. There are a couple of beds in there, in case someone's contagious and has to be isolated."

"I can handle dormitories; I slept in them for half my childhood. I'm a Brownstone kid, remember?"

"Uh-huh. And how many other orphans did you beat to a pulp in the Brownstone before you settled in and began to make nice? I wanna break you in gentle-like, Casey. Come on- I'll show you where the infirmary is."

I followed her across the room, through several dozen women- the woman from a bunch of different Inquisition teams- in various stages of dress and undress. No-one had a spare set of clothes just to sleep in. They either peeled to their underclothes (a t-shirt and grey boxers) or stripped bare. Women were everywhere- climbing out of jumpsuits and green fatigues, shaking sand from their hair, sniffing suspiciously at their armpits, clipping their toenails, sliding into bunks. Thirty-six sweating breathing burgeoning bodies in a not-very-large space. It made me feel as if tiny insects were crawling all over the surface of my skin. Pax was right, I realized. The dormitory life is something that you have to get used to, and once you leave it, you get un-used to it very quickly. If I had to sleep in that viper pit, then I would probably start shrieking and punching heads sometime in the wee hours of the morning.

Outside, the hallway was lit- actually *lit*. I found later that the main hall of a League barracks was always lit through the night. It was lit by a fluorescent strip that gave out the palest of dull grey glows, but still. Wasteful.

We walked for some time in silence.

"So," I said, without preamble. "The stuff you told me about your life- was that all bullshit?"

"My twisted history?" She smiled, humourless. "All true, true as gospel. Considerably more true than gospel, actually."

"Excuse me if my natural scepticism chooses this moment to assert itself- but *bollocks*."

"No. Really. I was taken into League protection when I was thirteen. Then I spent six years in the Institute studying physics. When they realized that I wasn't going to be splitting any atoms any time soon, they offered me a choice. I could stay in the labs, and work as an assistant to a *real* scientist...or I could join an Inquisition gang, and maybe, in time, work my way up to become an Inquisitor myself."

"Which you did."

"By the time I was twenty-one. Like I told you- I'm good at my job."

Of course she was. How could she not be? She was a scary brilliant physicist with word-perfect recall, who never forgot a face or an image or a thought. And she had Nora Russe to act as a buffer, to be a target for people's fear and hatred, while she looked around through narrowed eyes, saw and remembered.

"What if the Institute wants *me*, Pax?" I asked suddenly. "What the hell happens then? Are you going to turn me over to be locked up in a chilly ten-foot-by-ten-foot box?"

She shook her head. "It's up to me to decide where you're assigned. I have that much pull in the League. You'll stay in my Inquisition team for the time being."

"Oh," I said stiffly. "Great."

We reached a door of frosted glass- it was surreal to see a pane of glass that wasn't smashed. Pax drew out a jangling bunch of keys, unlocked the door, and opened it. A not-too-unpleasant smell wafted out, a mix of must and iodoform.

"This is your stop," she said.

"Right," I said.

We didn't move.

"You know," I said, "Emily really liked you."

"I liked her too."

We still didn't move.

Pax heaved a gusty sigh, and began something that sounded very much like a lecture: "I know that you don't want to be here- "

"That's really freakin' perceptive of you, Pax."

"You'll get used to it. I promise you. Everyone does. You have to remember- you're a kind of soldier now. And like any soldier, you're under discipline. There will be rules. Constraints. Orders you have to follow. That doesn't mean you're a prisoner. Once you've worn discipline for a while, it sits comfortably on you. Like an old coat. And there are rewards. You can't even imagine them right now, but they're coming. And they'll more than compensate you for what you've lost."

She said all of this sincerely enough, but it was a little mechanical, too. I wondered how often she'd given the same welcome wagon speech before.

I didn't want to argue- why feed the animals?- but I couldn't just let that lie. "What's going to compensate me for losing Emily? Malice?"

Pax didn't turn a hair. "Purpose. You have a purpose now; don't underrate that. And it's a purpose that truly matters. You'll be working to help create a world in which your sister might actually live to grow old."

"I see. That's the formula. Lose your family, stick some purpose in the hole. And you think that's more than enough compensation?"

"It was for me. Once I was old enough to understand."

"Go ahead and tell yourself that," I answered. "Repeat it to yourself at night. Make a little mantra

of it. Maybe you'll come to believe it. Maybe it'll help you forget that something terrible happened to you when you were thirteen."

She scrubbed a hand violently through her close-cropped hair. "Oh, Jesus. You're an amateur psychologist."

"I'm an amateur psychologist, you're a fucking traitor- we all have our issues."

"Just go to bed, Casey." She slammed the door open all the way. Harder than she meant to, I think, because the glass rattled. "Go to bed and sleep off some of the angst and we'll talk in the morning."

"Why don't we talk now instead? Let's talk about stuff I hate."

"Casey- "

"You wanna know something I hate?"

"*Casey.*"

"BEING KIDNAPPED. You LYING BASTARD."

Patience evaporating, she pointed with one finger. "Inside, Casey. Now."

"You don't have to do this, Pax!" My voice was getting too loud, sort of piercing, but I couldn't help it- I wanted to shake her. "You don't have to roll over when the League whistles!"

As soon as I said it, I realized that I had made a mistake. Sparks ignited behind Pax's eyes. She didn't have to say anything. I just shut up.

"Prentice," she said, oh so softly. "Show me some goddamn respect."

"I didn't mean- "

"Oh hell yes, you meant, and you're pissing me off. You think I'm some kind of slave- cowed and obedient and unthinking. Lose the stupid and catch a clue. I'm in charge here. Try and twist your mind around that concept. You know, I've pulled the switcheroo trick with Nora at least twenty times. And, guess what? It always works. Not once, not *once* has anybody smelled a rat. Everyone's so ready to believe it- big bad white woman as the big bad boss, and me as the helpless darkie. People just eat that shit up. *You* ate it up."

I bristled. "I thought you needed help! You *wanted* me to think that you needed help!"

"And you *loved* feeling like a saviour. Loved the fuck out of it. But I'm not a fluffy, trembling runaway, desperate for your protection. I never was. And if you feel differently about me, knowing that- well, then, the hell with you."

"Of course I fucking feel different about you! How could I *not* feel different about you?"

She spread her hands wide, letting me see her. "Same person here, Case. Same person I was yesterday. I'm just wearing a prettier outfit."

"The clothes aren't the fucking problem!"

"So what is the problem?"

I stood there, my ear burning, my hair cropped, my stomach churning from the evil-tasting meal we'd been fed. (It was some kind of stew, thickened with I don't know what, and gritty in texture.) I stood there and wondered how the hell she could ask me what the problem was. Did she really need me to say it in so many words? *I thought you were in love with me, but you were just planning to strip me for parts.*

Pax shook her head, shook her head, like I'd somehow disappointed her terribly. She repeated: "Go to bed. And don't wander around once you've settled. The alarms will be set in about ten minutes. And there'll be guards around the perimeter. "

I found my tongue again. "Wonderful. All the comforts of home. Except- you know- *home*."

"Inside," she said, softly now.

I went. There wasn't really anything more to say. She closed the door behind me, but not all the way; faint grey light spilled through the open crack.

There was a metal chair in the room, and a metal cot, and that was all. The cot's blanket was made of some kind of synthetic material, and it reeked of chemicals. The sheet was stiff and papery. It crackled when I sat down. No noise but the whisper outside of the fluorescent lights, and Pax's booted footsteps retreating down the hall.

I hadn't slept alone in a room since I was ten. Suddenly I didn't know whether I'd be able to. It was eerie to hear real silence- no-one else breathing in the dark.

But did I really want to sleep, anyway? If I slept, I'd wake up. If I woke up, it would be the next day. And I would still be in the barracks, a forced recruit in this joke of an army.

No- I wasn't a recruit, not really. Recruits are people; I was a thing. Something to be collected and controlled- maybe protected, but only so that I could be used in the future. The hell with Pax and her mumbo-jumbo about soldiers and orders and rewards and discipline that sits comfortably on you like an old coat. (I still have no clue what she meant by all that.) Pax knew what my life would be like from now on. She even felt a little bit bad about it, maybe. That was why she was preaching at me one minute, and half-apologizing to me the next, and getting defensive the minute after that. That changed nothing. I was a useful object. I belonged to her, and she intended to keep me.

I could imagine Malice smirking. *Sounds like you two are married already.*

The thought of Malice made my throat close. I curled tight and rocked, in the chemical smell and the dim and the quiet, trying to figure out how the hell my life could have changed so completely.

I don't know how long I sat like that before I saw the shadow through the frosted glass.

It was Pax, I knew that- just from the height, and from the shape of her silhouette. Her shadow hand came up, and dealt two quick raps to the glass. And then she waited. In silence.

I knew what she was there for, and I found that I wasn't surprised.

There was one more rap, a soft one, and I heard her feet shuffle. She wouldn't knock again, I knew. Wouldn't force this. Would respect my decision. She did have that much respect for me. It was up to me, now, to decide whether I could do this and have any respect left for myself.

I sat on the bunk for some minutes, thinking...but I did open the door for her in the end, and she was very gentle with me that night. You'll think I was pathetic for doing it, and maybe I was, but try to put yourself in my shoes. It was the endtimes, after all, and what the hell else was I supposed to do.

Chapter Thirteen: In which I draw naked women and ineffectively threaten a hunger strike.

Let's be blunt about this: You can get used to anything. Bad smells, slavery, trench warfare, prison, menstrual cramps- maybe not menstrual cramps. Everything else, though.

I got used to life in the League, after a couple of months. It wasn't that bad, not really, not day-to-day. Most of the work happened in quick, furious spurts of activity, when we suddenly had to tear down an ancient factory or search a settlement or shake down some highway punks. Amanthi and I used to spend a lot of time in the back of the Resource truck, dozing, as we rattled from town to town. Most of the time we were allowed to leave the shutters open, so that we could nap with sunlight on our faces.

Evenings were spent either in a barracks, or camped in the trucks by the side of the road. Either way, they were long and dull. Some people would be detailed to do light jobs: cleaning, washing, boiling up the pre-packaged food. But those of us classified as League Resources were kept under pretty tight supervision. Except for Pax, we weren't allowed to wander or to keep tools with us that could be used as weapons. Even Amanthi had to hand her medical kit over to Nora when she wasn't actually using it. Unless we were needed for some specific job, there wasn't much for us to do but loaf around. In the off-hours, we were allowed to nap, to mend our clothes, to read. Some barracks had a sad little library, made up mainly of foreign dictionaries and old Harlequin novels. Most of the pages had been torn out for rolling cigarettes.

We were allowed to play cards, too- poker, bridge, rummy. Amanthi, who was a poker fiend, had a jealously-guarded pack of cards that must have been sixteen years old. It wasn't much fun to play with- you could identify any of the cards from the other side by the dents and scrapes on the back, and half of the Diamonds suit was missing.

I was bored out of my skull without my tool bench, so, during a few of the endless evenings, I occupied myself by making Amanthi a better pack of cards. I used the endpapers of a big atlas as raw material. No-one would give me a pair of scissors, but I folded the stiff paper and then used a blunt table knife to tear it neatly along the creases. Pax loaned me a pair of ballpoint pens, red and black, and I drew on the suits and numbers. In a fit of artistic inspiration, I made all the figures on the face cards naked. The Queen of Hearts was, I thought, particularly fine. I drew her with a flogger in her hand and a nubile young female bent over her lap.

Amanthi got rather silly when I gave her the pack of cards. She threw her arms around me, in fact, and blubbered all down the front of my shirt. I noticed a few days later, though, that she had borrowed the pens from Pax and drawn careful, modest drapery over all the interesting bits of the kings and queens and jacks. The flogger that the Queen of Hearts had been holding became a bunch of flowers. The nubile young female became a lap rug.

It had been fun making the cards, anyway. I needed this kind of frilly little time-waster because I had no regular duties. I didn't have to tend the gardens or unload the trucks or cook or make repairs. I *did* report to the infirmary each night that we were in barracks, and Pax would join me there for an hour or two, or sometimes the whole evening. But that wasn't work. Or not exactly.

It made me antsy. Pax had taken me from Lafontaine because she intended to use me- and not just in a sexual kind of sense. So why wasn't she giving me anything to do? What was she waiting for? Did I have to go through some traditional League hazing ritual? Maybe one that involved eating bugs and doing calisthenics?

I had no clue.

I had forgotten, you see, what Pax had told me on that very first night in barracks: She planned to break me in gentle-like.

-

The first time it happened, Pax had been working the League gang hard for over twelve hours, collecting machine parts from a derelict steel-mill. Even Amanthi had been pressed into service, and I felt like a jackass sitting out in the truck on my own, so I lent a hand as well. Pax herself worked as hard as anyone to disassemble the ancient machines- unscrewing the rusty bolts where she could, wielding a hacksaw where she couldn't. By the time Pax called a halt, it was almost pitch dark out. We were exhausted and snippy, our muscles strained and our forearms covered in scratches right up to the elbow.

"We're just an hour away from the barracks," she encouraged us all, as we packed the parts into

the Resource truck. "An hour away from beds. Beds with mattresses. No camping tonight. You won't have to get up at the normal time tomorrow. I'll wrangle double rations for you from the quartermaster. Think of that and be gladdened."

I tried to be gladdened, truly I did, but I was so tired by then that there was a steady buzz in my ears. It almost felt like my skull was full of warm water. I tried to doze as we drove, but that was impossible with the truck jolting away beneath me. So I sat and let Pax's promises thrum through me: Barracks, food, bed. Barracks, food, bed.

Then the trucks abruptly skidded to a stop. I held my breath, waiting- but they just sat there.

"Oh *hell* no," I announced to the universe. "That is *not* allowed. *Not* okay."

And I clambered down from my precarious seat. Since we were nowhere near a town, the back of the truck wasn't locked, and I heaved it open and stalked straight out.

Outside, it was properly dark. A faint little moon glow, and the sky studded with stars. Pax, a dim shadow, was crouched by the front fender of the lead truck, cursing in a steady undertone.

Chain of command be damned, I decided, and marched up to her. "There should be moving," I informed her. "There is no moving. Make there be moving, or feel my wrath."

"It's the headlight, Casey," she said, wiping her sweat-damp forehead with her sleeve. "Something went wrong with the connect to the power coil. And the other lamp got busted yesterday. It's too dangerous to drive without any light- "

I listened with just one ear, and only for as long as it took to figure out what was standing between me and a bed with a mattress. As soon as my numbed brain had registered the relevant words- *headlight, power*- I shoved Pax out of the way. Then I grabbed the lamp, detached it, wedged it against the fender with my thigh so I could have my hands free, felt at its base until I found two exposed pieces of wire, blew on my hands, clapped them together, rubbed them hard, gripped the bare wires, and sent a rope of voltage scorching through the lamp until it blazed up like a supernova. It lit the pale grey ribbon of road, stretching out south-east before us. And it lit Pax's startled face.

Then I shoved the lamp back into its socket. "Make there be moving."

Pax smiled. "Moving there shall be," she said. "I'll get you to bed soon. That's a promise."

Tired as I was, I didn't catch the strange gentleness in her voice. Or, if I did, I didn't ask myself why it was there. I just gave an affirmative kind of grunt, and stomped back to the truckbed.

-

The next time it happened was a few days later, when we were in barracks. One of the big generators inexplicably blew out, bringing down power over the entire complex. That wouldn't

have mattered too much, except that a truckload of fresh food had just been delivered that morning. And I'm not talking about potatoes and onions. I mean milk (*cow* milk) and butter and strawberries and pomegranates and tomatoes and soft cheese and basil. Things that you taste maybe a few times a year, and dream of afterwards for months. And with power down in the iceboxes, most of it would be curdled slop by the morning- even if we ate of much of it as we could, which of course we would.

Pax didn't ask me to do it. It was Amanthi who told me about the catastrophe, and if I had been paying closer attention, her shifty, worried eyes would have let me know what was going on. But at the time, I have to admit, I was more worried about the food. I wasn't just thinking about my own stomach- it seemed like a crime against nature to let fresh strawberries spoil.

It was late and I was tired, and I was nowhere near my best, but I kept power up in the kitchens for eight hours or so, until the generator could be repaired. I swore and fidgeted a lot as the hours ground on- it *hurts* to push power when you go at it too hard-core, and every bit of me was throbbing or itching by the finish. But I did it.

"Nice job," Pax commented the next morning, as she fixed herself a giant sandwich of cheese and tomatoes and basil.

Very casual. Very offhand. But I still would have gotten suspicious if I hadn't been so exhausted-punch-drunk, really. I commandeered a gigantic bowl of strawberries for myself, loaded them with more sugar than we'd see in a year in Lafontaine, and devoured them all in five minutes flat. That made me dreadfully sick, as you can imagine- they were awfully pretty, the strawberries, but not quite ripe. The thunder and lightning in my stomach occupied my attention fully for the rest of the day, especially since we spent much of it bouncing over a particularly rocky stretch of road.

-

The penny finally dropped a week after that.

It was a warm night, but a comfortable warm- a heat that left you mellow and loose. Pax didn't even wait for dinner to be over. She got up from her bench in the mess hall, wiped her lips, and headed for the door, tapping me on the shoulder as she passed by. I had been about to put a spoonful of stew in my mouth, but I lowered it back to the bowl and followed her.

She took me to the infirmary, as usual. And maybe I should say here- I do not know how Pax always managed to find an empty room. I suspect she did it with a combination of threats, bribery, and Jedi mind tricks. Someone did stumble in on us once; he was looking for aspirin, I think. Pax drove him back out again with a few blistering remarks, and he went so quickly, I don't think he even noticed that she didn't have any pants on.

We had learned. We barred the door with a chair before we got started. Then we went at it slowly and leisurely. Pax set the pace- she liked to be on top, with her broad hand cupping the back of my close-cropped skull. She made things build and rise and crest and fall, always

nudging me a little farther- a little farther- a little farther. She rarely smiled when she working me over, except when she surprised me so much I had to gasp. Then she grinned low and wicked, and just for an instant.

Through it all, I didn't think. Didn't want to. The closest thing to a thought that went through my head was *ow*, when, by accident, she pressed too heavily on my kidney. When it was over- and it took a long time- I kept my eyes closed, and my face pressed against her. I was trying to extend that blissful blankness, trying to forget, for just a little longer, what I was to her, and what she was to me.

After half an hour of this, she tried very gently to reclaim her arm from my grip. I sort of gurgled in protest, and held on tighter.

"Sorry, Case," she murmured to me. "I've got work."

"Always with the working," I muttered, eyes still shut. "Never with the not working. What's up with that?"

"It does more or less entirely suck, doesn't it?"

"What is it tonight?"

"Tally sheets. And a ten-day report."

"Blah," I pronounced, but I let go of her. She retrieved her arm, rolled out of the narrow bed, and stooped to collect her clothing. Pax wore loose things around the barracks in the evening- shirts and sweats. Someone else would have looked rumpled and casual when wearing them. Not Pax. Never Pax. She could have made a bathrobe look like a uniform.

"Tally sheets and a ten-day report," I repeated, as I watched her get dressed. "Just knock them off fast and come back here. It shouldn't take you long."

"Longer than you would think, unfortunately."

"Why?"

She was tying the drawstring of her sweatpants. "The two-way radio's down. I can't just phone it in. I'll have to write it out in full, and then brief a runner."

I felt a flash of irritation. The arithmetic was so obvious: two women, one not-too-uncomfortable bed, very few clothes- that should have equalled one sweaty night of Pax and me doing unspeakable things to each other. And the only thing getting in the way was a stupid fucking radio that didn't have the sense to work when my sexual convenience required it-

And then, without warning, little-used machinery at the back of my brain began to grind to life. That's when I got it; that's when I finally, belatedly, understood.

Pax was almost finished dressing. "You go ahead and go to sleep," she told me. "I don't think I'll make it back here this evening."

I stared at her. "Not unless I fix the radio."

"What?" She glanced up at me, mildly. "You don't have to do that, Casey."

"I do if I want sex tonight."

"Well."

"Just like I had to fix the truck's headlight if I wanted to sleep in a real bed. Just like I had to power up the fridges if I wanted to eat strawberries for breakfast."

Pax made a dismissive, pushing-away gesture. "I didn't ask you to do either of those things,"

"You didn't have to. You knew I would. You set it up that way. Don't even try to deny it, Pax, or I swear I will bite off a part of your body. And I'll choose something that you *will* miss."

She folded her arms, and cocked her head. "All right," she said. "So I pushed you a little. So what?"

She said it like a shrug. *What the hell are you fussing about?* But I knew her well enough to see the tension in her- the defensiveness. She didn't want to admit what she was up to. She didn't want it said out loud. So I said it.

"You're training me," I said flatly. "You're training me to produce on command."

Five seconds, ten second, fifteen seconds, before she said: "It isn't like that."

"Pax, my god, it *is*. You're Pavlov, I'm the dog; the only thing missing is a tingly little bell. I do the trick and I get a treat. My *god* Pax, you can be a bitch."

She made that exasperated noise deep in her throat, and she moved towards the door. "I have to work, Casey. We'll talk about it tomorrow."

"No. We won't. We'll get up at oh six oh oh hours and you'll lock me in the back of the Resource truck before we ride the next leg of the route. Granted, you might do the apologetic eyebrow thing as you're locking me in. And, in case you're wondering, the apologetic eyebrow thing? Not the same as talking about this. Not the same as talking about it at all."

"All right." She turned back towards me, her lips curled into a forced smile. "You want to talk? Here we go. Things are not good in the world. The death rate has outstripped the birth rate by a factor of four. One in every three children born will die of pneumonia, malaria, or diarrhoea. One in every three children that lives to be older than five will spend its life as a drug runner, a forced

labourer, or a whore. There are more buried landmines in what used to be the continental USA than there are human beings still alive on earth. We're in crisis, Casey. Do you understand crisis?"

I listened stonily through the catalogue. It was nothing I hadn't heard before. "We live in the end-times. I feel like I keep saying that. I'm beginning to feel like people aren't listening."

"Times don't end, Casey! They change. Sometimes they get worse and now and then- very rarely but it happens- *they get better*. I know you think that your acid sarcasm is ever so charming and ever so witty. I know you've made an Olympic-level sport out of sitting on the sidelines and doing nothing. But it's time for you to step up. *You* have a power that the world desperately needs. So we can't afford to let you waste your life."

"I was not wasting my goddamn life!"

"No? Before I found you, you spent your time reading bad science fiction, or worse porn, and reminiscing with Malice about your glory days on the road. Now and then you killed some birds and then you ate them. And you were sort of half-hoping that the world would end, so you wouldn't have to deal with all the complications of being alive."

"That's none of your business!"

"Maybe it wouldn't be, if you were any other lazy overgrown adolescent. But like it or not, sugarlips: you're abnormal. And every minute you sit around and do *nothing*, you are allowing someone to die. I can't force you to change, Casey, and I can't force you to care. But I also can't ignore what I know. You won't put your skills to good use, but I can and I will. So if you won't push yourself, then I am going to push you."

Blood surged into my head. "How about I push you instead? Maybe off of a bridge? Do we have a spare bridge lying around?"

"I'm leaving now."

"Yeah. You do that. And while you're at it, Captain Crusader, you can fuck yourself against a suitably shaped tree, and then? Then? Then you can take a flying leap. Because I won't be trained, not by you. I will *never* push power for you again. Not while you're keeping me on a leash. So you can sod right off."

Pax had reached the door; now she paused, with her hand resting on the knob. "Then we'll have a contest of wills," she said. "You won't enjoy it, and I will win."

"I could go on hunger strike."

"You could do that, yes. Have you ever been force-fed? They pry your jaws apart, stick a tube down your throat and pump your stomach full of fluid. After six days of that kind of wacky fun, you'll eat whatever you're given, and lick the plate afterwards."

I glared. "Is that a threat?"

"No. It's a promise. Maybe it'll help you understand how serious I am. I don't want to fight you, Casey. But I won't be bullied, and I won't have my authority undermined. We have discipline in the League, and I enforce it. I did warn you. If you start to make things awkward for me, know that I will handle it- and I will handle you. And I have had practice with that kind of thing. I am very, very good at it."

Her face was still fairly calm, but her chest was rising and falling fast, and her nostrils flared as she breathed. She was angry, so angry, but not angry enough to say things that she didn't mean. Every word was as good as a vow, signed and stamped.

I had never been afraid of her, not really. Maybe because I had never seen the side of Pax that Amanthi knew. Not until that moment.

"Let me go, Pax," I said, more weakly than I would have liked. "Just fucking let me go. You don't have to give me a ride. I'll find my own way back to Lafontaine. Just put me out the front gate."

She didn't pause, didn't contort with inner conflict, didn't even do the apologetic eyebrow thing. She simply said, very calmly and definitely, "I won't do that."

"Then I'll escape."

I said it because it seemed the thing to say. I didn't believe I had the least chance of escaping, considering how closely the Resources were guarded, and Pax just snorted.

"I doubt it," she said. "But please, by all means, try. It'll be nice to watch you *trying* to do something, for a change." She yanked the door open. "Are we done here?"

"It kind of seems that way, doesn't it?"

"Fine. Sweet dreams. And look on the bright side. Maybe the world will explode while you're asleep, and you won't *have* to do anything useful."

She was going to leave on that note, stalk off down the hall like a stormcloud in sweats, but I interrupted her- "Pax?"

Pax looked up- just tired now. "Yeah?"

"The night of Orelle's funeral."

"What about it?"

"You said I shouldn't tell you where the source was."

She hesitated. "Yes..."

"Was that part of the act? Or did you mean it?"

The longer the silence lasted, the more I wanted to know the answer. But she didn't say a thing. She shook her head, turned, and she was gone.

Chapter Fourteen: In which it is shown that people with enormous bulgy brains can still make very big mistakes.

With each passing day, my mood got fouler and fouler. If Malice and Emily had been there, they would have recognized the warning signs, taken me out to a vacant stretch of land, and had me scream and throw rocks until I was ready to face the world again. But they weren't there, so my frustration just kept seething and bubbling like tar in the sun.

One night at dinner, I very deliberately picked a fight with Delacroix. I don't remember what I said to him, but it must have been good, because he actually lunged across the table to get at me, sending plastic cups and plates flying. He was grabbing for my neck; I dodged and he caught me a glancing blow across the teeth instead. I grinned, spat blood, and proceeded to smash blows into either side of his head.

Unfortunately, it didn't last very long. Pax sprinted down the length of the table, grabbed my jumpsuit with both hands, and dragged me clear. Then she turned on Delacroix. "That doesn't happen again. That *never* happens again. And for the rest of this evening, you mind your manners. Try to act like somebody who wasn't born in a barn. Or you'll spend the night outside-chained to a stake in the yard."

I snickered, and Pax's gaze swept over to me. "And that goes double for you, Casey."

Cheerfully, I wiped my bloodstained face. "How can it go double for me? You gonna chain me to two stakes?"

Her face twitched. "I might. Now finish your supper and don't attack anybody else."

She stalked off, looking masterful, but she couldn't fool me. She was trying not to smile.

-

The next day, Pax swung through the door of the Resource wagon, just as the trucks were about to leave. "Amanthi, take a hike," she ordered.

The little doctor rose to her feet. "Do you have any particular destination in mind, or should I just strike out into the desert and see how far I get?"

"No need to be snippy. You're going to ride in the front truck today. Tell Delacroix I said so."

Amanthi glanced at me, and with a sharp pang, I realized that she was worried about me. "I'm fine," I reassured her. "Go."

She went, with more than one worried backwards look. Pax dropped down onto the grain sacks where I was sitting, dug a small tin out of her pocket, and opened it. "Want some?"

I studied the tin warily. It was filled with crystallized yellow lumps of something, dusted in powder. "What is that?"

"Pineapple. Dried pineapple. Have you ever tasted pineapple? Probably not. Have some."

"I ask you for my freedom. You give me pineapple. We have a communication problem here, Pax."

"You don't *have* to eat it."

"No, I want it. Give."

She held the tin out. "You're in a good mood. Better than I expected."

"Hitting Delacroix is extremely therapeutic. You should try it sometime."

"I'll keep that in mind."

-

Pax rode in the wagon with me for most of that day, and the day, on the whole, was a good one. It was cloudy, so it was cool; we left the shutters wide open and the wind in my face was as good as a tonic.

I didn't feel like saying much, but I was content to listen to Pax. She talked steadily, breezily, saying whatever came to her mind. We were halfway through the route for the year. We would reach the next barracks in two days. She liked the way that a gap in the clouds let a shaft of pure light beam down on the desert.

Without any pause, or warning, or change of tone, her conversation switched from the realistic to the fantastic. She told me about Corpo-Seco, "Dry-Corpse," a monster-man from Brazilian myth. During his human lifetime, he beat his own mother so viciously that he tore his soul apart. When he died, the earth refused to rot his flesh, and even the devil wouldn't take him. He wandered the world, parched breath rattling in and out of his bag-like lungs. He would fling himself onto travellers and suck their blood and juices, but it never did him any good. He stayed dry right through, so dry that he could break off his own fingers like withered twigs, and his eyes in his eye-sockets were nothing but clumps of powdery dust.

"I always think of him when I'm crossing a desert," Pax finished. "Those stories used to freak me

out when I was little."

She would have said something more, I think, but just then, the truck slowed drastically. A piercing whistle sounded from in front of us- first came a long blast, and then a short.

"Hmm," Pax said. She stood, keeping a palm flat on the wall of the truck for balance, and her knees bent in case we hit a bump.

"What is it?" I asked. I didn't get up. I wasn't feeling motivated.

"One long blast, one short, means that we're coming up on a caravan." Her hand slid into her pocket, and I saw the pocket bulge as she gripped her nightstick. "We're going to stop them and have a little look-see. Find out whether they have anything we can use."

"Or *anyone* you could use."

She smiled- flinty, shark-like. "Look Case, feel free to make with the righteous indignation. But consider this. We're about twenty miles away from Little Juarez. That caravan is almost certainly on the way there. So what kind of cargo do you think it's carrying? Cabbages? Microelectronics? They're slavers, sugarlips, and they've got a full payload of future whores and farmboys. With maybe a couple of Naturals in the mix."

"Oh...balls."

"Exactly." She slammed the shutters of the wagon closed, cutting off most of the light. "Now, you stay put. I've got to work."

-

I only saw glimpses of the battle, through the crack between the closed shutters, but it didn't last long.

Pax took point, and the League guards were drawn up behind her like an arrowhead. I had thought that Nora was good with a nightstick- now I realized she was just a pale reflection of the woman who must have taught her to use one. Pax was a blade of blue lightning as she carved her way through the mêlée, and the men around her had very little to do but mop up.

The traders on the caravan, with their broken-down guns and makeshift knives, didn't stand a fragment of a chance. They might as well have shot themselves in the head and saved everyone the trouble.

Afterwards, things got crowded and confusing. The caravan's captives had been roped together by the neck, and their ankles hobbled. (That's a fairly common way to transport people to market.) Pax had them all cut loose. Then she herded them into a line and interrogated each of them briefly. Three of them turned out to be Naturals- they were racers, all three of them, people who could run for twelve or fourteen hours at a stretch. Pax had those three put to one side right

away. Then she questioned the others. How old were they? Were they in good health? What skills did they have? Could they read and write, fix an engine, craft a hunting bow, tan a hide?

There was only one that she thought valuable enough to keep. He was a dairy farmer by trade, an expert in breeding stronger, more disease-resistant cows. He smelled like it. He was loaded onto the Resource wagon with the three Naturals, and I was ordered to ride with Amanthi up front.

Then we put the trucks in gear. It was only then that the newly freed captives- the ones Pax hadn't chosen- realized that they would be left behind. Some didn't seem bothered. They were already looting the freshly killed corpses of the traders, and spat as the trucks went by. Others ran alongside the trucks, pleading and begging to be taken on board.

Pax glanced at the runners in the rearview mirror, and muttered to Delacroix, who was behind the wheel: "Gun it."

The trucks skidded away down the road, outpacing the runners. Within thirty seconds, we were too far away to hear any more pleading.

Pax scrubbed a hand over her face, and looked back at me over her shoulder. "I know. It's hard to watch. But most of them will be all right. At least they won't be sold in Little Juarez. We did a good thing today, Casey. Try to remember that."

Amanthi, who was wedged into the seat beside me, made a scoffing noise, then leaned over so she could speak directly into my ear. "You know what the worst of it is? She really believes her own damn lies."

-

Pax broke a bunch of standing orders and headed straight for the nearest barracks, reaching it at about fifteen hundred hours. It was far too early for dinner, but Pax ordered that the new recruits be fed as soon as we got inside. They hunched over the table, cramming stew into their mouths, and Pax had their bowls refilled again and again. At last they sat back, bloated and dreamy.

It was then that Pax signalled for Amanthi. "I'm going to explain what's going on," Pax said. "Then you'll have to do your thing. Let's get it over with."

Three of the new Resources took the explanation tamely. They had been bound, beaten, starved, and dragged hobbled across the countryside in the past few weeks, and joining the League was a definite step up, even if they would never be allowed to leave it. But the last one- a lean dark man, one of the racers- had a wild, desperate look about him, and he caught Amanthi's arm when she came close to him with the ear punch.

"I have a son!" he said hoarsely. "I need to go back to him! You have to let me go!"

Amanthi didn't answer, and she didn't try to shake off the crazed man. She stood frozen until two League guards grabbed him, and twisted his arms behind his back. As he howled and struggled,

she punched a triangular piece of flesh out of his right ear and applied the dressing. Then she packed up her instruments, her face pinched and green. All too obviously, she was trying not to be sick.

"May I go, sir?" she asked Pax tersely.

Pax raised her head from the Report of Recruitment that she was busy filling in. "Turn your kit over to Nora, and then yes, you can go. You too Casey. I have a lot to do tonight."

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I had nothing else to do, so I went with Amanthi to the washroom. She retched again and again, and I passed her cups of water and held her hair out of the way. Then we found a still-deserted barracks room and sat down side by side on one of the narrow cots.

"I had a husband," she said abruptly. "Before I was taken."

"Pax told me."

"She would."

Amanthi lay back on the thin mattress, and after a second, I copied her. She had taken off her jumpsuit when she was vomiting, to save it from stray splashes, and wore only her undershirt and briefs. It was intimate to lie with her that way, but somehow it seemed natural enough.

"Any children?" I asked.

"No," she said, and then: "It's been years, Casey. He doesn't know whether I'm still alive, and chances are, by now, he doesn't give a damn."

"I'm sorry."

"Half the time, I can't even figure out whether I care anymore. Because it's been such a long time, I mean. I go through entire days without thinking. About anything."

"It was Pax who...recruited you, right?"

"It was Pax who took me, you mean. Yes, she did."

She fingered her clipped earlobe, unconsciously, as she spoke. Pax often did the same thing. It was the one similarity between them.

"Do you want to know how it happened?" Amanthi asked abruptly.

I absolutely did not want to know how it happened. "Sure."

"I had started up a hospital. Well- a mud-brick building with a couple of cots in it, and a creek out back. My husband had learned how to do some practical nursing- how to bind wounds and help me with surgery and all that. People paid us with vegetables or chickens or firewood. Towards the end, I was delivering a baby every week. Most of them even lived." She breathed in and out- slowly, tightly controlled. "Then the League came. *Pax da Costa* came."

It was like reading a book when you knew that it was going to end badly. "Did Pax pull her fucking switcheroo trick with Nora?" I asked.

"No. Not that time. She just came in and talked to me. Very civilized, very gentlemanly. She took off her cap and everything. Wiped her boots at the door. She said that I had essential talents, and that the League needed them. Told me that she'd have to take me, one way or another. Told me to make it easy on myself. She held me by the arm as she walked me to the truck." She paused again, and continued, brokenly, "It's...been...so...long. And the only thing that's happened in all this time to make it easier- was when you arrived."

There was an edge in her voice that I knew, oh, so well. A huskiness, a longing. Deep within me, my radar bleeped. *Target is in sight. Target acquired.*

I rolled over to look her full in the face. Parted lips, flushed face. A-yup. Amanthi was interested. Not because she preferred women, but because she was bored and lonely, because she was tired of touching nobody's flesh but her own. And she knew I wouldn't hurt her just for kicks- which was more than you could say about most of the people in Pax's Inquisition gang.

My groin clenched, and I gave it a mental scolding. *Bad girl, down down down.* I was tempted, sure. I was as bored and lonely as Amanthi herself. The state I was in, she looked like a tall glass of water. But I can recognize a very bad idea when I see one. Some of the time, anyway.

So I leaned over and planted a slow, careful kiss on her forehead. I made it sweet, but didn't put the least particle of heat in it. Amanthi was a smart chick. She got the message right away.

"I know," she said dully. "You're not interested in me."

I stroked her cheek. "Only because I have lousy taste."

"Prentice."

I knew before I looked up what I would see: Pax framed in the doorway, all starch and brass buttons, with her arms crossed behind her back.

"I need you in the infirmary," she said.

That was unusual. It was early evening still, and she never called me before supper. Maybe she was taking me now to make a point in front of Amanthi- and sure enough, the doctor's face had stiffened with an anger that she would never express out loud. But what did the time of day matter? I wasn't about to fight Pax, not over this. Early evening, midnight, it all came to the same

thing in the end. I just nodded.

"Give me five minutes?" I asked.

Pax didn't answer. But she moved out of sight, and I knew she wouldn't hover by the door. She had too much class for that- or, maybe, not enough patience.

Five minutes. I sighed, and moved to brush loose hair away from Amanthi's face. She pulled back.

"Don't," she said. "What's the point of making her jealous? She'll just take it out on you later. Or on me."

"Screw her."

"You do. Nightly."

That was surprisingly saucy, coming from Amanthi, but I couldn't argue. Uncomfortable, I coughed.

"It's okay," she went on after a second. "I mean, I understand why you do it."

"Really? Good. You can explain it to me, then. Because I'm damned if *I* understand."

Amanthi was sitting up by then. She reached for her crumpled blue jumpsuit, shook it out, and methodically began to thread her legs into it.

"This is who we are, right?" she said. "At the end of the day, this is where we have to live. And it isn't the worst place that we could be. That's what Pax- I mean, *Inquisitor da Costa*- keeps telling me. If she gives you some comfort, I can't tell you not to take it."

Now I wished that she had just cussed me out instead. "I know it's stupid- "

"That's the thing. It's not stupid." She zipped the jumpsuit up in one quick motion. "Being who you are, being *what* you are- it makes perfect sense for you to keep her happy."

-

Pax was already undressing when I came through the infirmary door, so I knew that she was annoyed. There would be no pleasantries, then, no false politeness, no prettying up the moment. That was just fine with me.

I shucked my clothing off and headed in. That took her off guard, I think. There were a few seconds when she was startled, and that was all I needed. I drove her backwards onto the chemical-reeking bed. Then I got started, before she had a chance to brace herself or catch her breath.

Over the next hour, I did all manner of things to Pax that even I find it awkward to remember. Some of them, I'd heard Malice doing in the dead of night- heard her partners shrieking on that cusp between don't-don't-don't and more-more-more. Some of them had been described to me by not too reliable sources and others I made up on the spot.

I hurt us both, but I didn't frighten her. Her body bucked and arched, but she never tried to pull away. After a time, she flipped us, rolled on top of me, and then she took over. She was cooler and quieter about it than I had been, more in control, but her eyes flamed. It began to hurt far worse and feel much better, all at once. I almost crushed my bottom lip between my teeth, but I didn't make a sound.

When it was over, we were both shaking, but Pax didn't seem tired. She slid down beside me, somehow wedging us both into the narrow bed, and pulled me to her.

"Feel better?" she asked.

"Mpmph," I muttered against her chest. Not wanting to answer her. But of course I did feel better.

Pax didn't let go of me, wouldn't let go. Her fingertips moved around and around my back, in slow slow circles.

They say some Naturals can read other people's thoughts- the poor bastards. I never had a glimmer of that kind of talent myself; never wanted it. (What does it feel like to be suddenly pulled into someone else's mind? It might be like rolling into a feather bed, might be like falling into toxic waste, depending.) But I didn't need that kind of dubious gift to know what Pax was thinking. It thrummed out of her, to the beat of her contented heart: *Mine, mine, mine, mine, mine.*

"I guess it was only a matter of time," I said out loud.

Her fingers paused- "Say what?"

"You're always taking things. Your whole life is about taking things. Taking cities, taking trucks, taking factories, taking Naturals. I guess it was only a matter of time before you took a woman."

Her fingers kept moving, slowly. They moved up my back and along my shoulders, found the hollows behind my ears. She liked to do this, to explore me, figure out how I was put together and what made me gasp and what didn't. That was the Inquisitor in her. She didn't want me to be able to hide anything.

"It's a good way to avoid responsibility, isn't it?" she said after a while. "I mean, blaming me for everything."

I sat up abruptly, pushing her hands away. "Pax, I'm the first person to admit that I don't have a

photo-perfect memory. But I dimly recall that the night after my foster-mother's funeral, you threatened to lash me, cuff me, and throw me into a League truck if I didn't walk there on my own. Who the hell am I supposed to blame? Your evil twin?"

She sat up as well. She was loose and languid, which, as I had learned, was deceptive. It was when Pax was relaxed that she was most ready to fight.

"Babe," she said, "you can blame me for recruiting you. You can blame me for lying to you. You can blame me for what I've done to Amanthi, and what I've done to Nora- even for what I've done to Delacroix, not that you would care about that. You can even blame me, sort of on speculation, for all the lies I'm going to tell in the future, and all the people I'm going to snatch. But it so happens that in spite of everything, you want to fuck me with great regularity- and for that, sugarlips, blame yourself."

Boots clumped through the hallway- I tensed, Pax didn't- then someone stooped, and an envelope rattled through the crack underneath the door. Delacroix had become realistic about Pax's nocturnal activities. He no longer tried to stop her from going to me. He just made sure that she got her mail on time.

Pax rubbed tired eyes, and put up a hand. "Five minute cease-fire, Casey. I have to read this."

It was one of the official envelopes, sealed with a crested gold sticker. She leaned against the wall as she tore it open.

"You have *got* to take some fucking responsibility for your own decisions," she went on, pulling a crisply-folded paper from the envelope.

I glared. "New rule, okay? You can't call a cease-fire and then keep lecturing me."

But by then she was reading the letter. I saw her read it once fast, distractedly, then saw her posture change as her attention was caught. She straightened, walked to the door, where the light was better, tilted the paper up, and read it slowly, word by word. Then she slumped, and she read the letter again. And again, and again.

Hesitantly, I stood up. I wasn't about to go and look over her shoulder. League Resources weren't allowed to read letters addressed to Inquisitors. (It was on the seventeenth page of the hefty rule book, the one that I hadn't yet bothered to read all the way through.) But Pax was upset- that much was blindingly clear. And I couldn't *quite* convince myself that I didn't care.

Pax's back straightened, at last, and her hand, the one that held the envelope, fell to her side.

"Casey," she said, without turning around. "I never got around to asking. Do *you* believe in God?"

"I'm not sure," I said, warily. "Maybe some god with a really twisted sense of humour. The kind that pulls wings off of butterflies."

"I may come to agree with you. Casey, you've been reassigned. I've been ordered to have you transported to the Institute."

-

We sat at opposite ends of the bunk, me at the head, and Pax at the foot. She had the glazed look of a coma patient.

"You know what's funny?" I said in the end- I'm no good with awkward pauses. "You care about this a whole hell of a lot more than I do."

That got her attention. Her voice was close to hysteric: "You should care. You had better care. How *dare* you not care?"

I shrugged. "Either way, I'm not getting out of the League, right? Either way, I'm locked up. Either way, I'm never seeing Malice and Emily again. So what the hell is the difference?"

I expected her to say the obvious: the difference was our relationship, the strange whatever-it-was that we had together, which I'd lose if they took me away. But Pax surprised me.

"The *difference*?" she asked. "Did you *listen* when I talked about the Institute?"

"I listened to all three sentences that you said about the Institute. For some reason, you never got real chatty about it."

"Yeah. Funny, that. Casey, if you see the inside of the Institute, you'll realize exactly how good we have it on the road. You'll be allowed exactly one half-hour per day outside. The rest of the time- it'll just be white pajamas, and electrodes, and syringes. People sticking sharpened wires into your scalp to measure brain patterns, and slipping drugs into your food when you stop cooperating. And when you eat- when they *let* you eat, when you satisfy them!- they'll deliver the food on a paper tray, and if you're lucky, they'll give you a plastic spoon to eat it with. No fork though, *ever*, much less a knife. That's how much they'll care about you. That's how careful they'll be with you. They'll make very, very sure that you don't have a chance to cut your stay short."

For a fraction of an instant, there, something cracked behind her eyes, and I could imagine Inquisitor da Costa as a frightened thirteen-year-old child. I stared at her, instead of answering.

"Do you really not care?" she demanded hoarsely. "Do you care that little about your own damn life? Fine, then! Let me box you up and deliver you to the Institute. Hell, maybe you'll enjoy it there. You sure as hell won't have to make any decisions."

"I don't want you to do that," I said, belatedly. "I want you to let me go."

She made an impatient noise, somewhere deep in her throat.

"Pax!" I caught her arms. "What the hell is the issue here? You don't want to send me to the Institute! Do not send me to the fucking Institute!"

She held up the paper- the orders from the Institute, my marching orders. "They've assigned this Class One Priority, Casey! My god, they're practically *gagging* over you! They think your gifts could be the key to everything! Hell," and her voice suddenly sank much lower, "They might be right about that."

"My gifts are the key to everything. Sure. Twenty years ago, that was you. Remember?"

She brushed that away. "I was supposed to research new power sources. You, Casey, you *are* the new power source. You really could change...everything. *Everything*."

"I really can't. The amount of electricity I can produce is not going to save the damn country. And how would they get more of it? What would they do- breed me?"

I wasn't serious when I said that- but from the way Pax flinched, I realized, with a sudden jolt, that they just might.

"Oh, Pax," I whispered. "Don't do this. Don't do this."

All of a sudden, she couldn't sit still. With a twist of her lean limbs, she was off of the bed, and pacing to and fro.

I said, "I know you don't want this, Pax"- and she paced back and forth.

I said, "This is not what you planned"- and she paced back and forth.

I said, "Pax, *talk to me*. You owe me that much."

Her head shook, heavily, as she walked. "I don't know what to say. Because in a horrible way, they're right. Your power needs to be studied, it *has* to be researched."

"Why? Because it's going to save the world? And what if it doesn't? What if it *can't*? What if it's just one of those things that people are all too ready to believe? Me as the next energy source, you as the next Einstein. Just another couple of desperate, simplistic solutions. Just like believing that Jesus will show up with basket of chocolate bars if enough people go to church on Sundays. Just like believing that a twenty-dollar Rabbit Factory will feed your family through the apocalypse."

She had turned to face me. For once, she looked like she was really listening. "So what are you suggesting? That we sit on our hands and wait for the Midgard serpent to eat the sun? The League is one of the few forces in the world that is actually, genuinely, making an effort. I've done some appalling things, Casey, I have no illusions. But hell, at least I've done *something*!"

"Maybe," I said slowly, "maybe both of us have to let go of the idea that we've got it right. Maybe we have to have enough...imagination...to change. To find the middle ground between us. But that can't happen if they take me away and lock me in a lab. Can it?"

She stared at me levelly. "Do you realize what you're asking?"

"A'ya."

"You want me to betray the League, my commanders, my beliefs. Refuse a direct order, and help you escape instead. Knowing that this will prevent research from being carried out which could benefit the whole human race."

"That's what I want."

"You want me to do all this for you, because you *yourself* are not going to try to escape."

"You know I wouldn't make it."

"And once I let you go, what then? More porn-watching and science-fiction-reading? How would you spend your life if I let you get away?"

"You could find out if you came with me."

She stared at me.

"We could both change," I pointed out. "We could meet in the middle, maybe, you and I, but Pax, you just won't budge. You've been holding the high ground for so long, you're afraid to let go. But this is crunch time, sugarlips. Either you take a stand, or you take the consequences. You know better than anyone what will happen to me in the Institute. And you know that if I end up there, we lose, once and for all, the chance to learn anything from each other."

I breathed hard. "Now, why don't *you* make a goddamn decision?"

Chapter Sixteen: In which Pax makes a goddamn decision.

The trading post was an old gas station, fifty miles south. Empty gas pumps; walls of corrugated tin. We got there an hour before the scheduled rendez-vous with the Institute staff. Pax gave me a cigarette while we were waiting, and she had to light it for me, because my hands were cuffed to my belt.

"It's regulations," she had told me when she was snapping the cuffs on. For once, there wasn't that edge of defensiveness in her tone. She just sounded flat. "The trading post is considered a high-risk area for escape attempts. And people who escape often end up dead. So all League Resources have to be restrained during transfer. It's a safety thing."

I snorted smoke from both nostrils, like Malice, as I sat on the old concrete steps of the station.

Pax stood nearby, jiggling two keys in her palm: one for my handcuffs, one for my leg irons. I did not feel particularly safe.

"How much longer?" I asked Pax.

She glanced at her watch. "About twenty minutes."

Peachy.

Out of the corner of my eye, I studied the guards. There were only two of them; one was Delacroix, the other I didn't know. Both had been pulled out of bed for the transfer. They were surly and drowsy, not at the top of their game. And that made me thoughtful. All I had to do was overpower the guards- two muscular, well-armed men who were each a foot taller than I was. Then there would be nothing between me and freedom but Pax's nightstick and a few hundred miles of desert.

I stopped thinking about it. It's not healthy to dwell on the impossible.

"Are you hungry?" Pax asked, abruptly.

I moved the cigarette to a corner of my mouth. "You didn't bring any food with you, so why are you asking?"

She gave me foul look, and jiggled the keys harder.

I finished the cigarette. I spat out the butt and let the last orange sparks curl and die.

Still no sign of a distant truck.

"What's next?" I asked Pax. "Knock-knock jokes, or karaoke?"

"Funny," she said, "very funny, and now would you kindly shut your *fucking mouth*?"

I did. When a woman's voice hits that pitch, you stop joking. Especially if you happen to be wearing handcuffs.

She paced some distance away. She paced the same distance back. She watched the horizon.

And I realized, finally and for real, that she wasn't going to help. My throat tightened with the knowledge, and I stared at my hands so I wouldn't have to look at her.

It was getting dark, and a guard muscled the big hurricane lantern down from the truck. He lit it, and a pool of yellow light surrounded the station.

That was when we heard the rumble- whining, keening, rasping. A second later, we saw the truck crest the hill, dark shadow against a dark shadowy sky.

A tremor ran through Pax, from her shoulders down to her ankles, as though an invisible scalpel had sliced along her spine.

The truck had headlights, and now they were swelling up into big white globes in the dim. The truck was almost there, the truck was coming at us, and somehow the thought penetrated my brain: The truck was coming at us at full speed.

"DOWN!"

Somehow I heard Pax before I heard the gunfire. I was already low to the ground, but I struggled off the steps and onto my knees. The guards flung themselves prone, and a hail of scattered shot whizzed over their heads as the truck sped past, and away.

Pax had hit the ground even as she screamed the warning, and she was on her feet as soon as the truck was past. She yanked her nightstick from its holster. "That volley was too high; they'll try again."

She was right. The truck was now perhaps a hundred yards away- but as I watched, it spun around, in a clumsy high-speed bootlegger's turn.

"Move," Pax was ordering. "Delacroix, Matthews, move. Grab Casey, get under cover. *Do not stand staring at me or I will crush your balls to meat paste.* GET UNDER COVER!"

Pax grabbed one side of me and Delacroix the other; they half-lifted, half-dragged me inside the gas station. The whine of the engine grew sharply louder, and Pax threw both of us down on the concrete floor. Underneath her, crushed against the floor by her full weight, I heard the second hail of shot, heard it singing through the air and then blatting against the gas station walls.

Pax was cursing, but she stopped long enough to ask: "What the *hell* is that truck doing here?"

My face was still smashed against the concrete, so I spoke to the concrete. "It's my ride."

"What?" She rolled off of me. "No. That isn't the people from the Institute."

"That's not what I meant." I tried to sit. "See for yourself."

She gave me a single, startled look and hurried to the window, bent low. I pulled myself up to a crouch, so I could see over the sill.

Again the truck had driven away, veered, turned. Again it was booming straight towards us. It had turned off its headlights, and now it showed clearly in the glow of the hurricane lantern. It was an ancient, peeling, broken-down truck, squat and balky. Top-heavy, too, because of the makeshift gun-turret welded to its top. The gun of the turret was mounted and ready. And manning the turret, screaming like a gull as the truck crashed forwards, came "Malice" Hiroyama. She rode the bucking truck like it was lightning, and her eyes flamed like lamps.

Pax's voice was oddly calm, considering. "That's the Rover, from the front of your building."

I'd gotten a mouthful of grit when Pax knocked me to the ground. I spat and spat again, not bothering to answer. It was pretty obvious.

The Rover scorched past, almost tipping as it swerved- one set of wheels came off the ground. I winced, knowing what that meant. Emily was driving.

Malice, still screaming, fired. Another rain of shot, embedding itself in the station's tin walls, rattling across the roof. Then another. Then another.

Pax clawed her way over to me, practically kicking Delacroix out of the way, and grabbed me by the front of my jumpsuit. "You mean..."

Tires squealed; Malice screamed out curses, howling, defiant.

"That thing..."

More gunshot; the tin walls were studded.

"Works?"

"Oh," I said. "Did I forget to mention that?"

Chapter Seventeen: In Which I Reveal Where Malice and I Had Hidden the Tires, Engine, Power Coils, and Gun Turret of the Rover

They were buried under the truck itself, wrapped in several layers of heavy plastic. As Pax had said- there's no sense in wrecking a good Rover.

Chapter Eighteen: In which I have a chance, and don't take it.

Pax, still gripping my clothes, was staring at me as if she didn't know what body part she wanted to hit first.

The Rover's engine was growling some distance away, and I knew why: Malice had to reload. That meant she had to open the hopper and fill it with whatever she was using as ammo for the airgun. Nails, probably, and old coins and little stones. She must have ransacked my entire workbench, looking for steel scraps that would fit in the hopper. I felt ticked about that for a whole three seconds before I came to my senses.

"What are they here for?" Pax asked, too calmly.

"To deliver pizza and spread the gospel. What the fuck do you *think* they're here for?"

She hit me. She hit me with coolly measured force, just hard enough to make me gasp. "*What are they here for?*"

"Jesus- Fuck!- They're here to get me! They must have followed the League gang!"

"Did you know they were following?"

"No!"

"They're coming back," Delacroix said, suddenly, and Pax took a wild look around.

"The stairwell, it's concrete. Move."

I stumbled, still in my leg irons, and they had to drag me across the floor. An icy calm had settled over Pax. There was another patter of shot, but now that we had reached the shelter of the stairs that led down to the basement, none of it came close to touching us.

As Delacroix and Matthews panted on either side, Pax spoke to me alone. "Casey," she said. "Don't answer out loud, just nod. You know that the truck from the Institute will be here any minute. You know it will be heavily armed."

I nodded. Twice.

"You know that your friends won't have a chance against it. At close quarters, they wouldn't even have a chance against *me*."

She was right, of course. Malice could shoot up the building until Gabriel blew his horn, but she couldn't get to me without coming in range of Pax's nightstick. The fight would be brutal, dirty, and very, very short.

Pax knew my silence for what it was: miserable agreement. "You want to save their lives?" she asked. "If so, you need to convince them to leave."

Convince them to leave. Sever the lifeline I had suddenly been thrown. I stared at her.

She hit me again. It was harder that time; I could almost feel my eyeballs rattle in their sockets.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?" she said. Slow and measured, as though we had all the time in the world. "If they're still here when the people from the Institute arrive, they will die. They will be killed, Casey. Do you want to stop that from happening?"

I nodded suddenly- nodded and couldn't stop, as if my neck had become a broken stem.

"All right," she said. "I'm going to undo your leg irons."

"Inquisitor," Delacroix butted in. "Is that a good idea?"

Pax snorted. "The day I can't handle a five-foot woman, Del, they'll give *you* my job. Until then, you can keep your damn mouth shut."

My body, it seemed, had become hyper-aware of everything: the cool of the cement, the warmth of Pax's hands as she fumbled with the locks. Even so, I couldn't hear what was going on outside. Couldn't hear the hum of the engines, or the patter of shot. Couldn't tell whether Malice and Emily were still there, even.

The tight metal around my ankles suddenly came loose, and Pax let the manacles slither to the ground. "The roof," she said. "I need to get her to the roof."

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There was a trapdoor in the ceiling, but no ladder. Delacroix boosted up Pax, and then me.

When the two of us got up top, we could see the Rover only dimly. Its headlights were twin stars on the dark horizon. Malice and Emily had retreated in order to reload, to catch their breaths, to strategize. They probably hadn't realized before now that they even needed a plan. Their decision to come after me must have been made after a lot of drinking and a few rounds of double-dog-dares.

But they saw Pax and I, silhouetted against the sky in the globe of light from the hurricane lantern, and away in the distance, the Rover began to pick up speed.

"They'll be here in a few minutes," I told Pax. My voice didn't sound like my own; it was hoarse, scraped. "You'd better tell me what you want me to do."

"Tell you what I want you to do," she repeated to herself, unbelieving. Then, for the third time that night, she hit me. It was the hardest blow so far, a wallop that threw me down on one knee and made me bite a chunk from my inside cheek. "This is your life! It's your life! If you won't fight for your own damn life, what the hell *will* you fight for?"

My head was ringing, blood slid down the inside of my throat. "Pax, for the love of *Christ*, if you give a damn what happens, why don't you *help me*?"

"I *am* helping you."

"No," I said carefully, "you are not helping me, you are hitting me. There is a subtle distinction."

My hands were still cuffed to my belt, but Pax took hold of them, held them. Twenty fingers clenched into a living knot.

She said: "I'm trying to make you understand, Casey. *I can't save you*. You'll have to save yourself, or lie back and surrender. Believe that life is worth something- that *your* life is worth something- and choose to defend it. I can't make that choice for you."

"I don't understand!"

"Oh *Jesus!*" she yelled. "*Here!*"

And with that, she knelt, with the grace of a squire being knighted, or a lover proposing. Knelt, so that I could touch her, on either side of the head, with my chained hands.

My hands closed around her head- that was just reflex- and I realized what she was doing. I could, if I chose, smash an electric bullet through her brain, from ear to ear. That would leave Delacroix and Matthews for Malice to deal with, but against the two of them, Malice would have a fighting chance.

I pulled my hands away. "No," I said. "No."

"This is the only way, Casey!"

"Oh *fuck it*, Pax, get over yourself!"

I found that I was screaming those words- then realized why. There was a new noise in the air. Louder engines, larger ones, the engines of several different trucks, nearby and coming nearer. The Institute vans.

Down below, Delacroix was yelling: "Inquisitor da Costa! *Inquisitor da Costa!* What the hell is going on? We're coming up."

Pax got to her feet, it seemed, by reflex, and then hissed very low, "Shit."

The Rover's twin headlights reeled into view. Malice and Emily were going to give it one more try. The trucks of the Institute weren't yet in sight, but just the sound of them made the earth thunder. Delacroix was stooped above the trapdoor, leaning down to give a hand to the other guard.

Twenty minutes until the cavalry came crashing in from all sides.

"Listen to me," I said to Pax. One last effort, one last time. "No-one came to rescue you, Pax, when they took you to the Institute. And I'm selfish and immature and I barely ever give a damn about people, and you've done more good by accident than I've ever done trying. But I want you to know something, whatever happens in the next five minutes. If I had known you when you were thirteen, if I had known you when you were taken, then I would have come for you, Pax. *I would have come for you.*"

Pax blinked, and she looked around as though the world had suddenly changed colour. And then her face twisted, contorted, as though she was about to scream or bark out laughter or sob herself into pieces.

Then she lunged.

I drew back, but she was on me, grabbing my shoulders, my jumpsuit. She forced and pushed me to the edge of the roof. Delacroix screamed something I couldn't hear, and headlights were flooding the scene from all directions, but she didn't stop. She backed me up until my heels were hanging over empty space, with only her toes supporting my weight. Then, for the briefest of instants, she drew me in close. Her lips brushed my ear.

Then she threw me backward off the roof.

-

I fell for all of five seconds before I crashed onto top of the Rover.

Malice caught me. I don't know how a hundred and twenty pounds of Malice caught me, grabbed me, held onto me, as the Rover accelerated, careening away from the trading post at something more than the truck's recommended speed. But she did. She even held on as I twisted to see what was going on behind us.

The hurricane lantern still illuminated the scene on the rooftop. Pax stood straight and erect, and her nightstick tapped lightly against her thigh as Delacroix and Matthews ran towards her, yelling. Then she raised her arm, and a streak of blue lightning fissured the sky.

I heard howling; knew it wasn't Pax. No-one, no-one, could wield a nightstick like Pax. Even Delacroix and Matthews together wouldn't stand a chance. The Institute vans would be there in minutes, though, and that would make things considerably more interesting.

Malice lowered me, like a doll, through the hatch in the roof of the Rover. Strong hands caught my legs. I caught a glimpse of shaggy, greasy, hair, and realized that the stupid boyfriend had come along for the ride. He laid me down on the floor of the van, and Malice knelt by me, swiftly checking me over.

All of a sudden I was shuddering, my teeth chattering, and I couldn't stay still.

Malice saw. "Get the poteen," she ordered the stupid boyfriend.

The glass banged against my lips and the liquor spilt down my shirt, but I managed to choke down some. "What the hell are you doing, anyway?" I gasped to Malice, when I could talk again. "You're supposed to protect Emily! We had a fucking pact!"

"You didn't consult me before you made the pact," Emily called from the front seat. "And for the record, I think it's really dumb."

"What she said," Malice agreed. "Em- turn off the headlights and speed the hell up. Somebody's gonna be after us soon."

"Maybe not," I said. I suspected that the Institute folk were going to have a more immediate problem to deal with, in the form of a nightstick-wielding Pax with a new-found sense of justice. My teeth clamped together as if I had lockjaw.

"Get me the wire cutters, kid," Malice was telling the stupid boyfriend. "Then I'll get to work on the cuffs. Hell- Casey- why are you crying *now*?"

I wasn't, really, it was more like...leaking. Pure overflow, from too much feeling.

She took me by the shoulders. "Don't tell me you're worried about that bitch Pax. Don't disappoint me."

"I'm not. Worried, I mean. Malice?"

"Yeah, what?"

"I know you'll want to shoot Pax, when she shows up in Lafontaine. But don't. Please."

Her head jerked back. "Why hell would Pax da Costa show up in Lafontaine?"

"Because she told me she would." I drew a shuddering breath. "Right before she threw me, she said, 'I'll see you soon. Somewhere in the middle'."

Chapter Nineteen: In which the world ends.

Pax wasn't in Lafontaine when we arrived back there. And she didn't come that week. Nor that month, nor the month after that.

The League did come. A different Inquisitor and a different crew, but the routine was just the same. Doors were kicked in, possessions thrown out into the street, half of them ruined and the other half stolen. They searched for three days, and left Lafontaine with a truckload of power cells, seeds, tools, and fuel. But they didn't find me- or the other things that we had been particularly careful about hiding.

I'm not going to tell you where I hid during the search. Call me nuts, but I've gotten a little more cautious about giving that kind of information away. Suffice to say, it didn't smell too good. And I had to share it with Floyd.

Eventually they left. They made a lot of threats and brandished a lot of nightsticks while they were going, but they left nonetheless. I watched them go, from the roof of the apartment building. I was surprised, frankly, that they'd given up so soon. It was as if they'd run out of places to look, which bespoke a certain lack of imagination.

Lack of imagination was never Pax's problem. She knew every last place that a secret could possibly hide- every nook and cranny of the great wide world, every dark little corner of the human heart. No matter how something was buried, she could drag it out into the open. She

could unravel the mysteries of the world, and spin them up into threads, and weave a rug of them to walk on.

And I was furious with myself for missing her.

Malice swung up the ladder. "They're gone."

"I can see that," I snapped. "They'll be back."

"A'ya. For certain. Them or a bigger group. Have you heard what they're offering for you now? Wait for it...Five hundred pounds of carbide."

"Jesus!"

"Just wait. Next year, the price'll be twice as high. Assuming you stay free."

South of us, the Inquisition trucks were grinding down the highway, churning up clouds of smoky dust in their wake. Sooner or later, I would be dragged into one of those trucks. A travelling merchant or pilgrim would see my clipped ear, and send word to someone important. Or one of the people I knew in Lafontaine would finally find the reward too much to resist.

"Malice," I said. "What the bloody fucking goddamn *hell* are we going to do?"

Malice shrugged. "We'll do what we can. Just like always."

Together we watched the distant clouds of dust settle, and the trucks creep over the horizon. How much time had I just gained? Another week? Another month? How long before they came for me again?

"For Christ's sake, don't think about it," Malice said. "You'll drive yourself crazy. Let's go inside."

As we walked to the ladder, she kept an arm around my shoulders. This wasn't something that she did often, but I was glad that it was there.

"We should take a couple of precautions, though," she told me as we walked. "For starters, you're not allowed out of the apartment when out-of-towners are in Lafontaine."

"*What?*"

"Like I said- precaution. And like I also said- the price on your ass is high high high, and it ain't going down any time soon."

"I can't handle this!"

"Yes, you can."

-

The time crawled past in Lafontaine, and I stayed out of sight when strangers were in the town. It meant I couldn't help as much in the garden, and couldn't take paid jobs out of the home. Malice and Emily and Emily's stupid boyfriend tried to take up the slack. We didn't eat as well, but we got by.

Emily and I played a two-hundred-game blackjack tournament. She defeated me effortlessly, and I wrote her an I.O.U. for a bank truck full of gold bullion. Emily's stupid boyfriend cooked dinner once a week. Floyd chewed up the wooden handle of my hammer. Malice started learning to knit.

A month ago, when I was reading *The Stainless Steel Rat* for the fifty-fourth time, Emily and her stupid boyfriend swung through the apartment hatch. They were grinning their fool heads off, both of them, like the entire world was one big damn joke and they were the only ones who'd heard the punchline.

I put down my book. "Just tell me that you're not pregnant, Em."

She shook her head, still grinning.

"Married, then?" I guessed.

"Something like that."

"You're too young."

She shrugged. "Who knows how much older I'm gonna get?"

That was true enough. I took a better look at the stupid boyfriend. He had been around for a while, I realized- much longer than any of his predecessors. He had been there to help rescue me from the League. He could cook. And his eyes lit up when he looked at Em. Funny how I'd never noticed that before.

I could complain, but what was the point? Looking at the matter objectively, Emily had better taste in partners than I did.

I sighed, stood up, and glared at the stupid boyfriend. "Treat my sister right, or I'll beat you to death with a boot, and then find a way to bring you back to life so that I can do it all again."

He nodded. "Got it."

"I doubt that it'll be necessary," I reassured him. "I really do. To be completely honest, I kind of like you, Emily's Stupid Boyfriend."

"Umm." He cleared his throat. "Actually? My name's Robert."

Fair enough.

"Robert," I repeated. And then I shook his hand.

-

Pax arrived in town three weeks ago. She arrived on foot, and her boots were cracked and the soles almost worn through. She had been walking a long way. She wore an old jumpsuit, faded to grey, instead of her Inquisitor uniform. Besides that, she had a freshly shaved head, a rucksack on her back, a rolled-up blanket under her arm, and Amanthi trudging behind her.

I was there to meet them, sitting on the apartment steps. Of course I'd seen them coming. We had begun to keep a pretty careful watch over the roads.

"Hey," Pax said to me.

"Hey," I answered. "Good to see you, Amanthi. There's plenty of water inside if you're thirsty."

Of course she was thirsty; she had dust caked all over her face. She gave me a grateful smile and headed in. I leaned to one side so that she could get past me.

Then, for the first time in three months, Pax and I looked each other in the eyes. I sat back and stretched my legs out. I thought it only right that she should start.

"I have to say," she said, "I'm surprised. I kind of figured that you would hide when you saw me coming."

"I considered it."

"I'm not here to capture you. I'm not here to bring you back to the League."

"I believe you. Which probably proves, beyond all remaining doubt, that I am stupid beyond compare."

"If it would make any difference, you could send Malice to Little Juarez, to check with the bounty hunters. They'll tell her that Amanthi and I are both listed as runaways. There's a price out on both of us."

"It wouldn't make any difference. At the end of the day, you're lying to me or you aren't. I choose to believe that you aren't. God knows you don't deserve it, but that's how things are. You brought Amanthi out with you."

"I did."

"Did you do that for Amanthi's sake? Or for mine?"

"A little from column A, a little from column B." She paused. "For my own sake too, as well. I think."

"Well." I put out a hand, and Pax helped pull me to my feet. "Let's go inside. I'm sure you're thirsty too."

-

Once she was up in the eco-eco, with a cup of bad tea in one hand and a cup of worse soup in the other, Amanthi suddenly broke down. I think it all hit her at once: her captivity, the stress of the escape, the long slow journey on foot, the price on her head, the fact that she might never be really safe. She didn't cry. She just crumpled, her face in her hands, and her hair spilling over them.

Pax moved as if to go to her, but she stopped herself. "I think that somebody other than me should talk to her. She might kind of want to kill me just a little bit."

"*Really*. What leads you to *that* conclusion? Malice, you go. And for the love of God, don't try to seduce her. That's the last thing she needs."

Malice looked honestly shocked. "Come on, Casey. You really think I would make a pass at her now? Even *I* have my limits."

She went to Amanthi, and she didn't try to touch her, or even speak to her. She just crouched beside her, waiting. She would wait as long as Amanthi needed, and she would be ready whenever Amanthi was.

Pax and I went up on the roof, to give them space. She had the makings of a few cigarettes stuffed into her pockets. Together we smoked and watched the sun sink.

"What's Amanthi's plan?" I asked eventually, breaking the silence. "Does she have one?"

"She wants to go back to her husband. But she's afraid of leading the League back to her town. Probably afraid that her husband hasn't waited for her, too. Strangely enough, she might stick with me if she doesn't have anywhere better to go. We'll have to talk about it."

"No doubt. Do *you* have a plan?"

She looked down at the smoke curling from her cigarette, and snorted out a laugh. "For once in my life- no. I didn't have a plan beyond getting here. Talking to you."

"Sweet. But a little dumb, I think."

"Only a little? I'm doing better than I thought."

"We can't stay here. The three of us, I mean, the League Resources. There's too much reward money riding on us. I'm temptation enough on my own. But add you and Amanthi to the mix, and we're a fortune on legs. Someone's bound to sell us out."

"Amanthi and I wouldn't sell for nearly as much as you would. But yes, you're right."

"So either you have to leave Lafontaine, or..."

I left it hanging.

"Or we could leave together," Pax finished. "We could power up the Rover, and just *go*. You. Me. Malice and Emily and Robert, if they want. Amanthi too. All of us."

I didn't know whether to laugh or scream or sob, so I took a particularly long drag at my cigarette, as a compromise. Ten months ago, this woman had dragged me away from my home. Now she wanted to do the same thing over again. The only difference was that the first time, she had done it for the greater glory of the League. This time, I wasn't even sure of her reasons.

"And what the hell would we do, away from Lafontaine?" I asked. "Tour mindlessly through the wicked world? Or dress up in nice green uniforms and thrash some peasants?"

"Neither. We could do something real, you know. Something good. We could found a new town. Build it of desert stucco. A town that's designed to work with the world we have, rather than surviving off the remnants of the old. Or we could make our way north. It's cooler there, and there's more water. We could join a settlement there, help it grow. Or we could go after Naturals. Find them. Rescue them if they're enslaved. Then work with them. See what they have to offer the world."

I scrubbed fiercely at my hair. "You see? I knew you'd mention that. How long before you start to clip their ears, and lock them in trucks, and tell them that they're too important to decide what to do with their own damn lives?"

Pax raised her hands, surrendering. "All right. All right. I deserved that."

She was silent a minute, and then asked softly, "Should I just go?"

I sighed. "No. Don't. I'm the one who said we should meet in the middle. I know there must be some space between our ways. There must be middle ground between taking total control of people's lives, and leaving them to die in their own filth. I'm just...Well. I guess, to be totally brutally honest, I'm scared shitless. God almighty Pax. It's hard enough just to survive. You want us to survive, and change the world in our spare time."

"Between you and me and Malice and Amanthi, we're ahead of the game when it comes to survival. Malice can rip up people's bodies and Amanthi can stitch them back together, and you can fix the truck and light people's heads on fire. And I can memorize a zillion columns of

numbers at a time, which might not strike you as a survival skill, but you'd be surprised. And I can cook eggs."

"Eggs are tasty," I murmured thoughtfully. That seemed to encourage her.

"I didn't leave the League empty-handed, either. There are five nightsticks at the bottom of my rucksack."

I glared. "I *hate* those things."

"Fine. Forget the nightsticks. I'll break them. I don't have to make eggs, either. I'll make porridge instead. See, I can adapt. Casey- come with me."

"Come with you, and change the world?"

"Why the *hell* not?" Pax took hold of my hand. She did it cautiously, as if she expected me to smack her across the face. Which was probably smart of her, under the circumstances, because I kind of wanted to. But I didn't.

"Do me a favour," she said. "Just for one second, forget everything that you already know. Forget everything in your life that made you give up. Just for one second, believe this, if nothing else: You're extraordinary, Casey. You were made to do extraordinary things."

I was a flyspeck away from making some smartass remark. Something like, *Am I extraordinary enough to be locked in a ten-foot-by-ten-foot cube, with sharpened wires in my head?* But I didn't do it. I couldn't. For just one second, you see, Pax's words had touched some chord that vibrated down all the way through me, right to the roots of my soul.

Faith is silly that way. It hits you just when the rational part of your brain throws up its hands and stalks away in frustration. It was *stupid* of me to be standing there in the sun, with the woman who had abducted me not very long ago. Stupider still for me to be thinking- well, what if? What if I actually could do anything?

I didn't know whether Pax was right. I just knew that I wanted her to be.

Her shoulder was there, so I leaned into it, and her arms came up around me. I breathed the smell of her. It was the wasteland smell: salt and smoke and sand.

"Okay," I said, into her chest.

"What?"

"I said okay." I pulled back from her. "What the hell. Let's try. Let's launch ourselves into the breach with nothing but our wacky talents and a can-do attitude."

A startled grin broke out over her face, and I hurriedly held up a warning finger. "BUT! The first

order of business- *NUMBER ONE*- is Amanthi. If Amanthi wants to leave, then we're going to take her *anywhere* she wants to go. Whatever that takes!"

"Anywhere," Pax agreed. "Whatever that takes."

"Don't say yes too quickly. I mean it. If she wants to go to the North Pole, and I have to scoop you out and use you as a kayak to get her there, then I'm gonna."

"You say that with a degree of relish that makes me uncomfortable."

"I'm serious."

"Fair enough. I give. You've got it. Amanthi comes first. I owe you that much."

"Hell no. You owe *Amanthi* that much. When I get around to collecting what you owe *me*, things are going to get *much* more interesting."

-

It was so hot that night that sleep was almost impossible. Some people dragged their mattresses up to the roof; some staked out the basement, which was cool, but smelt of sewage. Pax and I opened up the back of the Rover, padded it with blankets, and lay where we could see a little patch of stars.

We didn't talk much. Words are very cheap, and there comes a point where you don't want to bother saying or hearing the obvious. Like *I'm sorry*, or *I missed you*. But there were other things she said in the middle of the night, when my mind was so glutinous with exhaustion that I could barely recognize the sounds. And now, three weeks later, I don't really remember them. But I choose to believe that they were beautiful.

It was near dawn when she started to talk in Portuguese. Haltingly, jarringly, repeating something long forgotten. I didn't know at the time whether it was a poem or a prayer, and when she translated the words for me later, I was no wiser, but I think it went something like this:

To the four winds/I have sworn an oath/
To track to the inmost part of you/your dying light;
To stir up the embers/where once burned your faith
And to rekindle yours/from my own.

-

In the three weeks since then, I've been getting ready.

It's not easy to say goodbye to your life in three weeks, but it's easier than saying goodbye to your life in thirty seconds. At the very least, you have time to give your plants away, and pack all of your underwear.

The day after Pax and I made our decision, we asked the others whether they wanted to come. We tried to be straight about the whole thing, tell them all the risks and dangers. How we didn't really know where we were going, and how the League would probably never stop hunting us. When we were finished, Emily and Robert glanced at each other, and something wordless passed between them. Then Emily declared, brightly, "I call shotgun!"

Malice only took a few more seconds to decide, though she complained: "It is a big fucking world out there. And I've only got the one knife."

Pax straightened, and I knew exactly what she was going to say: *Want to learn to use a nightstick?* She didn't end up saying it, probably because I threw every pillow in the house at her face before she could open her mouth.

Amanthi is on board as well- at least for now. Her face still goes dull red every time she sees Pax, and she hasn't spoken three words to her since the day they arrived. In a way, it was the final humiliation of her time in the League, when she had to let Pax, of all people, rescue her. But for the first time in years, she's free to be angry, and I think in the end that'll help. That, and Malice Hiroyama, who is very good indeed at suggesting ways for her to burn her anger off. Some require razor blades. Others involve baseball bats and walls. All very healthy and productive, though not in a way that Pax would necessarily understand.

-

We're leaving this evening. The plan is to drive through the night, and reach the nearest water source before the heat of the day starts. Pax knows every well and spring for hundreds of miles around.

But for most of today, we've been working on a different project. There was something that we wanted to leave behind. A message for the League, something for them to ponder during their next trip to Lafontaine.

On and off, for the past couple of weeks, I've been collecting coloured earth and old tins. Early yesterday, I built a small fire in the gravel yard, and turned chemist. I extracted the coloured oxides from the clay, roasted them to darken the tone, and I added this and I added that and I ended up with a few quarts of good hard-wearing paint, in red and brown and smoky black.

That was my main part in the job. That and the scaffolding. Malice and I, working together, slung ropes and planks from the roof of the apartment building, so the others could paint comfortably. Pax did the sketching, the roughing out, and then Emily and Robert helped her to fill the shapes in. Amanthi stood by with her medical kit. She said she wanted to be ready for emergencies. I think she was secretly hoping that Pax would fall off the scaffold.

We finished the mural this afternoon, and as soon as it was finished, the six of us stood in a line on the cracked sidewalk, and stared up at it. Emily held Floyd, and petted him thoughtfully.

Pax, with our help, had painted rabbits all over the side of Orelle's building. A horde of rabbits, brown and black and fawn-coloured and tawny, running and leaping over the weather-beaten walls. They were roughly done, but Pax has too much fire in her to produce bad art. Every last bunny looked like it was breathing.

Below the rabbits, in good-sized if shaky capitals, was written:

THE ONLY SALVATION
IS IMAGINATION.

"I liked it better before you put the words on, frankly," I told Pax. "It looks kind of preachy this way."

"I *am* preachy. You know this about me. You can paint the words over, if you want, but I'm not going back up there. I've already ruined my pants."

"Paint-covered pants. Truly, your suffering is without end or description."

Emily thoughtfully ruffled Floyd's ears. "You think that the League will get the message?"

"Probably not," said Pax. "But at least we tried."

"Enough with the rabbits," I said. "Come on, Amanthi. Have you still got the deck of cards? I think we've got time for a quick hand of poker before we have to leave."

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