

EARTHBOUND

ADAM LEWINSON

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Prologue.

If you want to know the truth, I'm not gonna tell it to you.

Pace might but he's a little busy right now, as am I, surrounded by hordes of metal Mankins with lasers aimed at our skulls. He'd still tell you the truth, though. That's just who he is. Eff him. Eff them. Eff everybody.

It's pretty easy to pick apart Mankins. There's nobody in there. No soul. It's just metal. I want to get my hands on the guy controlling the metal. That's the sweet spot. But right now, I'm not seeing how that happens. I'm not seeing how we get past the thousands of Mankins closing in on us right now. We deserve it I guess. Kind of. But then again, we don't deserve any of this. We're innocent. I swear. Mostly.

Pace and I don't need to talk through our strategy for escape. By now we've been through so many scrapes together that we know each other's rhythm for this kind of thing. One glance and we know our plan. That's what we did this time too. But once we ran inside the lobby of this skyscraper and the Mankins started to encircle our position, we glanced at each other. We knew we were effed.

This is more of a requiem than anything else. If Pace was telling the story he'd made it more romantic. That's him. Not me. I'm a realist. I know the true nature of the world. The carnally unforgiving nature of the order of things. Kill or be killed. Eff or get effed. And in the end, all you can do is go out in style.

We'll do that. In a few minutes we'll have no choice but to burst out of our position, guns blazing, taking out as many Mankins as we can. Not that it matters. There are just too many of them.

Regrets? Yeah. Sure. Never had much luck with women. I'm no virgin, let me be clear about that right now. But I'm too much of a loner to have a girlfriend. Pace never had that problem. He did pretty much nothing but boast about his experiences with women while we've been racing across the Great Plains over the past couple of months on the run from just about everybody. Girls love him. I'm so tired of hearing about it that I want to punch him in the face. Make it bloody and swollen, so he'll look more like my sad-ass face. I'm not ugly, I know that. I've just been punched in the nose too many times. Pace thinks my nose got knocked a little to the right during that fight back at Town Hall with that asshole Boze and his group of followers known as the Nuggets. I think he's right. That really hurt and I was too pissed off to let the doctor fix it. Now when I look in the mirror it kind of suits me. Scares people away a little bit. I like that.

Pace exhales deeply, finishing the last of our water. He leans back against crumbling

drywall. He doesn't want to look at me. I don't blame him.

"Sorry about Rebecca," he mutters.

I don't respond. I'm too fuming. Then a moment later he looks over at me to make sure I'm still listening. Still alive. I've got a pretty bad wound opened up under my ribs.

I can't look at him. He should be really effing sorry about Becca! It's a worthy apology. But probably too vague for someone facing certain death. Is he sorry because he slept with her, or sorry that I didn't? I really wanna make him feel pain over that. But now's not the time for resentment. Now's the time for forgiveness. But that's not my style.

Eventually I just glare at him. Pace knows I'm pissed. But all he can do is laugh.

I wish I had Pace's sense of humor. His vagabond debonair style. That's what girls like. That's what Becca liked.

It makes me sick.

I resent him a little I suppose. He's always been the golden child. I've always been the bad boy. I've done so much fighting while he's done so much loving. Or whatever you want to call it. Just once I wanna get the girl. But that's not gonna happen. I wish I had done a little more living before I do so much dying.

Whatever. I don't hate him though. He's been my best friend when it mattered. Nothing's changed that. Death is the only thing that'll change that.

"What are they waiting for?" he asks.

I just shake my head. I wonder, what are they waiting for? We're outnumbered over a thousand to two. Bad odds, even for us. But it's Mankins. They don't think. The person doing the thinking obviously wants them to wait. Maybe wait until I bleed out. Lower the odds.

I hear the march. Jackboots. That unmistakable clank of metal marching in unison. It's pretty faint but it's slowly getting louder. I look at Pace, he hears it too. He knows. We don't need to say it out loud.

Bions.

The guy tracking us gives us way too much credit. He must really want that bounty on our heads – quadruple for dead instead of alive. But still, in this situation he doesn't need to ship in the Bions to guarantee a kill. If I get the chance to talk to that guy, maybe in the next life or whatever, I'll have to tell him he's effing crazy. There was no need for the Bions.

But why not take every advantage, I guess. We've gotten out of pretty bad scrapes recently. Maybe he's smart not to underestimate us. And Bions give such a good psychological advantage. They're so much harder to kill than Mankins. Not just physically – they are tougher, but a kill shot is a kill shot – but they used to be human, kind of. So they think like a human. Smarter. Unlike a simple Mankin, they adjust. Also there's the guilt factor. It's not just

all metal. There's something sentient in there and it's not their fault they're enslaved in metal. That's the challenge. It's harder to pick apart a sentient creature but I've done pretty much a lot of that too.

Can you imagine the torment? They want to be killed. It's putting them out of their misery. But they're programmed to survive anyway. Hell, maybe there are a few out there who just wanna live like anyone else. I dunno, I didn't ask many of them before I shot them dead.

The jackboots get louder and closer. Pace just laughs. I shoot him a what-the-eff look.

"So much for getting starbound," he howls. This keeps him in stitches. I don't see what's so funny. Never did have much of a sense of humor. Instead of honoring him with a response, I reach into my pack and grab my last bite of buffalo jerky. Never did like it. Too salty. But it's ruined anyway cause I'm thinking it's the last bite I ever eat. Probably is. Could have been so much better.

Eff Pace – he's right about us never getting off Earth. That was always his fantasy anyway, not mine. Me, I like having both feet on the ground. He wants to fly. He wants to go out there into the stars and find out what happened to our ancestors. Eff 'em, I say. They left, they forgot about us, the last thing I wanna do is catch up with them. Well, someone else is gonna have to follow after them anyway. Clank clank clank. Man that's loud.

I load two of my last few charges into my Persuaders. I'd remove the safeties but I pried those off already. Never did much like safeties. I look at Pace. He and I know it's time. Take our stand before the Bions get here. We have no chance now against the Mankins – we have zero chance when the Bions arrive.

"This is gonna be difficated," I say.

We crouch into position. Can't lift our heads much more or we're in firing range. The lobby of this skyscraper was in pretty bad shape before we got here anyway, and it didn't handle the energy blasts well as they accompanied us inside. The windows were shattered before anyway, but now big chunks of concrete were gone too, which at least gave us ground cover for a while. I suspect the Mankins' blasts knocked the hell out of what was left of this building's foundation. Maybe the skyscraper will collapse on top of all of us. Hah, that would be justice. But there's probably no hope for that. As we've learned, these structures were built pretty strong. Despite the neglect and rot, they're still hanging in there. That's kind of how I always saw myself being if I was lucky enough to live to an old age. Yeah, don't remind me. But at least we're gonna die in the only place that's ever felt like home. The Old City suits me so much better than my real home ten miles away. I belong amongst all this decay. Although I wouldn't mind seeing Black Eagle Falls again. If only to try to figure out what was so seductive

about them. Why my mother decided to jump in and never come out. Maybe I'll ask her soon where I'm going. No, not that I've ever been much for church schooling, but I'm quite certain that wherever my mother is, I'm going somewhere else.

I wonder if there's anything I'm supposed to say. I look at Pace. I bet he's wondering the same thing. And then I see this slight moistness in his eyes. He's not scared, that's not him. He's not afraid to die either. Neither am I. It's something else. I feel the same way. But eff him if I'm gonna say it out loud. Instead we both nod. It's time.

As I apply some pressure on the triggers of my twin Persuaders, one image pops into my mind. Becca. Why the eff should I think of her? Other than she's the most beautiful effing thing I ever seen. She's never ever even looked at me the way I wanted her to. She's just got doe eyes for Pace. At least that's what I always thought. But Pace had to go putting ideas in my head. Hours on end riding across the plains and loping our way over mossed-up freeways, you gotta fill up the time somehow. He was just talking. There is no way she likes me. That she'd want me. Pace, fine, but me, I'm just the other one, the bad one to stay away from. But I can't help but regret that I never even told her how I felt. I'd do it now. If I ever had the chance.

Pace and I rise up in unison. Instantly we feel the sting of energy blasts whizzing past our cheeks. I don't mind the singe, I just want to keep shooting until they connect with my skull or my chest. Man, they're everywhere. We line our backs up against each other, as we always did when we got cornered. He takes one flank, I take the other. They're easy to kill, these Mankins. They're cheap – really bad programming. So it's just a numbers game. We just keep firing until invariably one of them will get in a lucky shot. I kill a dozen. Maybe more, I have to stop counting, but I can't help myself. I give Pace cover while he reloads. He does the same for me – or tries anyway. I get nicked in the thigh. Have to keep standing. Have to hold up Pace. He's not as good a shot as me. I think I just killed my fiftieth. Going for my record. That's a way to go out. I'm killing a lot of 'em. Maybe we have a shot. Maybe. But there's just too effing many of them. And we're nearing the end of our ammo. I'm not hearing the sound of jackboots anymore. I squint away from the sun and see them – the Bions are here. They're raising their cybernetic arms and taking aim. Unlike the Mankins, they don't miss. I raise up my arms too. But unlike those stupid robots, I don't need to take aim – it's second nature by this point. I can manage two more Bion kill shots, one from each gun before the others beat me before I have the chance to beat them. I pull back the triggers.

And then everything turns white.

1.

Being at the end makes me think about the beginning. Not the beginning of my life – fortunately I can't remember coming out of my mother's womb. Or my baptism. Welcome to the world. Now drown. No, I'm thinking about the beginning of my dying.

It was only about six months ago, although it feels like a couple of years. I stood on the edge of the Missouri River, staring thirty feet down into blinding white water. Black Eagle Falls was seducing me. The fall would probably kill me, or if not, odds were good my head would smash against the cement remains of what used to be a dam. But no matter if it didn't. I'd just open up my lungs and inhale. Gladly. Not much point in sticking around long enough to officially become a man, old enough for me to legally be able to buy a drink – not that the laws ever stopped me anyway. No, I pretty much became a man at the age of twelve. In that very same spot, I stood and wondered why my mother willingly jumped in. Why she allowed herself to drown. Why her body washed up a few miles further down the shore. Becca was with me then, I'll never forget it, with her arm around my shoulder, trying her damndest to comfort me. I didn't need comfort though. I already knew what it was like to lose a parent. I just needed to understand why.

But six months ago, Becca wasn't with me anymore, I'd made damn sure of that. I was alone, ten some odd years since my mother died, not sure why I was still breathing. I'd grown in those ten years, filled out, gotten stronger. Figured my body mass would make me fall faster. That's about all I cared to know about physics. But I do know a lot about nature. She's been reclaiming the earth over the past couple hundred years, taking back what people bastardized. Plant and animal life are reassuming their dominance. Monuments to mankind are barely recognizable anymore, compared to what I've seen in history books, which isn't much cause I'm not much of a history student. All we've got left are our effing settlements, and if our birth rate continues the way it has been, then given another thousand years, there'll be precious little evidence that man was there at all, if the earth even lasts that long.

The earth wouldn't miss me. Probably never wanted me anyway.

People wouldn't miss me much either. No, I'm just like my old man. It took me a few years but I'd figured out why my mother killed herself. It was only a matter of time before I followed in his footsteps. Better if I end it myself before innocent people have to die.

I looked up at the sky for what I thought would be one last time. Everyone talks about how lucky we are, how effing beautiful Montana is. But I don't effing see it. It's all I've ever seen. It's just all gray to me. So I let my eyelids slide shut. My body started to tip forward. It was the

call of the waterfall, I couldn't resist it. Speckles of cold water peppered my face. And that deafening roar of water was so soothing.

That was it, I thought. Time to go.

I can't tell you why I didn't fall in. I'm not really sure. Maybe it's cause I couldn't tell whether that's what my mother would have wanted or if she would have been disappointed. I dunno.

Okay, I'm effing lying to you already. I know why. I heard a voice say my name. "Asher." And it was her voice. Becca's voice, as if she was standing right next to me. It had to have been her. But when I opened my eyes, staring at all the effing gray terrain all around me, Becca was nowhere around me. Course she wasn't there. She's just in my head. I cursed and took a few steps back from the edge. I guess I knew I was ready to die. But there was something I needed to do first. I just wasn't sure how or exactly what.

Kinda disappointed, I went back to a field where I'd set my horse free. My horse's name is Charon by the way. We understand each other. He gets me where I need to go. Guess that's why he waited around for me. Probably knew with his horse sense that I didn't have the guts to jump in.

I got back to our settlement around nightfall. It's called Great Falls. There's another waterfall nearby that goes by the same name. Not very original. We got five falls all told. Black Eagle is the closest to our settlement. Then Colton Falls, Rainbow Falls, Crooked Falls and then the biggest one of all Great Falls. That one has a ninety foot drop. Guess that's why they call it Great. Really effing clever.

I didn't want to go back to my family's house. Never did until I had no choice. So instead, well past curfew, as usual, I haunted the only saloon in our little settlement. I planned on taking up my usual stool at the bar, where nobody bothers me so I don't bother anyone else. And that's exactly what I did.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw a shot glass nudged over in my direction. I could tell by the color, it was filled with the good stuff. Hell, I couldn't afford that. I glanced up and saw it was Pace who owned that whiskey. Of course it was, effing rich boy. He gave me a nod. I ignored him. I can pay for my own liquor. Most guys give you an expensive drink, there are strings attached. But as I've learned, not Pace. He just likes to share – to be the guy everyone likes to hang around with. It was probably easier for him back then, when he worked for his father at the bank. He was lucky I guess, making good money, growing up without really understanding hunger, like the rest of us.

At that point me and Pace were less than friends. Not enemies either. I just kinda figured

it was best to not know him. He's a talker. Case you haven't figured it out, I'm not much of a talker. I was kinda cringing, hoping he wouldn't strike up a conversation. Bragging about his exploits with the pretty girls in town. That's what he liked to do. Maybe it was just bar talk, I don't know how many of these girls Pace was actually with, but I suspect everything he told me was true. As I've learned over time, Pace has a problem with lying, whereas I have a comfortable relationship with lies. Anyway, I was hoping that refusing his liquor was enough to shut him up, and for a time it was. When he finally spoke, I don't think he was talking to me.

"Whoa, look at that!" Pace said.

I looked up and saw him glance over at a girl leaning against the pool table, laughing with some friends and knocking down some homemade whisky. Pace didn't need to point her out to me. I noticed her the minute she walked in the saloon. I always notice her.

Rebecca. I've always called her Becca, but I don't think most people do. I always lose a little bit of my breath when I see her. And it's not just her long legs in those tight handmade jeans. Or her halfway buttoned shirt – I think that's what you call a blouse, right? – which casually showed off her big rack. Or her long brown hair that seemed to shine even if there isn't any light. No, it was her eyes. Her brown eyes that could just look at you and make you feel like you were somebody, like you were worthy of her attention. She was no doubt the most beautiful girl in Great Falls. I guess that's not saying all that much, given our population, but at the time I bet if I traveled throughout what used to be called Montana, throughout the Great Plains, to all the settlements, I'd never see a girl more beautiful. Looking back now, of course I can vouch for that.

"Guess she's no longer with Boze," Pace said, again not necessarily directed at me. But he made a good point, I thought Becca was still with that guy. Boze is a few years older, and the closest thing to a lawman we had in Great Falls. He was supposed to keep the peace, whatever that means. Seems like we had the same number of brawls with him or without him "keeping the peace." Anyway, I was sure they were gonna get married. That would have been tragic.

Next thing I knew Pace slid his whole bottle of good whiskey my way. "Might as well drink it," he told me. "I'm now otherwise engaged."

Then he just got up and walked right over to Becca. I coulda easily thought he was giving me his whiskey to keep me preoccupied and out of his way, but I knew it wasn't like that. No one knew how I felt about Becca. I sniffed the open bottle. Sure smelled good. I thought about drinking it to take my mind off of him talking to Becca. She wouldn't be interested in him anyway. She'd see right through his charms. But I glanced over and it sure looked like I was wrong. Pace had forged a pathway through her cute girlfriends. Cute girls seem to like

hanging out together. Unlike guys. It's usually one decent-looking guy surrounded by a bunch of ugly guys. Man, that must be rough for girls to deal with, when the decent-looking one gets spoken for and they have to fight over meager scraps.

Becca didn't seem too resistant to his advances. She was leaning against the pool table, sipping at her drink, tilting her head back a little to laugh at his jokes. I grabbed hold of Pace's fancy bottle of whiskey and held it under my chin. Why shouldn't she go with Pace? He's rich. He'll give her a better life than stupid Boze ever would. Or me for that matter. There was no need to be jealous. I had nothing better to offer. I would want her to be happy.

I took a quick look over my shoulder again. Pace's hand was on her leg. He was movin' fast. I took a good whiff of that expensive whiskey. It was getting more tempting by the second.

Then through the back of my head I could kinda sense movement. It was Becca, with Pace, and they were heading for the door. I turned my head just in time to see her eyes burning into mine. She seemed, I dunno, kinda sad as she let Pace loop his arm around hers. She kept staring at me – and I really couldn't stand it – until she walked out through the saloon door. I looked down at Pace's whiskey, picked it up and took a huge swig right out of the bottle. Boy that expensive stuff is good.

Fair enough. Pace got the girl, I got the good whiskey. That's all I needed, all I wanted, right?

But why did it have to be Pace? I just knew his motivations weren't pure. Boze, sure, he was an idiot, but at least I always kinda figured he had honorable intentions. He'd marry Becca, do his best to give her a life. But not Pace. He'd have his way tonight, maybe a few more nights, and then on to the next conquest.

I took another long swig of good whiskey. I knew what emotions were churning around inside. I needed some help to stay put, hoping it would cement my body down on the barstool. But I couldn't help myself.

Next thing I knew I hoisted my body out the saloon doors. Pace was a few yards away, walking Becca toward his house. I hurled myself at him and gave him a good shove.

"Asher?" Becca cried out with surprise. Hearing her say my name is a little magical, I have to say. She's the only one who calls me by my full name. Well, my mother did too. Everyone else just calls me Ash. Seems to suit me I suppose. Ash is what's left after something burns down. That's me.

Pace took a defensive posture might quick, I must say. He held his hands up like it was an old-fashioned stick-up, and he was backing away from me faster than I was approaching.

"Say Ash," Pace said, trying to paste a smile over his fear, "what seems to be the trouble?"

"Yes Asher," Becca interjected, moving her body in between me and Pace. "What exactly is the trouble?"

"Sorry Becca," I responded, trying to calm myself down but I really wanted to beat the shit out of Pace. "Just don't much like seeing you leave with Pace is all."

With Becca in between us, Pace seemed to feel more confident again, maybe thinking she wouldn't let me beat the shit out of him. "Do you prefer to be called 'Becca'?" he asked her.

"You can call me *Rebecca*," she replied pointedly. It felt good to know she was keeping one thing special just for me. Made sense, after all our history. That was history I cared about, actually. "Okay *Rebecca*," he laughed. "We were just leaving. So Ash, if you'll excuse us..."

"Nope," I muttered.

"The lady can walk with whoever she likes," Pace responded with confidence.

I reached past Becca and grabbed Pace by his fancy collar. "This is something I can't abide," I said. No idea where those words came from. Pace started flinching like I was gonna hit him. Maybe it was my balled up fist in my other hand.

"Now Ash," he pleaded, "not the face, okay? It's my best asset."

All the better a target for smashing, I thought. But before I could take a swing at him, I felt Becca's hands enveloping my fist. It'd been years since I'd felt her touch. Most of my rage fell away right then and there. I looked into her eyes. She looked stern. Kind of like how I remember my mother looking at me sometimes.

"Asher, I appreciate your trying to protect me," she said with powerful calm, "but I do not need protecting. Do you understand me?"

"Sorry Becca," I said. "I got no right."

As I backed down, I saw Becca get increasingly pleased. "I didn't know you still thought you might," she said.

Pace didn't seem to like her warming up to me a little, so he got his confidence back and stepped in front of Becca again and got in my face. "Ash, what say we call this a night and I'll just walk *Rebecca* home."

"What say I smash your face?" I responded.

Becca's hands were over my fist again. Guess I should threaten physical violence more often.

"I know you're strong," Becca told me. "If strong was all that's important you'd be running this settlement. You want to make an impression on me, you do it without violence."

Her words sedated me. Both she and Pace just kinda stared at me for a minute, waiting to

see if there was anything I could do without punching someone. I admit, I had nothin'. Didn't have the words, didn't have the actions. I just felt kinda embarrassed that I had done what I did.

"He impresses you?" I asked.

"He's exciting," she responded. "And in this town, what else is there?"

"I *am* exciting," Pace added. Smug mother-effer.

But then it hit me.

"Okay," I said. "You wanna be impressed? Don't go home with Pace. Instead come with me."

"What do you have in mind?" she asked.

"The Old City."

Becca looked at me funny. Pace did too actually. The Old City was off limits, for everyone's own safety really. That didn't stop me from going over a few times to explore, but I have a bit of what you might call a suicidal complex. Every now and then when I don't feel like I have much to live for, I'll go. "You want excitement? That's a story you can tell your grandkids about."

"If we live to tell it," she added with caution.

"Where do your parents think you are now?" I asked. "Asleep in your bed? You snuck out the window, right?" Becca nodded guiltily. "So they're not gonna miss you. I'll get you home before sunrise."

I could see a light igniting in Becca's soul. "I'll go!" she blurted out.

"Wait a sec," Pace intervened. "That's no place for a girl."

Becca gave him a nasty glare. He really didn't know her that well. He was basically shoving her into my arms.

"Guess if it's no place for a girl," I said, "you won't be coming with us."

I was challenging Pace dead on, calling him on his bullshit. He looked back at me, his mouth kinda open, I expected spit to come drooling out.

"Fine," he said. "Let's go."



Riding horses is second nature to me. Riding horses in the dark, near pitch dark, with nothing but a shaky candle-lit lantern in your hand, with a whole lotta whiskey in your belly – that's hard. Still, the easy part of the journey was down what used to be called Route 87. What

used to be a six-lane highway was now covered in moss, like most of the old roads. They didn't get much use, save the infrequent use as a trade route between settlements. People from Augusta or Conrad would make the journey when they had an excess of cloth or medicine. They'd ride in by cart to trade when we have an abundance of fish or buffalo meat, depending on the season. Traders would usually misbehave a bit while they were in town – probably cause they weren't accountable to their folks back home so no one was wiser. It always made for an interesting time. Harmless mostly unless they put an improper eye on one of our women. Then the residents of Great Falls would actually work together for a change and protect what's ours. There was only one other time when they banded together like that – because of my father.

Anyway, Route 87 wasn't built for horses, it was build for cars. Supposedly they can run fast. Ten times faster than a horse. That is if anyone can find a car in pretty good shape, and they know how to fix it up, and they have enough electricity to spare to charge the thing. We've got a few broken down cars in the settlement, but they're really just scrap. So for my own eyes, it was all just legend, so I didn't pay it much mind. Horse riding was all I needed.

We reached the old bridge that goes across the Missouri River. I'd been over it a few times before – really slowly. It hasn't been meant for travel since, I dunno, World War I or whenever the Exodus was. Like I said, not much of a history student here. Anyway, there's just no telling when the bridge might collapse.

We all stopped our horses and tried to peer across it. Hard to do when the light only goes ten feet. I hoped the bridge hadn't collapsed already, halfway across and without warning. Would hate to fall down into the Missouri. No telling if that was a survivable fall.

Pace seemed kinda concerned. "We're going to make it across, right?" he asked, trying to hide his fear behind a fake smile pasted across his face. I looked at Becca, and she peered back at me. She didn't need to say anything – I knew she was nervous too, but she wanted desperately to trust me. I didn't want to give her reassuring words though. Not my thing. Not sure I could believe 'em if I said 'em anyway. So instead I just tugged at my reins and led my horse forward across the bridge. I could barely hear their horses' hoofbeats behind me – muffled in moss that goes halfway up your horse's leg. And I hoped Pace was pissing his pants with fear.

I rode as slowly as I could, straining my eyes to make sure there was solid ground in front of me. Then I started thinking maybe I should be riding last, not first. My every step forward could be the one to finally turn the bridge into shit, collapsing behind me, and then Becca would bear the brunt of it. Pace too. If they were good swimmers they'd have half a chance.

Finally I could see the other end of the bridge in sight. Charon took those last few treacherous steps, and then I had him run a few yards away to get some distance. I turned around to make sure Becca and Pace made it across whole, which they did. The dim glow from the lantern barely made out a huge grin on Becca's face. She was loving this.

We rode in silence for a while, marveling at the sight before us. Buildings, unimaginably tall. Skyscrapers, as they're called, cause I guess when you get that high up you scrape the sky. I don't really ever want to find out. Like the bridge we just crossed, those structures gotta be ready to crumble, and I don't intend to be around when that happens. Rubble had fallen everywhere. Some of the buildings had been charred by fire – that can't help their stability. Most of the ground-level windows were shattered, probably from looters back when the Exodus ended. Hard to believe people tried to live here back then, but they didn't last long. They killed each other, or worse were taken out by rabid animals or wolves or disease. Cities are no place for a man anymore.

Hard to believe that nine million people once lived there, building up the air force base, and then waiting their turn to get off this planet. Not that I miss them, but I think they didn't leave any excitement behind. They weren't too smart either, the way I hear it. They put in all that effort, worked for a hundred years preparing to go off-planet. 20 billion people gone. And when they were gone, the hypernova that was supposed to blow us up never came. The gamma radiation or whatever it's called from the exploding star was supposed to wipe out all life on Earth. But it didn't happen. Not for the next hundred years. Or two hundred, whatever the math of it is from then to now. And for the million or so who stayed behind, they had a hard time dealing with what was left. Only settlements like ours had a chance. And eventually, people like us stopped looking up into the sky, wondering when it was gonna blow up. It just wasn't gonna happen. And if it ever did, mind you, I'm okay with it. What can I do about it anyway.

We reached the part of the city where the streets were flooded. First couple times I got to the flood I used to turn back. Still water's got alotta disease in it, and that's not the way I wanna go out. But eventually I figured out a path to ride around the flood, which led to an area that was worth the risk. Buildings ceded their territory to a thick forest, seemingly sprung up out of nowhere. Nature has a way of reclaiming what's hers, I guess.

There was an old rusted sign mounted alongside overgrown brush. I never could read the words. I could say it was because of the overgrowth of vines and weeds blocking the letters, but in actuality it was cause I can't really read much. Never understood why I needed to really.

Becca read the sign aloud. "Riverside Park. Sounds nice enough."

I rode up alongside Pace, close enough to whisper in his ear. "Keep an eye out for wolves." I did that to eff with him, although there were plenty of wolf packs in the Old City. Never saw them up close though. Only times I did was when I was working out on the ranch. Those were the only times anyone ever put a shotgun in my hands, so I could protect the herd. They had good reason for keeping a shotgun out of my hands the rest of the time. Not sure how I'd get one on my own anyway. I'm not even wholly sure where the armory is. They keep it a secret, so guys like me don't break into it I gather.

Anyway, I went in first to the forest, since I knew the way. I knew exactly the spot I wanted to show Becca. But this part was probably the most dangerous of all the Old City. Worth it though. She was probably spooked, I reckon. Pace too. He was bringing up the rear, and he had to know that wolves tend to like to follow their prey. He'd draw their first attack.

I admit, this part of the Old City was unsettling, but it was almost soothing when we started to hear the sounds of nature we were accustomed to. Birds, owls, crickets, that sort of thing. I could see thick spider webs pretty much everywhere, and every few moments I thought I saw the scurry of rats near our horses' hooves. This was the kind of life that owned the Old City now. That and the wolves – or worse.

Pretty quickly I could hear the familiar sound of rushing water, getting louder and louder. I led us to a clearing, and was happy to get us through that forest without incident. In front of us was a little patch of land that sloped slightly downward, right alongside the bank of the Missouri River. We dismounted, gave the horses some water, and gave ourselves some whiskey from a flask I kept in my saddlebag. We tamped down some weeds and sat among them, staring out at the flowing water.

"Nice spot, right?" I asked.

Becca nodded. I couldn't tell if she was still excited or now just plain scared. She's a smart girl. She knows about wolf packs.

"Puts a new perspective on our tiny little existence, doesn't it?" Pace said. "There's more than just the Great Falls settlement, that's for sure."

"But none of it's as safe," Becca reasoned. And she was right about that.

"I'm up to my ass in safe," Pace replied. In that moment I couldn't tell if he was boasting or being truthful, but as I later learned it was a little of both.

"Haven't seen you at movie night in a few months." I thought Becca was talking to Pace, but I glanced up and saw she was looking at me.

"What's the point?" I said.

"I never miss movie night," Pace said cheerfully.

"I know," Becca replied. "I see you there. With a different girl every time."

That made me laugh. Becca knew what Pace was all about. I didn't need to worry about the two of them. Or so I thought.

Pace thought it was funny too. "I like the movies, what can I say."

When we were younger, movie night was pretty much the most exciting thing in our lives. It seemed like everyone in Great Falls would get together in Town Hall on that special night when they'd load up the equipment and show us a relic from our past. They'd probably show it more often, but the equipment is old and no one knows how to fix it. Plus using it takes up precious electricity, of which we have little. Those wind generators only crank out so much. Pace's family could afford to keep a few working lights in their house, but for the rest of us, daylight and candlelight were enough to get by out of necessity. Anyway, when I was young I never missed movie night. For about three years straight I always went with Becca. We sat next to each other in the dark. We were both prepubescent by the way, just so you don't get any ideas. I remember watching some movie about some girl who gets swept up in a tornado and lands in some magical place. Or there was one about this lady, she was a teacher I think of a bunch of children, and their dad was an effing jerk, and they sang and ran away from the Swiss or the Nazis or something like that. Boy, we'd talk about those movies for the whole month until the next time. So I stopped going when it was time to grow up. Eventually you realize that life is about survival – and that's pretty much it – so there isn't much time for fantasy.

"You stopped going, Asher?" Becca asked.

I gave her the courtesy of an honest answer. "Those movies have nothing to do with who I am. It's just a waste of time." I took a swig of whiskey and handed the flask to Becca. Then I added, "course, if I was dating someone like Boze, I'd want to sit in the dark with him as much as possible, so I wouldn't need to see his ugly face."

I caught Becca off guard as she was taking a sip of whiskey. She laughed and nearly spit it out. But that stuff is too precious. She managed to save every drop. "Yeah," she agreed, "not seeing his face was a bonus."

"I have to say," Pace said, "I was glad to hear you unloaded that guy. Good to see a worthy girl such as you keeping yourself available for a better opportunity." Pace was a better opportunity, that's for sure. No reason to worry about money for a girl that married him. Maybe that's one reason why he had no problem with girls liking him. But was that what Becca was flirting with Pace for? That didn't sound like her. Of everyone I know, she's the one who seems best able to handle being so dirt poor. "You'd be set if you married someone like me,"

Pace continued. Now I was pissed. I sat up and noticed my hands were clenching into fists without me even thinking about it.

"Oh no," Becca said, laughing in his face. "You're not the marrying type!"

Pace joined her in her laugh. "You're right about that."

My fists unclenched.

More whiskey.

"Boze," Becca mused. "The only reason I dated him was my parents thought it would be a good match that would make fine babies. But I always knew he was an idiot." We all laughed in agreement. I could see Becca's eyes darting around – she was getting uncomfortable. She didn't want to talk about Boze anymore. Fine by me.

"Relationships are a funny thing," Pace announced. "Our ancestors used to have the luxury of indulging in love, if they chose to. But there wasn't as much pressure then as there is now. How many times do we have to hear about 'repopulation of the species?' Is that really our obligation? And just because an arrangement appears to be a strong match, like you Rebecca with Boze, doesn't mean it's love. We're living life too much for society's sake. We should live more for ourselves."

"Amen," Becca replied. "But I'm not sure how realistic that is."

"It has to be!" Pace continued. "I feel so fenced in. Somehow I've got to find a way to get out of our little town. Maybe I'll be one of our traders, so at least I can see the other settlements."

"I thought you were going to stay in the bank forever," Becca said.

"That would be so sad," he replied. "My Dad's been good to me, no doubt, and that stupid bank has kept me from going hungry. But I'm ready for a little hunger right now."

We passed around the flask and all took another sip of whiskey and let his words resonate.

"I'm always a little hungry," Becca finally responded.

"Working at the general store's not going to fix that," Pace said.

"No. It's like dying just a little bit every day," she remarked. I could see by the slight squint in her eyes that she meant it. "How come I never see you in the store?"

"I go in there from time to time to buy kindling," Pace replied.

"Not you," Becca groaned. "I know your family hires Martha to do most of the errands. I mean you Asher. Mine's the only store in town. If you don't buy food there, I don't know how you're eating."

"I get by," I lie. Truth be told, I tried to go to the general store only on off-hours when she wouldn't be working there. Or if I saw her in the window I'd keep walking, even if it meant I'd

go hungry that night. I don't need to be a burden on her.

More whiskey.

Then we found ourselves staring up into the sky. It was so clear. Nothing but stars.

"What do you dream about, Asher?" Becca asked me. She was looking at me all quizzical. Like she did when we used to sit around all day and just talk. Again, just to be clear, that was when we were prepubescent. That's the only time I think when boys and girls could just sit around like that. Now, there's too much pressure to do something – anything else.

Anyway, I didn't have much of an answer, so Pace chimed in. I think he sensed my hesitation. Came to my rescue too. "Me first. I can tell you. I dream about going up there. Starbound." He pointed to the stars. "I want to go where our ancestors went. I want to see what's beyond our solar system. I want to pass by that hypernova and give it the middle finger. Just imagine what's out there. It must have been amazing for our ancestors to forsake all this. Otherwise they would have come back." I looked down at the weeds. Wasn't sure what "all this" Pace was referring to. "What about you, Rebecca? What do you dream about?"

Becca looked straight down to the ground and, as always, she spoke from her heart. "I dream of a life without fear of poverty. Because that's what makes life so unbearable. Not the poverty. The fear."

I tried to grasp the concept she was saying. I admit, I had a hard time with it. But Pace seemed to understand.

"The fear's what keeps us trapped in the settlement," he said. "If we can get past the fear, there's a whole world out there, and nobody's taken it yet. It can be all ours."

Pace and Becca were staring into each other's eyes now. They were making a connection. Eff that.

"You know what I dream about?" I blurted out. Both of them averted their gaze from each other over to me. I waited a second, for dramatic effect. "Nothing. I don't dream."

Becca moaned. "Asher, that's such a cop out."

"It's not. I'm a realist. Isn't that how you taught me to be, anyway? I accept my situation for what it is. I'm just trying to get through it."

If you wanna know the truth, though, I do dream. It's just nothing I can openly admit. Certainly not to Becca.

That was certainly a conversation killer, anyway. Our thoughts all trailed off. I just fixated on the river. I thought about all those fish in there. Enough to feed our settlement for many lifetimes over. And I thought about my mother, and what she saw in that water anyway.

Next thing I knew, though, Becca shouted out. I sprang up, fearing wolves. It was a

predator – but the kind that's easy to handle. It was just Pace. He had tried to give Becca a kiss, apparently. My fists clenched again. Yup.

"If you weren't such a playboy, Pace..." Becca said, pushing him away.

My fists unclenched. Becca could take care of herself.

"Kissing's just fun," Pace said in his defense. "That and the things that come after it. Gives us something to do while we're bored, right?"

"Maybe you should try kissing your horse," I offered. They both liked that one.

"I do," Pace admitted. "Problem is he kisses back." Then we passed around the flask one more time, to smooth over whatever had just happened.

Then, I don't know if it was the whiskey or a healthy sense of competition, I dunno, but I had this overwhelming urge to kiss Becca. Yeah, I have that urge all the time, but that thing in my brain that stops me from doing stupid things wasn't listening. I just leaned over and put my large hands on her winsome face and leaned in.

"Asher, what are you doing?" Becca pushed me away harder than I thought she could. I looked away sheepishly. "We can't."

Didn't I know it. "Sorry, I..."

"I don't think you need to apologize," Pace said, intervening in our intimate moment. I was kind of relieved actually. "Hey, we both gave it a shot. Can you blame us? You're the best looking girl we know."

Becca seemed to blush at that. I'm not sure she believed it. But it was true.

"We should head back," Becca said, changing the subject. "It's beyond late."

We saddled up and made our way back out of the forest. I still never saw any sign of those wolves. Once we got back to the skyscrapers, we rode a little faster than before, with the added confidence you get when you're just retracing your steps. But then when we got back to that effing bridge, we took our time again getting across. This time, Pace went first. I was bracing for a sudden swim but it never happened.

Soon, we neared the outskirts of Great Falls, and it all felt very familiar. And a little disappointing. Maybe that's why Becca slowed her horse until I caught up with her. I could see some kinda look on her face, not sure how to describe it. Maybe regretful, I dunno.

"I'm sorry about before, Asher," she said.

"It's all right. It was just the whiskey, actually. Won't happen again."

I told you I'm comfortable with lies.

"There's just too much history. Otherwise..." Her voice trailed off. I wanted to know what "otherwise" meant, but I found myself thinking about what my relationship with Becca

used to be. After my mother died, Becca stepped in as a bit of a mother figure to me. She helped with cleaning and cooking. I lived in that old empty house by myself – I didn't know how to do that stuff without her. As she said all the time, I'd starve without her. That was pretty much true. I was an outcast by then, but not to her. She taught me about everything. Even girls, when puberty hit. But by then of course, I'd developed quite a crush on her. But why would she be interested in me? I had no future. She'd have a better life with better suitors. Eventually I purposefully ignored her, and we drifted apart. My memory did flash to the time when I was out with a girl named Lithe. Told you I wasn't a virgin. Truth be told, Lithe was never my type. A little too skinny. Just a placeholder really. It was nice that she liked me and all. Or to be more truthful, she was so desperate she thought I was her only shot at marriage and all that. Poor girl. Anyway, Lithe was holding my arm or whatever, and we happened to walk right past Becca. We glanced at each other but then we both looked away. It was awkward, especially then.

"You know I've always believed in you," she said. True. She was the only one who ever thought I wasn't innately evil. That I wouldn't follow in my father's footsteps, break into the armory and go around shooting anyone in sight. He killed fifteen people that day. No one understood why. My mother certainly never understood. But I think I do. Which is why Becca was always wrong to believe in me. When my boss on the ranch hands me that shotgun, with just enough shells to ward off the wolf pack, I am tempted. I wonder what it would feel like. It certainly feels good killing wolves. And when it's time to slaughter pigs or cattle, or even the bison, I know how to do it and I get good satisfaction from it. But those are just animals, or so I tell myself. We eat most of them. That's the way nature works. But I dunno. If I knew where that armory was, there's no telling what I would be tempted to do.

"Want me to tell you a story?" Becca asked. She knows her stories. She's very well read and all, and she makes good use of the library filled with all sorts of relics from our past. She used to read stories to me all the time. It was actually better than going to the movies, cause it was just us. Hearing one of her stories would have been a good way to pass the time, no doubt. But instead, we kept riding in silence.

We rode near Becca's house and dismounted, far enough away that we wouldn't wake her parents. In a minute she'd sneak back in that window unnoticed and crawl into bed for a brief sleep before sunrise. And she'd be out of my life once again. It was time for me to say something. But what was I supposed to say?

"Hey!" we heard a male voice shout out. I thought it was her father. I was ready to run. Her father could catch Becca with Pace, that would be okay – actually, he'd love it. But not me.

Never with me. The voice, though, wasn't Becca's father's. It was Boze.

Boze stepped out from underneath a tree. He was tall – had that going for him. And big in a kind of lumbering way. Not a face that women liked, like Pace, but not as ugly as me either. Kind of a compromise. But whatever poor girl got saddled with him would have to put up with his foolish thinking and loud mouth.

"I've got a good mind to arrest you both," Boze said loudly, with his tin badge gleaming in the moonlight.

"Shh!" Pace whispered. "Do you want to wake up her parents?"

Boze was properly scolded and kept his voice lowered after that. "Rebecca, where've you been with these boys?"

"None of your business anymore," Becca replied rightfully. She tried to breeze past him but he grabbed her arm.

"Everything in this town is my business," he growled.

"Hands off, Boze!" she shouted, maybe not caring about waking her parents up anymore.

Pace rolled up his sleeves, gearing up for a fight. Me, my fists were already clenched of course.

"Ladies aren't property, Boze," Pace said. "And this one's got better ideas on how to spend her leisure time – and with whom."

"And that's supposed to be you?" Boze scoffed.

"Suppose so. We just got back from the Old City. You think she'd go there with just anyone?"

Boze stared at us with his jaw open, looking stupid. Boze wouldn't have the guts to go anywhere near the Old City. "That's against the law you know," was all he could muster to say.

"I'd like to see you try to arrest me," Pace dared.

Boze didn't know how to respond, so he just turned his attention back to Becca. "Rebecca, you can't be hanging out with these guys. After you change your mind about marrying me, I don't want you having done things I can't live with. The rich one, I can sort of understand, but this one..."

Boze pointed a lone finger at me. That was all I needed. My fist connected with his jaw. I was ready to follow with a punch to his gut, but he was already down. And out cold. What a clod.

We stared down at Boze for a moment. I'd punched him before of course, and most of his Nuggets too. When we were all younger they loved harassing me. They called me a demon

child or devil spawn, or worse. They'd beat me up frequently. But as I grew older, though, I became increasingly difficult to beat up. Eventually they learned that and left me alone. And I suspected Boze would again after this. He could arrest me, sure, when he came to, but then everyone would know I decked him – while he was stalking his ex-girlfriend. He might want that little detail overlooked.

"You all right?" Pace asked Becca. She nodded with thanks and turned to go. Then she stopped. I wanted to ask her why she stopped. Then she turned, and just had this amazing curled up smile on her lips. She leaned in and kissed Pace on the cheek. It was all he needed to put a big smile on his face. Then Becca leaned in and kissed me on the cheek too. It was a tentative kiss. I could barely feel the heat from her lips. But it was enough for me too.

"G'night," she said. And then she sashayed off to her parent's house and snuck back in her bedroom window.

"That was worth it," Pace remarked.

"Mm-hmm," I muttered. As we mounted our horses, I realized something about Pace. He was brave enough, or foolish enough, to follow me into the Old City. He was ready to throw down with Boze. Maybe he wasn't as much of a pussy as I thought.

"You got pretty good taste in women," I said. "But Becca's different. You got it?"

"I do," he replied with a friendly smile. "I can't promise to keep my hands off of her, but I will promise to treat her right."

"I'll be watchin'."

We nodded to each other with grudging respect, then rode off our separate ways. I returned to my house – my father's empty shack. I allowed myself to fall down onto my cot, which groaned under my weight. I had an hour or so to sleep, but I knew I wouldn't be able to. My mind was too alive. So I just laid there. Wondering why. Why didn't I just let her leave the saloon with Pace. Why did I torture myself this way?

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