Cansado.

Estoy cansado de sobrevivir cada día.

Estoy cansado de esconderme en la parte trasera de este burdel.

Estoy cansado de los otros edificios rotos y derrumbados a mi alrededor.

Estoy cansado del trabajo que hago.

Estoy cansado de este pueblo.

Estoy cansado...

No importa lo que haga, no importa cuánto me esfuerce por cambiar las cosas... siento que solo estoy dando vueltas aquí.

Un círculo sin fin; eso es lo que es esta mierda de pueblo...

...pero esta noche me voy.

Miro fijamente al sol que se pone, preguntándome qué me poseyó para establecerme en este desierto.

Incluso sin camiseta, estoy sudando bajo mi pelaje y puedo sentirlo goteando entre mis omóplatos.

Gracias a Dios es domingo, si no, tendría que esperar a que a mi primer cliente le guste ese tipo de cosas.

De hecho, he tenido algunos...

...

Permanezco allí por un tiempo más, finalmente decido que el sol ha bajado lo suficiente como para empezar a prepararme.

Paso del balcón hasta el pasillo, luego a mi habitación.

Me muevo en silencio, por alguna razón la idea de lo que estoy a punto de hacer me hace sentir que tengo que mantenerlo todo en secreto.

Seguro que no pueden simplemente retenerme aquí, pero sé que no quieren que me vaya...

Me pongo la ropa, abotonando mi camisa y poniéndome los tirantes sobre los hombros.

Luego, me quedo en silencio junto a la puerta, escuchando.

Hay poco ruido, puedo escuchar a las chicas riendo y hablando a lo lejos, probablemente en el salón vacío.

Bien.

En silencio, me dirijo hacia la esquina de mi habitación, justo detrás de la cama.

Arrodillándome, introduzco mis garras entre las tablas del suelo, sabiendo exactamente cuál quiero porque he memorizado el patrón de la veta de la madera.

La levanto mientras hago una mueca por el chirrido que hace.

Un sonido fuerte desde abajo me hace saltar y me quedo inmóvil, escuchando.

Pero me doy cuenta de que es solo una de las chicas, riéndose, probablemente borracha.

Sosteniendo la respiración, meto mi mano libre a través del pequeño espacio que he creado entre las tablas del suelo y comienzo a buscar.

Sigo sosteniendo la respiración hasta que siento las tres piezas planas de metal frío apiladas una sobre otra.

Usando mis garras nuevamente, las recojo con cuidado para no dejarlas caer porque ya lo he hecho y el sonido que hacen atraería a todos.

Poco a poco, bajo la tabla del suelo de nuevo, sintiéndome un poco menos tenso porque creo que están lo suficientemente borrachas ahí abajo como para que ni siquiera recuerden que estoy aquí arriba.

Me quedo arrodillado en el suelo, mirando la única águila de oro y las dos águilas dobles descansando en mi palma.

Es extraño pensar que estas tres monedas representan todo por lo que he estado trabajando durante los últimos dos años.

Cincuenta dólares, y si Jack realmente sabe lo que hace, es suficiente para sacarme de aquí.

La puerta se abre de golpe y doy un salto en el aire, aunque esté de rodillas.

"¡Jesús!"

Consigo cerrar mi mano a tiempo para que las monedas no salgan rodando por el suelo, apretándolas contra mi pecho mientras me congelo en el lugar.

"Sammy, deja de esconderte aquí arriba, baja... ¿qué estás haciendo?"

Todavía no he mirado hacia atrás, sosteniendo ambas manos contra mi pecho mientras intento controlar mi respiración.

"Uh... estoy rezando."

Miro hacia atrás y veo a Cynthia mirándome como si no me creyera en absoluto.

"¿Tú rezas?"

"¡Claro que rezo!"

"Bueno, me refiero al tipo de rezar de rodillas y juntar las manos hacia el cielo."

Suspiro, tratando de sonar molesto, aunque solo tengo miedo de que vea lo que estoy haciendo.

Pongo un pie en el suelo bajo mí, y mientras me levanto y me giro hacia Cynthia, deslizo las monedas lo más suavemente posible en mi bolsillo derecho.

Cynthia frunce el ceño cuando me giro para mirarla.

"¿Estás bien, Sam? Pareces un poco alterado."

Gracias a Dios, la chica de alguna manera no se dio cuenta, y finalmente siento que mi corazón empieza a calmarse un poco.

Me cruzo de brazos, frunciendo el ceño.

"Bueno, es porque entraste aquí sin ni siquiera tocar."

"Lo siento, simplemente se me olvidó. Las otras chicas y yo no lo hacemos."

Creo que la verdadera razón es que está un poco ebria por beber en el salón con las demás.

"Lo recordaré la próxima vez. De todos modos, baja, ¡todos nos estamos divirtiendo mucho!"

Suspiro y niego con la cabeza.

"No esta noche."

Cynthia suspira.

"Oh, deja de estar siempre tan deprimido. Además, estamos, eh, hablando de ti..."

Eso llama mi atención.

"¿Por qué?"

"Bueno, ya sabes, hay un armiño en el pueblo. Viene de Batavia y al parecer ha hecho una cita aquí."

Cynthia salta emocionada, con las manos en el hocico.

"¿Y qué?"

"Oh, Sam. Como dije, es de Batavia, y... hizo la cita contigo."

Me erizo.

"¿Cómo lo sabes?"

"Bueno, {i}yo{/i} no miré la lista. Jamás lo haría... pero Gabriel sí."

Cynthia sonríe de nuevo, y yo presiono mis manos contra la cara, suspirando de frustración.

"¿Sabes cuántos problemas podrías tener por eso? Me harías perder todo mi negocio si se enteraran de que ustedes están husmeando a mis clientes."

Aunque ya no importa.

"De nuevo, no fui yo quien lo hizo, y fue algo único para ver quién iba a atender al armiño. No esperábamos que fueras tú."

"Eso no lo hace correcto."

"No, no lo hace."

"Ahora baja."

Suspiro.

"No, me voy a pasar la noche fuera. Esta habitación está demasiado sofocante. Creo que el aire de la noche me hará bien."

Cynthia me lanza una mirada, una que he visto más veces de las que puedo contar.

"Está bien, pero deberías intentar dejarte ver más a menudo; ese es el primer paso para construir tu clientela."

Me lo dice como si no lo hubiera escuchado mil veces antes... pero nuevamente, ya no importa.

"Sabes que los míos son diferentes. Me encuentran a {i}mí{/i}."

Me doy cuenta de que estoy cansando a Cynthia, y en su estado animado, se rinde más rápido de lo normal.

"Bueno, yo vuelvo abajo. Siempre eres bienvenido a unirte. Créelo o no, a la mayoría de nosotros nos caes bien."

"Sí, sí..."

Cuando está a punto de doblar la esquina, de repente recuerdo que esta podría ser la última vez que la vea.

"¡Y gracias!"

Lo suelto torpemente, no estoy acostumbrado a decirlo.

Y Cynthia no está acostumbrada a escucharlo, por la forma cómo se asoma alrededor del marco de la puerta, con una expresión de confusión.

"Sí, no te preocupes. ¿Estás bien, Sam?"

Me maldigo a mí mismo por sonar tan sospechoso, pero mantengo la cara seria y me encojo de hombros.

"Como dije, está sofocante aquí, me hace sentir como si estuviera volviéndome loco... pero gracias por hacer un esfuerzo."

"Claro, Sam. Cuídate en esas calles."

"Lo haré."

Cynthia desaparece detrás del marco de la puerta, y me doy cuenta de que me entristece verla irse.

Ella es una de las pocas personas que voy a extrañar aquí, además de algunos de mis clientes.

Meto las pocas prendas y pertenencias que tengo en una vieja mochila que encontré al borde de la carretera hace unos meses.

Echó un último vistazo a mi habitación, contento por una vez de no tener mucho.

Esto hará mucho más fácil lo que estoy a punto de hacer.

Con eso, bajo cuidadosamente las escaleras, escuchando a mis compañeros de trabajo mientras doblo la esquina y salgo por la salida trasera a través de la cocina vacía.

Es esa hora de la noche en la que las multitudes típicas del día son reemplazadas por las multitudes típicas de la noche.

Hombres hablan y gritan en pequeños grupos frente a los salones que no respetan la Ley Dominical.

Las prostitutas se paran en callejones y entradas, esperando a que cualquiera de los hombres ebrios que deambulan por las calles las note.

Los más bajo de lo bajo, y aunque haya conseguido encontrar un lugar en el burdel más respetable del pueblo, sigo sintiéndome como una de ellas.

Camino deprisa por las calles, con la cabeza baja, y las manos en los bolsillos, como siempre.

Normalmente evito que la atención se centre en mí, incluso con mi pelaje blanco que llama la atención.

Levanto la vista algunas veces, tratando de asegurarme de que voy en la dirección correcta, no estoy acostumbrado a esta parte del pueblo.

Jack quería que lo encontrara cerca de la mina, ya que al parecer necesita mi ayuda con algo antes de que abordemos el tren de medianoche.

Siento un pequeño estremecimiento en el pecho ante la idea de que, al amanecer, Echo estará muy atrás.

En camino a una vida en la costa oeste donde puedo empezar de nuevo de la manera correcta.

De hecho, tengo que contenerme para no saltar, emocionado por primera vez desde que comencé a planear todo esto.

Aún me siento culpable por dejar a todos atrás; a Madame Dora por darme un lugar donde quedarme y trabajar, a William y Nik por escucharme, a Cynthia por ser una amiga...

Pero todos tienen su oportunidad de salir de este pueblo algún día, y esta es la mía.

Si dejas pasar esa oportunidad, entonces la pierdes... luego quedas atrapado.

Al menos eso es lo que me han dicho de este lugar.

Cierto o no, yo no voy a perder la mía.

Los edificios se vuelven menos a medida que me acerco a la mina, el camino de tierra cada vez más difícil de distinguir del desierto cubierto de arbustos.

Pero me siento mejor lejos de la luz y de la gente.

Me hace sentir protegido de alguna manera.

Pero hay una pequeña luz frente a mí, y sé de inmediato que es Jack con su lámpara, justo donde dijo que estaría.

Siento un gran alivio, ya que hasta ese momento sospechaba que me habían engañado.

Solo había conocido a este hombre durante una semana, y se me acercó con la idea de unir nuestras fortunas y escapar hacia la costa.

Así que verlo ahora con su lámpara de gas en alto, una sonrisa en la cara... realmente va a suceder.

Su expresión es contagiosa, así que sonrío tímidamente, levantando una mano.

"Jack."

"¡Hola, Sam! ¿Cómo estás esta noche?"

"Mejor ahora que estoy fuera de ese agujero."

El hombre mayor me golpea fuerte en la espalda, y aunque es mucho más pequeño y menos musculoso que yo, casi me hace tropezar.

"¡Y no tendrás que volver nunca más! ¿Cómo se siente eso?"

Respiro profundamente.

"Bien, creo. Realmente no lo sé aún."

"Es normal. Lo he hecho algunas veces yo mismo. ¡Esperemos que esta sea la última vez ahora que tengo un compañero!"

La mano que tengo en mi espalda me rodea por el costado y me abraza.

Siento que mis ánimos se elevan un poco.

Si este hombre siempre es tan amable, tal vez nuestra pequeña "asociación" funcione después de todo.

Aunque solo había sido mi cliente dos veces en la última semana, habíamos hablado de cosas más personales que cualquiera de mis clientes, incluyendo a William.

Era comprensivo, ingenioso y, además, bueno en lo que hacíamos antes de hablar.

Incluso me enseñó algunos trucos que ayudarían a que mis otros clientes volvieran.

"Así que, ¿tienes todas tus cosas?"

"Sí."

Me giro para mostrarle la mochila vieja en mi espalda.

"¿No llevas mucho? No te preocupes, construiremos una vida para ti lo suficientemente pronto. ¿Y el dinero?"

Hago una pausa, casi entrando en pánico porque olvidé por un segundo dónde puse las monedas, luego meto una mano en mi bolsillo y las saco.

Jack levanta la lámpara, examinando el águila y las dos águilas dobles descansando en mi mano.

Silba.

"Hace tiempo que no veo un doble, ¡y mucho menos dos! ¡Buen trabajo, chico!"

Me vuelve a golpear y tengo que cerrar los dedos rápidamente para evitar que se caigan.

Las devuelvo a mi bolsillo, hurgando con mis dedos para asegurarme de que no hay agujeros.

Al mismo tiempo, miro al cielo, calculando que probablemente son alrededor de las nueve de la noche.

Eso nos daría unas horas antes de que pase el tren, aunque quiero estar allí lo antes posible para no perderlo.

A pesar del alivio que acabo de sentir, el pensamiento de subir al tren pronto me pone nervioso de nuevo.

La última vez que lo hice, casi me caigo a las vías.

"Así que, ¿en qué necesitabas ayuda?"

"Bueno—"

Jack pone su mano libre en su cadera, sonriendo de nuevo.

"—He dado un gran golpe en la mina."

Frunzo el ceño.

"¿Qué?"

"¡Samuel, encontré oro en la mina!"

Miro a Jack, confundido.

"¿Cómo?"

Hasta donde yo sé, necesitas... cosas, maquinaria o algo así para sacar el oro.

¿Cómo es que Jack tenía todo eso para él solo?

Se acerca más.

"Mira, esto es lo que quería contarte. Yo no lo excavé. Alguien dejó un poco de oro en unos sacos que ya habían extraído."

Sigo mirando, casi sin creer lo que estoy escuchando.

"¡Lo sé! Parece que ha estado allí mucho tiempo. Está en una parte de la mina a la que ya nadie va. Creo que simplemente las olvidaron en su día."

Jack comienza a caminar por el camino, hacia la mina, y me quedo mirándolo por unos segundos antes de comenzar a seguirlo rápidamente, tratando de encontrar palabras que decir.

"Pero... pero... ¿cómo alguien puede olvidar algo así?"

Veo los hombros huesudos de Jack subir y bajar encogiéndose de hombros.

"¿¡Quién demonios lo sabe!? Pero escucha, hay un saco de eso. Creo que es suficiente para, bueno... permitirnos vivir ricos el resto de nuestras vidas. REALMENTE ricos."

Estoy en silencio, atónito.

No puedo creer lo que acabo de escuchar.

¿Cómo es posible?

Jack acaba de decirme que encontró algo que podría cambiar completamente mi vida.

No solo irme a la costa, sino mudarme allí y vivir rico.

Es algo que ni siquiera había considerado.

Me quedo en silencio hasta que Jack gira a la izquierda, fuera del sendero y se adentra en los arbustos, aunque la entrada de la mina está a 30 metros delante de nosotros.

Me quedo de pie en el camino por unos segundos, mirando de un lado a otro entre él y la mina.

"¿Jack?"

"¡Vamos, muchacho! No tenemos mucho tiempo."

Dudo, luego me fuerzo a avanzar, maldiciendo mientras comienzo a pisar las piedras afiladas escondidas bajo las artemisas.

"¿A dónde vas?"

"Ya verás—"

Jack comienza a subir por la ladera de la gran colina a la que está unida la entrada de la mina, el suelo inclinado aumenta la dificultad de caminar a ciegas.

"Aún hay mineros en el camino principal de la mina, a pesar de que es domingo. Por eso lo dejé allí hasta ahora; lo vamos a agarrar y salir del pueblo antes de que alguien pueda poner sus sucias manos en él."

"Oh."

Tengo que jalar mi cola cuando queda atrapada entre las ramas de un arbusto, provocándome gruñir.

"¿Está lejos?"

"Está aquí mismo."

Jack se gira hacia una pequeña saliente de rocas en la ladera de la colina, casi oculta por los arbustos que la rodea.

Deja la lámpara en la base de las rocas, luego comienza a saltar para tratar de subir por una de ellas.

"Aquí."

Me subo fácilmente a la roca, y Jack se ríe mientras levanta la lámpara hacia mí.

"Me estoy volviendo demasiado viejo para hacer cualquier cosa en estos días."

"Ahora sé que eso no es cierto."

Coloco la lámpara a mi lado antes de agacharme para levantar a Jack por la mano.

Me da otra palmada en la espalda antes de agarrar la lámpara y darse la vuelta.

Detrás de las rocas hay una pequeña caída que conduce a lo que parece ser una pequeña fisura en la ladera de la colina.

"¿Qué es esto?"

Jack sonríe a la luz de la lámpara.

"Pequeña entrada secreta."

"¿Cómo diablos la encontraste?"

Jack solo había estado trabajando en las minas por unas semanas, ¿y ya había logrado descubrir todo esto?

"Algunos de los demás lo saben, solo tuve que hablar con ellos."

Jack deja la lámpara en la saliente de la roca antes de deslizarse hacia el espacio pequeño, dando la vuelta y alcanzándome de nuevo para que le baje la lámpara.

Me deslizo después de él y siento de inmediato una ráfaga de aire fresco y rancio que sale del interior de la abertura.

Se siente muy bien comparado con el calor que hace afuera.

Cuando miro hacia el pequeño túnel que tenemos delante, empiezo a sentirme un poco más inseguro de lo que está sucediendo aquí.

Pero Jack sigue adelante, confiado como siempre.

Así que lo sigo.

"Cuidado con tu cabeza, Sam. Eres lo suficientemente grande como para llevarte un golpe desde arriba."

Hago lo que dice, mirando hacia arriba y agachándome bajo las grietas del techo que bajan de vez en cuando.

Llegamos a una desviación en el túnel, y Jack va directamente a la izquierda.

Entonces vamos a la izquierda, luego a la derecha, luego...

"Oye, ¿sabes dónde estamos? Podríamos perdernos—"

"Sé EXACTAMENTE dónde estamos. No te preocupes por eso, lindo gatito."

Todavía tiene ese tono alegre en su voz, pero me está poniendo un poco nervioso considerando el tipo de situación en la que estamos.

Aun así, no duda en ninguna de las desviaciones del túnel, así que tengo que asumir que sabe lo que está haciendo.

Después de todo, trabaja aquí.

Los túneles son mucho más estrechos de lo que siempre imaginé, y me pregunto si no será por esta parte concreta de la mina.

Nik definitivamente no podría pasar por algunos de estos pasajes.

Jack se detiene bruscamente y casi choco con él.

Está parado frente a una pequeña abertura en la pared, incluso más pequeña que por la que entramos.

Sin aliento levanta la lámpara hacia ella, casi como si fuera sagrada o algo así.

"Aquí está, Sam... aquí está."

Su emoción me está contagiando un poco también, pero observo la oscura abertura con el ceño fruncido.

"No creo que vaya a pasar por ahí."

"Es del mismo tamaño todo el camino. Pasarás, pero tendrás que girar esos hombros grandes de lado."

Se levanta y me da palmaditas en el pecho antes de pasar la abertura, pudiendo hacerlo sin tener que girarse.

Me deslizo a través de la abertura, teniendo cuidado de no rasparme con ninguna de las partes que sobresalen de las paredes.

Este túnel es mucho más corto, gracias a Dios, pero el aire se vuelve denso, mucho más húmedo, y ahora creo completamente a Jack que esto es alguna parte abandonada de la mina, probablemente desde cuando la empezaron.

La luz de la lámpara de gas desaparece por un momento cuando me doy cuenta de que Jack ha llegado al otro lado, y es entonces cuando paso, finalmente pudiendo respirar tranquilo en el espacio más amplio en el que entramos.

Mirando a mi alrededor, es solo un hueco pequeño, más pequeño que el tamaño de mi habitación.

Hay algunas cosas tiradas por ahí; una pala y un pico contra la pared, lo que parece ser una taza de hojalata en la esquina, y finalmente algunos sacos en el extremo más alejado del hueco, parecen estar llenos y torcidos.

Me doy cuenta de que Jack está respirando agitadamente, y considerando que no nos estábamos esforzando realmente en absoluto, solo puedo imaginar que es de la emoción.

"Ahí..."

Jack señala los sacos, y puedo ver que incluso su mano tiembla.

Trago saliva y comienzo a moverme hacia los sacos.

"¿De verdad? ¿Están todos llenos?"

Son del tamaño de mi cabeza, y parece imposible que todo eso pueda ser oro.

"¡Sí! Mira dentro."

Dejo salir una pequeña risa que simplemente sale de mí, porque todavía no puedo creer nada de esto.

Al menos no hasta que lo vea.

Así que me agacho frente a uno de los sacos, agarrando la abertura y la abro para mirar dentro.

... piedras.

Las miro entrecerrando los ojos, preguntándome si tal vez el oro está atrapado dentro de ellas o algo así.

Eso explicaría la cantidad ridícula, pero no veo nada que brille.

Empiezo a pedirle a Jack que acerque la lámpara.

"Oye, ¿puedes—"

Una explosión estalla en mi cabeza.

Sacude todo mi cuerpo, todo mi mundo.

Todo se detiene y no puedo pensar.

En realidad, soy consciente de una cosa, y son mis dientes chocando entre sí como si alguien acabara de golpearme en la barbilla.

Pero no viene de delante... sino de atrás.

Luego el mundo vuelve a mí, y me doy cuenta de que todavía estoy agachado sobre el saco, pero mis hombros están contraídos, mi cabeza inclinada hacia atrás como si tuviera calambres en el cuello.

Jadeo muy fuerte, como si me estuviera ahogando, y llevo lentamente mis manos hasta donde ocurrió esa explosión.

Se dirigen automáticamente a la nuca, entre el cuello y el cráneo.

Me quedo ahí por un segundo, confundido, preguntándome si algo cayó del techo mientras sigo mirando la bolsa.

"¡Eres un gran hijo de puta!"

Luego otra explosión, un poco más fuerte, de modo que golpea mi cabeza y mis manos.

Esta vez, siento que mi cuerpo se pone rígido de la manera más extraña, mis piernas se enderezan, lo que me empuja lejos del saco y caigo sobre mi espalda, entonces veo mis brazos que sobresalen, manos que se extienden hacia el techo...

...

...

...

"—como una maldita casa de ladrillos!"

Parpadeo confundido al cielo, preguntándome por qué está tan amarillo y sucio...

Sigo parpadeando, esperando a que vuelva a ser azul, o negro con estrellas... sea la hora que sea.

Puedo escuchar a alguien a mi lado, moviéndose, luego siento algo en mi cadera, alguien jala de mis pantalones.

"¿Dónde los pusiste?"

Murmura sobre mí, y reconozco la voz como la de Jack, pero qué está haciendo Jack...

La mina.

Pongo mi mano para tapar mi bolsillo, tratando de preguntarle qué diablos está haciendo, pero todo lo que sale es un gemido confuso que no suena a mí en absoluto.

"No, no. ¡Quita las manos o te volveré a golpear!"

Tardo un segundo, pero logro enfocarme en el hombre más pequeño inclinándose sobre mí, una mano buscando en mi bolsillo mientras la otra sostiene una pala.

Empiezo a preguntar nuevamente qué está haciendo, pero luego su mano se retira de la mía, y suelta una pequeña carcajada tan fuerte y aguda que me hace estremecer.

"¡Jaja! ¡Ahí están!"

No puedo ver lo que tiene, pero escucho el tintineo de las monedas... y todo vuelve a mí en una cascada de confusión, dolor y, sobre todo, rabia.

Me lanzo y agarro su brazo, pero no puedo mientras una ola de dolor enfermizo me recorra la cabeza y la espalda.

Me esquiva fácilmente.

"¡Abajo, gatito! No quiero, pero te daré otro si no te quedas en el suelo."

El hombre se aleja hacia su lámpara mientras yo sigo sentado, poniendo una mano en la nuca con un gruñido.

Su sombra bloquea la luz, y me doy cuenta exactamente de lo que Jack está haciendo.

Va a intentar dejarme aquí, perdido en las minas mientras se escapa con mi dinero, todo lo que tengo.

Un gruñido sale de mi garganta y, casi sin pensarlo, salto hacia él, justo cuando está a punto de recoger su lámpara.

Mis manos golpean su espalda, justo entre sus omóplatos.

Como mencione varias veces, soy mucho más grande que él, y cae como una cerilla rota, con el abdomen en el suelo.

"¡Unfh!"

Lo escucho perder el aliento y antes de que pueda hacer algo más, golpeo su rostro con el puño tan fuerte como puedo, cuatro o cinco veces.

Grita después del primero, pero se calla después del tercero, contrayéndose debajo de mí.

Me quedo ahí encima de él, jadeando por aire, todavía preguntándome qué diablos acaba de pasar.

Mientras miro a Jack, sus párpados agitados y la sangre que sale de su boca, me doy cuenta de lo estúpido que soy.

Tan malditamente estúpido.

La mayoría de la gente lo habría visto esto venir, pero pensé que conocía a Jack...

...al menos tanto como puedes conocer a una persona en una semana.

La idea de tanto oro, de vivir rico... me había cegado por completo.

Jack comienza a quejarse más fuerte y a moverse más, así que me acerco a su mano derecha y la abro a la fuerza y agarro mis monedas.

Las aprieto contra mi pecho mientras me levanto, sintiendo una oleada repentina de mareo mientras lo hago.

Tropiezo con la abertura y me apoyo en ella por un momento, recuperando el aliento, esperando a que mis ojos borrosos se enfoquen.

El agudo dolor en mi cabeza se ha ido ahora, reemplazado por una profunda punzada que va desde la parte posterior de mi cuello hasta la parte posterior de mis ojos.

Levanto la mano para frotarla de nuevo y mi mano sale húmeda y ensangrentada.

Empiezo a preocuparme de que puedo estar más herido de lo que pensaba.

Necesito ayuda, que alguien me revise, pero primero necesito encontrar la salida de esta maldita mina.

Empiezo a moverme de nuevo a través de la abertura, pero luego recuerdo que necesito la lámpara.

Me doy la vuelta y encuentro a Jack ya de pie, acercándose a mí, a solo metro y medio, esta vez con el pico en sus manos.

Aturdido, me pregunto si es el sonido pulsante en mis oídos lo que me impidió escucharlo, pero no tengo tiempo para pensar en nada más mientras se lanza hacia mí, empujando la cabeza del pico hacia mi cara.

Esta vez no dice nada, sólo grita.

Me tenso y levanto las manos, pero también dejo que mis pies se salgan de debajo de mí, y eso es lo que me salva cuando caigo fuertemente para atrás y escucho el metal golpear la dura pared de la cueva detrás de mí.

La caída me produce una ola de dolor en la cabeza tan fuerte que casi vomito, pero luego veo a Jack levantando el pico por encima de su cabeza, listo para enterrarlo en mi cara.

Me va a matar.

Incluso después de lo que ha sucedido, encuentro eso casi imposible de creer.

Pero ahí está frente a mí, el hombre que pensé que era mi amigo perfilado por la tenue luz de la lámpara, los músculos bajo su pelaje apretándose, un gruñido de furia en su rostro.

Grito, levantando mis manos para protegerme, las monedas caen al suelo cuando la idea de ser atravesado con un pico me llena de miedo como nunca lo he conocido.

"¡No! ¡NO!"

Mientras lo levanta, golpea contra el techo del hueco, y Jack comienza a ajustar el ángulo del pico.

Sé que es mi única oportunidad, y me impulso desde el suelo hacia él, corriendo hacia él mientras agarro su arma.

Él entra en pánico y golpea demasiado tarde, el mango de madera aterrizando débilmente contra mis antebrazos mientras yo levanto y agarro el pico.

Ambos gruñimos mientras lo inmovilizo contra la pared, mantengo el arma por encima de su cabeza con ambas manos, tratando quitársela de las manos.

Sin embargo, tiene el pico bien agarrado, al menos hasta que retira su mano derecha para intentar golpear mi costado.

Estoy tan tenso por la rabia y el miedo que no siento nada y con una de sus manos fuera, puedo arrebatárselo.

Me tambaleo hacia atrás mientras él se cae.

Él me mira.

Nuestros ojos se encuentran.

Levanto la cabeza del pico y lo estrello contra su frente tan fuerte como puedo.

El sonido es profundo y repugnante, como el hielo rompiéndose en un río congelado.

Cuando aparto el pico, su expresión es completamente diferente, sus ojos están vacíos y distantes.

Se queda quieto un momento y, de repente su cuerpo se contrae y se pone recto antes de deslizarse hacia un lado por la pared para acostarse boca arriba.

Veo que sus manos se cierran en puños, subiéndose al pecho antes de soltar un gran suspiro.

Luego deja de respirar por completo.

Lo miró fijamente, mi pecho agitado, el pico colgando en mi mano mientras espero.

"¿Jack?"

Él no se mueve, en absoluto.

Por su aspecto, sé que está muerto.

Sigo mirando, mi mente aun tratando de entender cómo llegué aquí desde hace solo diez minutos.

Pero no importa cuánto mire, nada cambia frente a mí.

Jack está muerto en el suelo.

Siento un escalofrío recorrer mi espina dorsal, y hay una sensación de temor que parece comenzar a ascender desde la Tierra hacia mis piernas y hasta mi estómago.

No sé por qué, pero siento que me están observando.

Como si... acabara de despertar algo y ahora me está mirando.

Dejo caer el pico y me alejo de Jack, mis nervios fallándome, incapaz de agacharme para comprobar si realmente está muerto.

A pesar de todo lo que he pasado, nunca he visto a nadie muerto antes.

Tembloroso, me doy la vuelta, mirando alrededor.

Necesito tomar mi dinero y largarme de aquí.

Si me atrapan así... los hombres de aquí no necesitarán muchas más razones para colgar a un puto como yo.

Extiendo la mano hacia la lámpara que ha estado sentada en el suelo tranquilamente todo este tiempo.

Todavía estoy inestable, tembloroso, así que cuando intento levantar el asa de alambre, la derribo por completo.

Instantáneamente, la llama se apaga.

Miro en estado de shock la repentina y completa oscuridad antes de buscar torpemente la lámpara, como si levantarla volviera a encenderla.

En cambio, solo toco el cristal caliente, haciéndome gritar al quemarme las yemas de mi dedo índice y medio.

La forma de la llama ahora muerta graba, grabada a fuego en mi visión es lo único que puedo ver ahora.

"No... no, no, no, no."

Susurro en la oscuridad, dándome cuenta de repente de lo profundo que estoy metido en todo esto.

No conozco el camino de salida para empezar, y ahora sin luz...

Intento mantener la calma, tragando saliva.

Sé que justo enfrente de mí está la abertura que lleva de nuevo a las minas principales.

Jack había dicho algo sobre otros que conocían este lugar... tal vez podría encontrarme con alguien, o simplemente encontrar mi camino hacia afuera.

Camino cuidadosamente hacia adelante, estirando las manos hasta encontrar la pared.

Desde ahí, tanteo hasta que encuentro la pequeña abertura que conduce a los túneles principales.

Sabiendo que dejé caer las monedas aquí, me pongo de rodillas y comienzo a buscarlas.

"Por favor... por favor, déjame encontrarlas..."

Me susurro a mí mismo, a Dios, a la nada... rogando que mis manos sientan el metal frío.

No puedo llevar más de un minuto buscando cuando algo sube repentinamente por mi espina dorsal, como un dedo que me recorre por mi espalda.

Luego, una respiración en mi oído.

Dejo escapar un grito involuntario, girándome boca arriba y retrocediendo hasta chocar con la pared, con una vara de dolor clavada en el cerebro.

"¿J-Jack?"

Miro con los ojos bien abiertos hacia la oscuridad, al lugar donde lo dejé, escuchando, con el corazón a punto de salirse de mi pecho.

Nunca he tenido más miedo en toda mi vida.

Algo se mueve en el hueco conmigo, más a la derecha de donde estoy mirando.

Me tenso, con las orejas pegadas a la cabeza.

"¿Jack?"

Vuelvo a llamar, realmente esperando que el hombre todavía esté vivo, que esto no sea algo más, sea lo que sea.

Porque parece otra cosa.

Pasan unos instantes de silencio, empiezo a darme la vuelta, y es entonces cuando siento algo inclinarse sobre mi hombro.

Grito de una manera que nunca lo he hecho antes, arañando la pared frente a mí, tratando desesperadamente de encontrar la abertura.

Cuando lo hago, me fuerzo a través de ella, mis hombros raspándose dolorosamente contra las paredes.

No entiendo.

No entiendo.

Algo viene atrás de mí a través de la pequeña grieta, y no es Jack, definitivamente no es Jack.

Salgo al otro lado, mi cara chocando con la dura pared de tierra del túnel más grande, mi cabeza retrocediendo y dejando mi nariz ardiendo.

Tropiezo hacia mi derecha, en la dirección de la que sé que venimos.

Nunca he tenido problemas para ver en la oscuridad, pero esto es oscuridad total, y no hay nada para que pueda ver.

"¡AYUDA! ¡ALGUIEN, AYÚDENME!"

Ya no me importa que puedan atraparme.

Solo necesito salir de aquí.

Mis manos giran salvajemente, sintiendo las paredes, tanteando hacia adelante.

Ya no puedo escuchar la cosa detrás de mí, pero eso no importa.

Acabo de matar a un hombre, y algo que no puedo explicar sucedió justo después, y simplemente no puedo entender.

Choco con otra pared con fuerza, y elijo al azar la siguiente dirección, dirigiéndome hacia la derecha nuevamente, aún a tientas con mis manos destrozadas.

Finalmente, mis instintos me alcanzan, y me obligo a desacelerar, a dejar de hacer tanto maldito ruido para poder escuchar.

Hay silencio, lo que sea que me estuviera siguiendo ya no lo está... o simplemente está demasiado lejos.

Pero mientras escucho, oigo algo lejos por donde he venido.

Un sonido entrecortado, rítmico, profundo y rasposo... no sé qué es.

Aumenta de volumen, y me presiono contra la pared, con las manos en el hocico para evitar respirar demasiado fuerte.

Está lejos, pero cada vez es más fuerte que resuena en el túnel.

Luego el silencio...

Me doy cuenta entonces de que estoy llorando e intento de callar los sollozos que se agolpan en mi pecho.

No recuerdo la última vez que lloré.

Estoy congelado.

Sé que eso no es Jack.

Jack está muerto, y algo más estuvo en ese hueco conmigo.

I just turn away from where the noise came from and start moving again.

I'm walking this time, and even though the tears keep running down my face, I'm at least quiet.

The complete, overwhelming fear has settled into a dull, almost numb feeling in my chest.

I aimlessly walk left and right each time I feel a new passage open up with my paws.

While the sounds go away, the feeling that something is watching me never does.

I think I wander for a few hours...maybe more.

It's hard to keep track of time when everything's black.

But I must have gone all night, because what saves me is the sight of light pouring through the end of a long tunnel.

The one we came through.

I move toward it on instinct, not even really feeling all that excited to see it.

I'm relieved, but it's numbed, just like the fear.

I carefully scramble up the boulders and out into the early morning, the sun just barely rising.

All the better that I'm getting out before the town really starts to wake up.

I slide over the boulder to the ground, my button-up and undershirt riding up as I do, and I feel the rough rock scratch through my fur to my stomach and chest.

I lean there a moment, feeling the corners of my muzzle dip down as my body starts to try and cry again, but I stop myself.

I don't cry anymore, and I can't cry now.

People might see, they might suspect something.

So, with a deep breath, I turn around and start walking along the incline of the hill, toward the road to the main entrance of the mine.

Once I get there, I start making my way back to the saloon, my feet kicking up dust as I can barely pick them up at this point.

Ahead of me, I see someone walking up the road, a big guy, and it's only then that my stupid head realizes that being seen right now would be very, very bad.

But he's already seen me, and I recognize him at the same time he recognizes me.

He actually stops in his tracks just to stare at me.

I stop too, unsure of what he's about to do.

Then he jogs the rest of way, surprise on his face.

"Samuel? What are you doing?"

Then I see his eyes really widen up as he gets a good look at me.

"What happened!?"

"I..."

I'm still numb, even though I realize this is real bad, having Nik see me like this after what I just did.

"...fell down."

"Fell down."

Nik repeats the words, as if he's showing me just how stupid they sound.

I look down at my shirt and see that it's covered in drops of dried blood.

I reach up and brush the back of my paw across my nose, and the white fur comes back with crusted flakes of more blood.

I hear Nik gasp as I'm looking down, and he grabs me by the shoulder and turns me sideways.

"Dear God..."

"What?"

"Your head, it's busted all open."

I reach back and all I feel is crusted up fur.

Nik pushes my paw away.

"No, no. You need to see a doctor."

"I don't have money for a doctor."

"Then I will help you see one."

"You don't got money either."

"I know others with money. Who beat you?"

I take a deep breath, staring down at the ground, knowing that I need to get back to the saloon before someone else sees me.

"Just some asshole on the street...I dunno who."

"Did he beat you because of your work? What did he look like?"

The badger's grip on my shoulder tightens.

It's not often I see him angry.

Still, I gotta get back.

I pull away from his paw, moving up the road.

"I...I need to go wash up. I can tell you more later."

"Samuel."

"Sorry, but I gotta go. Just...come see me at the saloon sometime."

Nik stays silent as he watches me walk off, and it's right then that I remember I still got my knapsack on, something I hadn't noticed all that time in the cave.

I can only imagine it makes me look even more suspicious.

I decide to stay behind the buildings on my way back, and it does a good job of hiding me from almost everyone who's up this early.

I reach the saloon, walking up to the back entrance.

I stand at the door for about a minute, listening, but it's completely silent.

Hopefully, the girls turned in after their night of drinking.

I open the door quietly, glad to see the place completely empty.

On my way through the kitchen, I grab the smallest bottle of Old Rye Whiskey that I can find, just hoping that it won't be missed and, if it is, that it'll be blamed on someone else.

As I move up the stairs as quietly as I can, I do hear some low murmuring coming from one of the girl's rooms, but I'm quiet enough on my feet that I'm sure they don't hear me.

I finally get to my own room and open the door, wincing as it makes the usual creaking sound that it always does, hoping to God that Cynthia isn't up to hear it.

I stand in my room for a while, just staring, wondering how I got myself into this mess, at the same time realizing it's all my own damn fault.

I finally manage to make my way to the dresser, looking at myself in the mirror.

About as bad I thought:

White fur mussed up everywhere, stained pinkish-red down my nose and chin, my right eye swelled up a bit.

I can't see the back of my head, but when I turn it this way and that, I can tell from a few glances that it's a disaster back there.

I strip down and go about cleaning myself up, using my cup and drinking water barrel to pour water on my already-bloody shirt which I use to wipe up my fur.

When I get to the back of my head, I can feel the skin moving around in ways that I'm not used to, and I wonder if Nik was right that I should see a doctor and get stitched up...maybe after I've slept.

For now, I settle for opening the whiskey bottle and taking several swigs before pouring it on my shirt and pressing that to the back of my head.

My vision flashes white and I suck air hard through my teeth, screwing up my face as I try not to scream.

I do it a few more times until I just can't stand the pain anymore, dropping the shirt to side of the dresser and finally stumbling to my bed, carefully laying face-first on my pillow.

The warmth of the alcohol in my stomach dulls the aches in my body, and gratefully, I'm able to fall asleep.

I'm back in the hollow, laying flat on my back, staring into the dark.

My face feels strange over my forehead and eyes, like it's caved in.

I know I'm not alone because I can hear the whispers and slithering sounds in the mine.

Something's been woken up, and it's restless.

I feel something grab me, long, slender paws, fingers that grip into my clothes and roll me over.

It crawls up my legs, sliding over my rear and back where it sits and chatters to itself.

Then, I feel it lean over and lock its teeth into the back of my head.

It bites hard, crushing my skull and piercing my brain.

Pain explodes in my head as I hear a high-pitched scream.

"SAMUEL!"

I jolt awake in my bed, pulling my face away from the pillow, damp with my own saliva and streaked here and there with dark, red blood.

"Whu—?"

"OH MY GOD! He's alive!"

I hear movement behind me and I look back to see Cynthia standing there, both paws to her mouth, the other girls showing up behind her to stare into my room.

"Sam, what happened!?"

My head hurts way more than it did when I went to sleep, and I find myself just staring at them in confusion, vaguely embarrassed that I'm naked in front of all these females.

Then, I dry-heave and alcohol and bile comes up to splatter on my pillow and onto the hardwood floor.

This earns a few more screams from the girls before a much taller, older doe pushes through them.

Madam Dora stands in the doorway for a moment, taking in the scene before she shoos the girls away.

I have just enough time to see Cynthia, her eyes filled with tears before the door shuts on her.

Without any hesitation at all, Madam Dora walks over to gently pull me up into a sitting position.

The room spins for a minute, and I have to shut my eyes tight to keep myself from throwing up again.

The deer cups my face delicately, turning my head just slightly back and forth as she examines it.

"You should have come to me immediately, Sam."

I don't know what to say, so I keep quiet.

The older woman glances over at the dresser, seeing the whiskey bottle there.

I wonder if I'm gonna get in even more trouble, but she just shakes her head.

"You know, it's also my job to keep you healthy. Whiskey isn't going to fix something like this. CYNTHIA!"

The loud voice makes me flinch, anything loud is making me flinch, actually.

The door immediately cracks open and the fox pokes her muzzle through, making me realize that they're all probably just pressed to the door right now, listening.

"Y-yes Madam?"

"Stop that crying and get dressed. Run to Dr. Avery's. Tell him to come as soon as he can."

"Yes Madam!"

Cynthia disappears again while the Madam looks over the rest of my naked body, checking for any other signs of injury before she looks back up at me.

"Who did this?"

I glance down at the sheets, but she grabs my chin and gently, but firmly pulls me back to look at her.

"My job is also to keep you safe. Be honest with me. I do not care who it is."

Her soft brown eyes look right into mine, and I swallow.

"I—I was just having a walk through the streets...couple of men came up behind me and bashed my head. I didn't see them."

Madam Dora looks at me for a while longer, and I think she probably doesn't believe me.

She lets go though, and I immediately look back down into my lap, deciding to pull the corner of one of the sheets up so that I can at least cover myself up a little.

"You should never go out alone without telling anybody, Sam. You know this."

"I'm sorry."

"Well, you've suffered the consequences. Stay in this room until you see the doctor. You won't be working tonight, that should be punishment enough while you rest. Now, put some trousers on so I can send one of the girls in to change your sheets."

With that, Madam Dora gets up to leave, but not before gently setting a paw to my cheek, giving me a sympathetic smile before making her way out the door, sending the girls against the door scattering.

The doctor comes by about an hour later, and I spend the afternoon sitting in a chair while he sews up the back of my head.

Two deep cuts with a good deal of bruising, according to him.

He also mentions that it looks like I got hit with a heavy tool of some kind.

I just sit there quietly, wincing every now and then as he draws the needle and thread through my skin.

Meanwhile, looking out the window, business is going on as usual.

No shouts of "murder!", no crowds of people running for the mines.

Instead, Echo seems not to have noticed a man named Jack going missing.

Still... my stomach twists at the thought of what happened, and I'm still numb, both outside and inside.

Maybe that little hollow is completely forgotten to the point that no one's been in there in years.

If that's the case, then I might be able to make it out of this alright...

...but I'm not alright, I can feel it in my chest.

I killed a man in that mine, that's bad enough...

...but something else happened there, and I don't know what it is.

What I do know is that it feels like it's clinging to me, still watching me.

I close my eyes, listening to thread pull through my skin, just wishing that I'd never met Jack, never trusted him, and never went into that horrible mine.

I've lost almost everything, and now I just might lose the rest of it.

My head still hurts when I wake up.

Been hurting for days and days. Doctor Avery said I was lucky when he took out my stitches.

No infections.

A bone bruise on my scalp at worst. Some heartless idea of luck. If I was lucky, I’d be doing something better with my life.

Anything better. If I was lucky, I would have been born clever.

I would have never met Jack, and he wouldn’t have done that to me. If I was lucky, he wouldn’t be dead.

And I wouldn’t be a murderer. If I was lucky, I wouldn’t have come to Echo. I still remember how Jack smelled when he mixed with his tobacco. And how he smelled right after he died. I still remember his laugh.

How he made me feel unique and special.

I thought he was going to set me free.

I thought I was going to be happy with him. I’m stupid. I’m so fucking stupid. I always feel something watching me now.

It makes me scared and it makes me want to cry. It hates me. They’ll hate me. They’ll hang me for this when they find out.

I’m a queer whore, without a family or friends, in the middle of the dirty frontier. God DAMN it.

The sudden pattering at the door just makes my head throb worse.

"Samuel?"

I peel the thin sheets off of my chest, already missing them as the air sucks the warmth from me, and I sit up.

All I see in front of me is the vanity mirror on top of my dresser.

I’m looking back at myself, lying in the dark.

It seems darker than usual, and I’m starting to hate looking into it when I’m alone...If I’ll ever really be alone again after that day. There was something down in those mines.

Black as tar and sticking to me.

If I hadn't met the devil that day, it must’ve been a close associate of his.

<z1>Be alert and of sober mind.<z2>

<z1>Your enemy the devil prowls around looking for someone to devour.<z2>

Peter 5:8.

I’d always figured he’d be charming, or a deceiver.

Tricky, like the good book described him.

That’s how he traps you, right?

He makes you feel loved.

He makes you feel unique in all of the world.

And then you give everything to him, and he takes you, and you suffer.

But that was more like the devil in Jack.

What I felt was raw and mean... some hungry, horrible malice.

No tricks.

Maybe that’s the part the bible leaves out—

—what he does after he knows he has you.

My soul is damned now, isn’t it?

Nothing will be the same again for me, will it?

I’m so scared.

"Samuel! May I have a word, or a few?"

Go away, damn it.

"Come in."

She bounces in, then falters.

I see her narrow eyes widen and the smile on her muzzle curls into a frown.

"I didn’t mean to hurt you. Stupid of me to be so loud."

"It’s not so bad."

"It is. You're crying."

Hot streams run down my cheeks as I realize that she's right.

I watch for her soft, sorrowful look to twist into curiosity, but it never does, and I start to wonder if the reason Cynthia has her job is because she’s such a good actor.

How could she not be suspicious of me?

How could nobody ask again? Cynthia pulls out a thin roll of parchment from her dress pocket and places it gingerly on my dresser.

"Madame wants you to do a few errands today, considering you’ve been idle. Could be helpful for you to be out and about for a spell."

She smiles shyly as she withdraws her paw from my vanity, twirling to face me when she reaches my doorway.

"Find me if you need me to do this for you instead, of course. And return before dark."

"Stop fussing. I wouldn’t be caught dead outside after dark."

For the first time, I see Cynthia’s features twist into a severe expression.

Her voice lowers to a sharp hiss.

"Well that’s the frightful possibility of the moment, is it not?! Follow the route. Do not bother going if you cannot."

She closes the door on me without another word.

The parchment just reads—

"Take the day off and mingle with some folks in the saloon. If you plan on going out, follow the safe route where trusted eyes will be on you. Spend some leisure time today. That’s not a request."

I groan.

It’s hard to get used to the noise of the main saloon during the day.

It’s loud and it’s crowded.

Benton plays in the corner on his twangy piano while the constant murmuring of coworkers, family members, or squealing children adds to the ruckus.

It’s not akin to my simple, sparse room at all.

I like the paintings of botanicals hanging from the wood paneling, but don’t much like that they hang from every turned corner.

The paneling of the bar is buffed, shaved and warped into prissy little curls that resemble the fashionable new style.

Art noov, I think it’s called?

More important about the bar is that folks generally know not to bother one another there during daylight.

So I put myself there.

Harlan’s brow lifts as he makes his way to me.

The severe old hare clicks his tongue to get my attention.

"What will you have, Sam?"

He’s much busier than he usually is telling from the sheen of sweat on his brow.

He always looks angry to me, but speaks in a flat manner, so I can never tell what’s on his mind.

The only hint I have on him is that his left ear flicks when he senses trouble in the lounge.

His ear only stopped doing that for me a few months ago.

"Just whiskey with sugar. Bitters too."

"I can do that Sam."

He pulls a clean sipping glass hanging from a rack and starts to busy himself with a few bottles and a jigger.

I feel like if I’m supposed to be making idle chatter, I may as well start with my cohort here.

"You holding up well today?"

The hare grunts and leans in, lowering his voice to a whisper.

"We’re big, but we ain't this big. I’m running out of stock faster than I should and the girls can barely keep up. We’re built for thirty in the lounge at a time. Not forty. Not fifty. If we turn people away there’s gonna be a fuss."

He places my drink in front of me, finishing before I noticed.

He’s fast.

"Enjoy, Sam."

He leaves before I can thank him.

Another customer has his attention now, ordering something complicated.

I turn around to look at the rest of the bar behind me.

The round tables usually reserved for poker are covered in drinks and food, holding patrons.

The standing and hanging lamps in this room all have cut glass panels stained pearly white, green, or gold.

Some of the more expensive ones closer to the bar are electric, which Madame says is safer near the alcohol.

The oil ones that are close to the cozy tables against the window look welcoming—

—but I avoid sitting near them during the day.

What I see there now is a young girl crying over a drink she spilled on her gown.

Her ma comforts her while her son drinks beer.

There’s a crash as he spills his drink too.

Benton plays the piano a little louder while some of the waitresses rush out with brooms and rags to help with the spill and to pick up the glass.

I don’t envy the waitresses much, but I would appreciate the opportunity to work day and night shifts here.

Madame has me run errands for board...

...but I should be making more.

Harlan said I was too big to be running in and out of the kitchen.

He probably isn’t wrong but it’s not the answer I wanted.

I’ve been around here for so long that I’m starting to recognize the locals by the day they visit.

Huxley, the rat in the corner with dusty sleeves, is always playing poker on his time off here with Reed, a shaggy wolf with a scar on his snout.

"Marcy told me that the rug is staying."

"Does Marcy pay your bills?"

"No."

"Does Marcy know anything of the world beyond fussing, tidying, and playing with wooden puzzles all day when you’re not about to coddle her?"

"No, but the damn rug is her mother’s. It’s filthy."

"So she should clean it then."

I watch them take turns drawing cards.

"She’s tried, but she ain't that clever. I’m just sick of looking at the damn thing."

"So do something about it, then."

"Royal flush."

"Sunavabitch. Stop distractin’ me with your damn stories."

"Mind yer business and you’ll win some."

The rat smiles and takes his winnings and the wolf slaps another dollar bill on the table.

They often get a little rowdy, but they know not to push it too far. They’re here so much, this is almost their home as much as mine; though I wouldn’t exactly call ‘em family.

Wouldn’t be surprised if they didn’t even know who I was.

I hear the saloon door flip open in the foyer.

A spindly looking weasel dressed in a dapper bow tie turns the corner.

His nose twitches as he looks from one customer to another customer rapidly and the widest, brightest grin I’ve ever seen spreads across his face.

"Goodness! Here’s that good old hustle and bustle that I miss. The reputation of Saguaro's Hip most certainly precedes her!"

The stoat sounds foreign.

British maybe, but not quite the same as I’ve heard before.

Some heads turn, and the stoat looks as if he’s making an announcement to somebody or another, but nobody in particular is paying attention, or listening.

I see Harlan’s ear twitch.

"I’m sorry sir, but we have no seating left aside from the bar."

"The bar sounds excellent, my dear! I hope not to impose for very long. You see, I’ve always wanted to visit an authentic western saloon. Why wouldn’t I want to start there?"

Cynthia laughs... politely.

She has to struggle to keep her ears from splaying.

"Ha! This is as...authentic...as it gets, sir."

She slowly turns to guide him my way, near the bar.

I give her my hardest glare, and she tries to communicate ‘I’m sorry’ nonverbally with her eyes and her grimace, but the man is seated... right next to me.

The perfume coming off of him is a bit herbal and strong.

Thankfully, the stoat ain't interested in me at the moment.

His attention is taken by the bar table itself.

He gasps and waves Harlan over with a spastic paw.

"Sir! Is this a genuine Dalbéra?!"

"No sirs here, just Harlan. And I couldn’t tell ya. I just serve the drinks here. What’ll ya have?"

"What’s most popular?"

"Beer."

The stoat frowns slightly.

I try not to make eye contact with him.

"Ah, I see. Well, I’ll have one then."

"There’s more than one kind."

"Yes, well, then I would like to have whichever kind is most preferred by the clientèle."

Harlan nods and gets out a mug.

I smell the citrus in my drink and close my eyes to take a sip when I suddenly feel... scrutinized.

The hairs on the back of my neck rise.

I look left, still facing forward, to see the stoat stare me down.

"You’re one of the workers here, aren’t you!?"

I nearly inhale some of my whiskey, and the back of my throat burns.

I take my time to stop, to swallow, and then put my glass down.

"No. Just a frequent visitor."

"That’s strange. You fit the exact description of somebody I was told to look for."

Shit.

I look up at Harlan, who’s busy with yet another customer.

His ear is still flicking.

"A mountain lion with beautiful markings and near-white fur. Built like a house, she said."

"Work does things to the body."

"Y—yes, it does."

I can see the insides of his tiny ears blushing.

He’d probably be cute if he didn’t talk.

"This one won’t be able to tell you very much about our evening selections. Come back after dark if you’re interested."

Harlan’s voice is cold and sharp, and I suddenly feel a welling surge of thankfulness for him.

"Oh! My apologies then."

The stoat trembles as his pink paws glide over the buttons of his satchel, playing with them nervously.

"The ladies will be able to help you with whatever you need."

"Oh, but I’m interested in the men."

My eyes widen.

I start to sip on my whiskey faster.

I don’t mind that it burns going down.

I just need something to keep my mouth covered so I’m not audibly gasping.

"I’m afraid that we aren’t that sort of establishment."

"S—sir, I do not—"

"Harlan."

"I do not mean to be impudent, but I was most specifically informed that you offered male options."

Then you should have also known that you have to go through secretive channels to find me, you imbecile.

"You should stop yelling."

"I—I hadn’t realized that I was."

He wasn’t.

"I think we need to have a talk outside, fella. "

I quietly thank the lord that Reed doesn’t know about any of my clients, now.

The bags underneath the middle-aged wolf’s eyes are extra puffy today, but he always has a stale smell about him.

I can tell that he’s drunk from the way he swaggers.

Harlan’s ear is twitching worse than it’s ever been before.

"Outside sounds like a good idea."

There was danger in the hare’s tone.

The wolf flinched from the sudden snap, but he shakes it off.

"I think I may have made a mistake—"

"Damn right you did."

One of the wolf’s friends is staring at the stoat from their table.

He looks far less drunk but far more upset.

It’s a frightful look.

"A—and when a mistake is m—made, a remedy can be supplied through... good communication. I-I t-think talking would be a good idea."

"Outside."

Cliff raises his paws, nodding, and puts the loop of his small satchel over his head.

His thin, brown, black-tipped tail is bottlebrushing into what are unmistakably anxiety spikes.

He leaves his beer, untouched, and swiftly escapes from the parlor out the front door.

Soon after, the other two follow.

Shit.

I have to think over my options.

Seems like my new foreign friend is getting the authentic experience that he was after.

On the one hand, maybe they’ll go easy on him, and he’ll learn some discretion.

On the other hand, they might kill him if nobody’s around to look.

I rise from my seat.

"Let them be, Sam. You don’t need any more stitches."

I shrug and whisper.

"You just lost your customer. I don’t necessarily want to do the same. I need the money."

Harlan places his fist on his chin, lifts his brow and gives me a curt nod before I turn on him and exit the door.

"Again, I didn’t mean to argue or create a scene. I truly thought my source was reliable. They said The Sanguaro’s Hip could cater to dandy curiosities."

"What in the name of God is wrong with this filthy Limey?"

"There were kids in there, you goddamn pervert."

As if your friend has any room to talk.

Cynthia has some filthy stories on him.

"What kind of shithole are you from that produces men like you? Educated men no less."

"Educated, he says. Probably why he’s here; degenerate like him got chased out from where he came from."

"Wouldn’t be the first faggot to lie."

"Not so sure he’s a faggot. Caught him makin’ eyes at Marcy."

The wolf guffaws.

"Well who don’t? She’s a nasty bitch."

"He’s a filthy bastard who just wants to fuck anything, isn’t he?"

"Well…"

"I certainly want to fuck neither of you."

The wolf’s fist meets Cliff’s stomach with a harsh impact.

The weasel tumbles into the dirt, yowling as he spins.

"Filth suits you better than that woman’s shit you’re wearing, you greasy pile of shit."

The rat advances onto the weasel’s new location.

He lifts his leg, lets it hang in the air for a few seconds, then lets it fall.

He kicks three times.

Hard.

Cliff is letting out a horrible noise.

I start to wonder if the little guy will get up.

Which unfortunately means I may have to get into another fight.

Claws extend.

When all of a sudden, the rat stops kicking Cliff.

He’s sniffling and sobbing on the ground when the clamor of dozens of doors opening and people leaving their homes sounds throughout the street.

I spot William in the distance, and he's staring in the direction of the alley.

"Shit!"

"I’m not paying another fucking fine. Let’s get out of here before we’re recognized. I like booze better than I had candy asses."

The two quickly run off, leaving the weasel curled on the ground, covered in dirt and bruises, tears streaming from his eyes.

He makes pitiful sounds as I crouch over him on my knees.

"You alright... professor?"

"S—student!"

"Can you move?"

"I—I d—don’t kn—kn—know!"

"Wiggle your feet."

They move fine.

"Now your hands... now your... fingers... Good. You’re fine."

"No I’m not fine. I was beaten! Everything h—hurts!"

"But you’ll live without any permanent damage. Better than I can say for most who’d have the balls to do what you did back there."

He’s about to say something else.

Furtively, I look left to right to make sure nobody’s looking.

People are passing us rapidly, but few are paying attention.

There must be something important happening in front of us.

I bend down and shut him up with a soft kiss.

He squeaks in surprise, trembling.

His tongue is tiny and receptive, and he tastes like mint.

"Maybe that will help the pain."

He stares at me, wipes a tear from his eye and slowly sits up.

I’m amused by the sudden lump in his pants.

"You had the right place. Be smart about it next time? You’re supposed to be good at that, right?"

There’s a sudden disturbance at the town’s center.

Hushed voices and urgent chattering all the way.

"Don’t worry about getting a punch thrown at you from time to time, being what you are here. See, there’s always something for these folks to busy themselves with."

"They can hardly control themselves. They’ll forget this in no time."

I turn back to put on my best smile for Cliff, but he’s already gone.

Seems like he’s a slippery fella, when he wants to be.

Maybe he’ll remember that the next time some slob’s fist is trying to make intimate contact with his gut.

He’s a doctor, after all.

If he’s really a quick learner then there really shouldn’t be a problem, should there?

I grow more concerned just pondering it.

Meanwhile, the crowd is growing.

Most of them are men; some which I recognize; most which are strangers.

There are, of course, plenty of women peeking from the windows, pretending to arrange their curtains.

But among the crowd are two familiar figures.

One’s William.

The other is a red fox with a camera slung around his neck.

Murdoch.

I’ve seen him work at the general store and do odd photography jobs about the town, but I’ve never had to speak with him.

"I don’t know what these miners expect you can do, unfortunately."

The big coyote sighs.

"The usual, I suppose. They want me to sniff out a scumbag so he can dangle on the end of a rope. And then they can piss themselves drunk. What else?"

The fox smiles and sadly shakes his head.

"How cheerful. Well, at least it sounds like they know how to have fun. They might’ve had justice if only they had waited. I already know that Avery will tell me that these photos are useless."

"These boys are out for blood. They’re hungry, they’re tired, they’re overworked, and now one of them is dead."

"Even if you paint the prettiest picture of how some bastard got drunk and nailed himself in the head, that’s not going to give them the relief that they want."

"Well, maybe a keener eye than mine can produce some evidence. These pictures aren't going to show them anything interesting."

"Perhaps we can tell them that Ralph did it."

"Don't joke like that."

"Who's joking?"

The two men notice me.

"Sam. Just the man I wanted to talk to."

William scrutinizes me with his sharp gaze... like he always does.

I can read the familiar twinge of anger on his face when he stares at me, but I can sense a harsh protectiveness there, too... similar to Madame.

"Talk away."

"Somebody reported a dead miner."

My chest tightens.

"Folks suspect foul play."

The fox suddenly speaks up.

"And unfortunately tampered with the crime scene."

My ears perk up.

William gives me a look at that.

The fox regards me with a kind, thoughtful gaze.

His chirpy voice disarms me, and I feel a little less scrutinized.

"They brought the body to the town square, wrapped up in a blanket, and extracted the purported murder weapon."

William growls and nods, jerking his head at a canvas in front of the hanging tree.

"Mmm, pulled the pickaxe clean from his skull. Did so much damage that we can’t tell if the blunt end or the sharp end hit him."

"Why does that matter?"

"Well...it muddles the narrative, doesn’t it? Was he hit in the head or did he hit himself? He didn’t have safety equipment or a light."

"He doesn’t need to know that many details, Murdoch. But aye... most pressing is if there were signs of a struggle, there won’t be now."

"Idiots."

"So you might never know what happened?"

The coyote stares me down.

"Maybe not. But it’s possible you could help us."

I feel dizzy.

"Help how?"

"With your... proclivities."

Murdoch looks away, appearing not to listen, and busies himself with his camera. He takes a snapshot at a few of the gathered crowds.

"...I understand."

I try not to look horrified, but it isn’t working.

"I know you've seen plenty of miners. Folks get sloppy when they’re...well—"

William’s eyes linger on me, starting from the base of my feet to the peak of my ears.

"—I need to know if Jack had enemies. Personally, I’m willing to bet the fool was looking for gold and wanted to steal it away for himself."

"Then he tried to use a pickaxe in the dark. But if something did happen, there’s no better evidence than a confession."

My stomach is churning.

"I can try, William."

"Good man. I’ll stop by for further questions later in the evening."

Finally, William is walking away.

I let out a deep breath.

"William spent all of five minutes having a conversation with you. He seems to like you."

Shit.

The fox is still here.

"What are you blackmailing him with?"

I choke, and I stumble.

I don’t want to be here anymore.

I see Murdoch cock an eyebrow and his smile grows thin.

"I was just joking."

His tail sways slowly behind him, as if working up a thought.

He sniffs the air for a second and his gaze widens.

"Ha! But his scent is on you... so maybe you are blackmailing him."

"Either way, it’s not really my business."

I can feel my tail twist up and a little bit of heat rises to my ears.

I’m in no mood to be toyed with.

"What ain’t your business exactly?"

The fox flicks his ears to the brothel and makes a jerk-off motion in the air.

"Just that he's paying for something I can get for free. That’s all."

I certainly wasn’t expecting an answer like that, but I can’t help but laugh.

"Sounds like you're just a sucker."

"Not the word choice I’d use for this conversation. Not wrong to some effect."

He puts his thumb inside of his cheek and pokes it with his cheek.

Then he shrugs when he sees I'm not amused.

"Maybe I’ll have some questions of my own for you tonight when William shows up."

He looks me up and down like he's sizing me up.

"And maybe I'll give you some answers to some questions, too."

"Answers..."

"Yeah. Like how to have fun around here. Breaks my heart to see a newcomer so gloomy."

"I’m not looking for fun. I’m looking for prospects."

"Fun and prospects don’t have to be so separate."

That sounds like the kind of shit that Jack would have said.

"If anything, I could help you out on the connections end. I’ve got more than a few. Third generation, born and raised."

"Sounds suspect."

"Well I should hope not. Locals around here have reputations to uphold, after all. Wouldn’t want to be seen as a troublemaker."

He grins.

"Not the kind of reputation I’m after, I’m afraid."

"Good thing that my family's balls at it here, then. Clean cut grocers and schoolteachers. No pirates, no bandits, no upstart revolutionaries."

"Bit pathetic if you ask me. But it puts bread on the table in an up and coming city like Echo. It would bode well to have your name established on the map early. "

I can tell why he’s kept his job as a salesman now.

"Maybe I’ll consider your advice..."

"Maybe is all I need."

Murdoch takes a bow and makes a hand gesture before turning away on his heels, his big tail swaying from side to side.

I’ve certainly had my fair share of people or excitement for the day.

If I want to be sane tonight...and more importantly, alluring...then I ought to catch a nap.

I don’t feel so great about William coming to visit me tonight.

I’m usually always honest with him.

Probably why he trusts me.

Can’t be like that anymore.

At least not for a little while.

I slide down to the floor, feeling the hard planks dig into my knees.

I hear him softly plucking the buttons.

His fabric shifts.

"Whiff it."

I lean in to obey.

It smells sweaty, musky...very male.

"No need to build up tension, darlin’. Suck it."

My arms are spread on the bed, holding me stable as I dip down.

His tip is already wet...he needs this...

I hear him suck in air harshly as my lips part.

He’s hot and warm in my mouth.

My licks are loud and sloppy.

He tends to like that.

Before long, ropes splash my snout, sinking into my fur.

"Nothing prettier than white on black."

He drags his dick across my face, smearing the cum into my snout markings.

"You’re good at this."

I wipe a little off of my snout that’s getting precariously close to my eye.

"It’s not so difficult."

"Rude to reject a compliment. You’ll do well in my books if you keep pants loose and keep tongues looser."

"Might even save an innocent man from getting dragged so a murderer can waltz free."

"I’m a whore, not a spy, William."

"Any smart whore is a spy. Smart whores live longer. Especially if the law is in their favor."

"A blind eye here and there is what you need more than anything."

The coyote starts getting dressed.

He stated that more like a fact than a threat, but I can’t help but feel it’s both.

I want to tell him the truth, but I can’t help but feel like that could be the most stupid thing I could ever do.

He does not need to know everything about me.

William already has his clothes and shirt back on.

"Do what you do and be my eyes after dark. I can’t keep tabs on as many folks as I’d like with all the new folks moving in."

"Why don’t you...do this yourself, if you think it’s so insightful."

"Cause I ain't a cocksucker. I already carved out my way to be of use. You, not so much, fella. But it would make both of our lives easier."

"So long as you’re sheriff."

"So long as I’m sheriff."

William shakes his shaggy head and grunts, rising from the bed as he pulls on his suspenders.

"You’ll learn about the world quick enough. Quicker would be better, I might add."

He sighs.

"Anyway, clean yourself up before you talk to me outside. I need witnesses to a better reason for my visit tonight."

"Okay..."

"Peaches."

The first thing I do is make my way to the washbowl and start scrubbing.

The water is cloudy soon enough with what William left behind, but the citrus oil masks enough of his smell.

I grunt when my length presses against the dresser.

William doesn’t tend to me finishing before he leaves.

The clear stain on my trousers has to be taken care of before I go speak with the sheriff in front of others.

At least I won’t have to wait to be ready for another customer soon.

William waits for me at the bar, quietly.

He’s ordering something, chatting lazily with... that fox from before.

I take a seat between the two of them...which they must have arranged for intentionally.

"Let’s get down to business then."

Murdoch sniffs the air.

"You mean you hadn’t already?"

William shoots him a look.

"Not in the least!"

"Alcohol and debauch makes a loon out of a sane man and much worse out of the trash."

"If our murderer exists, he makes succor out of the best medicine for guilt. Pleasures that distract among people proper society tends to forget."

"Or at least pretend to forget. Proper book keeping covers blind spots."

I think I’m starting to understand.

"...Which means you need to meet some of the ladies."

"They'll give us access to the men."

The men I can’t access.

But they can’t say that out here, can they?

"You’ll want the powder room, then. Cynthia!"

The fox hurries our way, ready to lead the way...

I’m not here very often.

Usually because I choose not to be.

It’s a bit too...periwinkle for me.

And nothing humbles you more as a whore than a space guaranteed to give you no interested prospective clients.

The girls chatter on sofas while Cynthia leads me to the Madam.

"William."

"I just need a few words."

Madame places her chin on her wrist as she stares into William's eyes, dark and sparkling in the candlelight.

"Pray that they engross me. My attention span is short and my patience for God-fearing men is shorter."

"I’ll be short, then."

"Your sort usually is."

Her gown billows as she rises, and she gestures to a doorway across the hall.

She gives William her wrist, he takes it, and she leads him into the office.

I can almost hear their muffled voices, until a sudden squeak distracts me.

"You’re here!"

Christ almighty.

"This one has a bit of spunk to him."

"A bit of what?"

"I can show you what I mean if you’re willing to spend the night with me."

She winks at the weasel, giving him the shy trace of her best smile.

"A tempting offer, but if I must be honest, I am most curious about an experience with Sam, here."

"If I’m stubborn enough to take a beating for that, then I’m stubborn enough to seek a unique opportunity."

The insides of the weasel’s ears blush.

The looks he’s giving me are a bit... passionate.

Not so much in a lusty way.

I’m afraid he might not understand that this is just a job.

Perhaps that kiss was a mistake.

But anybody would have needed a kiss after putting up with...well, Echo.

"I’m booked tonight, unfortunately."

This isn’t even a lie.

Nikolai is my regular today.

But it’s not unusual for Nik to suddenly cancel.

He’s not always the most reliable customer, even if he is a good friend.

"Then I will double your usual price!"

I want to put in that my bookings aren’t for sale to the highest bidder, but they utterly, earnestly are.

But Madam had warned me about passionate customers.

Obsession can easily lead to heartbreak...and violence.

I am not entirely sure yet that I want to take this weasel’s money.

"I’ll consider if my regular client cancels, which happens often enough. But I can't guarantee an immediate booking without prior arrangements."

The weasel visibly wilts.

"I do understand. You are a professional after all, and you have to ensure the health of your livelihood. I will make reservations if I cannot book tonight."

"So is this the fella with cold feet, then?"

I try to figure out who Cynthia is talking about when I turn and jump, forgetting that the fox is still here.

I’m a little bit unnerved by how quiet he can be.

"Unfortunately not, my dear. I’m here for business, not for pleasure."

"But your pleasure is our business, aren’t I right, Sam?"

I grunt.

"Then you should have charged me already. I’m having a lovely time just taking in the atmosphere."

"I can bill you by the hour if you’re that insistent."

Murdoch chuckles.

"Not so much. I’m trained to think of ways to make money faster than I spend it."

Mock concern wells up in Cynthia’s tone.

"So he’s after our jobs?"

I remember a little irritably that he did imply that I should pay him as opposed to the other way around.

"I don’t think I’m cut out for such a thing. But in another lifetime, perhaps even if I were, I’d have to be cut from a different cloth, so to speak."

"My family is willful about how I spend my time and develop my trade."

"So the shorter story is that you’re a coward."

"He’s right you know. I’ve heard that sob story before plenty of times."

"Grow a spine and spend some of mommy’s money to slob on a knob."

Cynthia sputters into raucous, chirpy laughter.

I think I imagined something.

For a split second, there seems to be a cold, intense hatred coming from the fox that distorts and warps his friendly features.

Before I can process what I see, his mischievous smile is there again.

There’s a jolly spark in his eyes.

I can sense nothing but warmth, now.

I can only express this feeling as the onset of a migraine that stops the moment after it begins.

"If you want a chance at my money that bad, I’ll spend a night. I mean it when I say I don’t intend to pay for sex."

"But if we want to make this a point of personal pride, well, we’re going to have to hold a wager."

"Five times your hourly rate to whoever has the best time."

"I’m not interested in any uncertainties. If you book me for the night, you pay."

"I’ve got far more than money to lose if I’m caught spending the night in a brothel."

"Now who’s the coward?"

"Have a little more faith in your hips, Sam. Five for one is a great deal!"

She leans in close.

"That family’s wealthy enough to pay, too. They wouldn’t be hurting for much. And they’d squash any rumors about their own son."

Several of the girls scream.

Cynthia looks at me, smirk wiped off of her face and her eyes full of concern.

There’s a low rumble outside that I recognize suddenly as the clamour of gathering voices.

I look outside of the window.

There are protesters arguing with one another.

Most of them appear to be miners.

Some of them are holding signs.

One of those signs has the visage of a young Ram on it, but I can’t quite tell what the words say during the dark.

Another one of those signs has Jack’s face on it.

I feel something twist in my stomach.

My fur bristles.

I suddenly feel alone in a room full of loud, frightened people.

There’s a sudden feeling of hot breath on my neck.

Like something wants to bite into my throat.

William’s booming voice brings me back.

"Everybody hunker down tonight. I don’t want to see a SINGLE SOUL wander out into those streets."

"Looks like all of your prospects will have to stay, Sam."

"I can’t attend to all of them!"

"Then attend to one of them! We’re going to have to find somewhere for the rest."

Fit Cliff in for a booking.

Take on Murdoch’s bet.

See if Nikolai is here.

Tell William the truth.