

The Black Wolf



By DaftFox Productions

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Loud gunshot noises blasted over the military training field of Imaer. The sound of a revolver firing was followed by the sound of a bullet hitting wood. 'Flawless,' Carswell said. 'You're doing great mister Mercia.' Neil brought the gun down and put it back in the gun holder attached to his belt. 'No, not flawless. Could have hit the hand lower. That shot would have totally disabled the hand,' Neil said. Carswell sighed and looked him in the eyes.

'It's like you're never satisfied with yourself, are you?'

'I am satisfied about myself for multiple things, but that shot is the difference between healing and living on or never healing and probably never being able to really do any good work anymore, which is even worse when the man I just shot has a family to take care of.' Neil looked at Carswell in a dead serious way. Carswell always got the chills when he looked at him like that.

'Is it just me or can you look as dead serious as your father?'

'I don't know. I don't look in the mirror all that much, but folks told me many times before I really do look like my father, although he is actually my foster father,' Neil said, with a somewhat jokey layer to his voice. Carswell grinned. He found it strange how Neil could switch mood so incredibly quickly. It was kind of impressive.

'Well,' Neil said, 'I got to go home. My father and brother are waiting for me. I have to be there within 15 minutes.'

'Alright then. You did well today. Have a nice evening and give my regards to your father!'

'I will,' Neil said, 'See you Saturday!' He waved to Carswell while he walked to the fence gate of the training field. Carswell waved back and turned around to remove the dummy Neil had been shooting on. Neil walked to the horse stables to pick up his horse, only to remember he didn't come here on his horse. His horse had a broken leg, because they had an accident while riding to fast on rough terrain. Neil mumbled incomprehensible words, sounding somewhat annoyed. He was so used to just riding back home that he would automatically walk to the stables. He grew to dislike walking distances further then 5 minutes away from his current location. He walked away from the stables and walked away from the training field on his way home. Luckily, his home was in the same area as the training field; "Imaer." Imaer was located to the north of the country. At the time, it was one of the bigger cities. In fact, Imaer was the capital city. The president lived and did his work there as well. Imaer had always been well organized and clean. It

was well secured as well, which was one of the reasons that relative to other big cities almost no major crimes seemed to be committed in the city.

Neil walked through the streets of Imaer on his way home. It wasn't a long walk, but to Neil it was. He made his way through the busiest street. He had taken his jacket off and pulled his hat further down, so that the shadow would cover his face. He didn't want to be seen. Although the city was well secured, pickpockets were everywhere. Neil was known to be a wealthy man. Everyone knew his face and name. That's why he wore a leather jacket and Stetson hat. This was typical clothing for people with a lower income, thus disguising him as someone who wasn't wealthy. Although the actual function of the hat was to cover his face, he preferred it over the bowler hat. He did have one, but he only wore it when he was going to meet up with people of high status. Neil did have to close his jacket, because stitched to his clothing he wore under the jacket was the symbol of the president. That was because his foster father, Nicolas, was the president since 1876, which was 6 years ago, making Neil himself 15 years at the time. Nicolas wasn't his real father, since Neil had been taken away from his parents, or rather, his father, Indy. Indy was a Howler. Howlers are wolves who become extremely aggressive when it comes to emotions. Not only that; they tend to grow up to 150% of their size and become rougher haired. This effect is the worst during full moons. Most Howlers lose total control if the effect applies. There are special hotels in which they can sleep during a full moon. The rooms in the hotels don't have windows and are locked from the moment the sun goes down until the moment the sun rises again. These rooms are also designed to be reinforced on the door and furniture in case there's an extreme case of a Howler. Indy was one of these extreme Howlers. As a matter of fact, he was so extreme he was too dangerous for Neil. During an argument with Neil's mother, he had gone ballistic and almost killed Neil's mother, Susan. She suffered major injuries and memory loss after the accident. Nicolas had been the one to stop Indy from killing Susan. After the accident, Nicolas had decided to take care of Neil. Nicolas had told Neil before. Nicolas was kind of scared to do so, since Neil was a half-Howler, since his mother wasn't a howler. Neil could have gotten into bad situations with Nicolas' own son Chris, Neil's foster brother. Luckily, it all turned out fine, although it is still visible that Neil was a Howler. Neil was more driven by emotions and feelings. During full moons, he could become quite emotional and was more aggressive towards others. Not in a physical way, luckily, since Neil wasn't the type to put on a fight if it isn't necessary. He always was calm and relaxed. The problem with that was that some people

saw this as a challenge to anger him and try to trigger him. More than once Neil had to pick somebody's collar and tell them to shut it. Most of the time they would then keep silent, since Neil was strong and they could feel that when he pulls on their collar. Once, an idiot decided to go on and got to the point where he managed to get him mad. Neil did have a close to Howler-effect; he seemed to become a bit bigger and his fur seemed to become rougher. He had dragged the wolf out of the bar and thrown him out at his collar with one hand. Since then, the wolf always kept his distance from him.

Neil's hands were freezing in the cold air of September, but luckily he had just arrived home. He grabbed his keys out of the inner pocket of his jacket and opened the front door. The warming air coming from the fireplace blew in his face. He stepped inside and closed the door behind him as quick as possible, so that the warm air wouldn't escape.

'I'm back!' He said. Nicolas turned around in the lazy chair at the fireplace. 'It's about time..,' He mumbled.

'You're late?' Neil turned around and hung up his jacket and hat on the hooks next to door.

'Yeah, I know. I had to walk.' Neil responded. He walked to the kitchen to get a glass of water. Before he left for training, he had cooked lamb, so that he only had to warm it up on the stove when he got back home. Chris was in the kitchen chopping up some vegetables to go with the lamb. He was a white wolf with very bright blue eyes. He was a very calm, nice and a *very* patient person. It seemed like he could wait for weeks before he would get grumpy. It was near impossible to get him mad. He also seemed to have some weird condition that made him regenerate quicker and better than average, but not by a bit. He once accidentally sawed off his fingertip while working with wood. The bleeding had stopped very quickly and the finger grew back after two weeks! If a fingertip grows back, it takes about eight weeks on average for a normal canine. It was weird since it didn't have any negative side effects either.

'Hello,' Neil said.

'Hey! Had a good training today?' Chris asked.

'Average.'

'You and average don't go in the same sentence when we are talking about your training Neil.' Neil smiled. Chris and Neil had always been nice to each other. They had less arguments than most siblings and never fought,

although Neil did sometimes want to bash his head against a wall. But that's just how it goes between siblings.

'Speaking of your horse, what happened to him?' Nicolas asked. He always referred to animals with canid pronouns since he thought animals weren't that different from canines at all. They lived too and probably had some kind of consciousness too. They also had a gender and Nicolas thought it should be pointed out. Chris and Neil had always agreed with him.

'Well...' Neil scratched the back of his head. He didn't really want to tell him because he knew his father would get mad. He had told him time to time he should never ride too fast on rough terrain.

'I might have taken a shortcut while riding home from William's yesterday...' Neil said with his head bend down slightly and his ears flat on his head, bend backwards. Nicolas sighed.

'What did I tell you about going too fast on rough terrain mister Mercia?' He pulled up one eyebrow, while looking kind of angry and annoyed at the same time.

'I know, I know...' Neil mumbled. 'But I was late for...'

'No, you would have been, but you didn't arrive before 2 a.m. Sometimes it's better to be late Neil. An adult like you should be able to make smarter decisions than almost breaking your neck and actually break your horse's leg while trying to be on time for training,' He said, now definitely mad at him.

'I didn't almost break my neck,' Neil said with an indignant tone.

'Every time you fall off a horse you have a high risk of breaking something Neil. *Especially* you since you're so clumsy you could die tripping over a damn stick!' Chris laughed in the background, but Neil chose to ignore it.

'I know you have told me way too many times and that I should have learned it by now, but...' Nicolas interrupted him again; 'And I should only have to tell you once Neil, not multiple times!'

Neil sighed and decided it would be best not to argue with him. He sat down on a chair at the dining table and grabbed the book he had been reading for the last week.

'What book are you reading?' Nicolas asked.

'How to avoid picky dads,' Neil answered in a cynical way.

'Don't be like that Neil. I just don't want you to hurt yourself. Even worse, lose you. I don't want to lose anyone else. I've lost too many good people in my life. Especially people who were careful and never deserved it...'

Nicolas had lost a lot of good friends and family. He never really told Neil anything about it. Every time Neil asked Nicolas about what happened to

anybody he had a good relationship with, he would only turn his head away and say: 'Some things are best for you not to know. Not yet, at least.'

Neil was 21 now and his father would still say the same. It made him question the meaning behind what Nicolas was saying. At the age of 15, Nicolas told him so many things that were hard for him to talk about, but talking about people that were there when Neil wasn't born yet, it never came. The same went for Chris as far as Neil knew.

'I'm sorry,' Neil said.

'Never mind. It isn't your fault it went the way it did...,' Nicolas said with a sigh. He stared at the fire in total silence with his head resting on his hands, ears bend backwards, flat on the head. An indication he was sad. When he was this silent, Neil knew he was thinking. Probably about what had happened to those who he had lost. Neil didn't know what happened, but it was clear now was not the moment to ask something about it.

Neil thought the best thing was to leave him alone for a while.

'I'll leave you alone for a while.' Neil closed the book and walked to his room upstairs. Neil had a quite big house. Nicolas had paid half of it. Well, kind of. It was bought with money that was donated to Nicolas by their family. Or what's left of it. As far as Neil knew only he and his father existed in their family-tree. Neil never knew his own mother or his father.

Neil opened the door to his room. It was not big, but certainly not small. He had a king-sized bed, a small desk where he could write and read, sometimes even draw. Above the desk was a window. Neil walked to the window and opened it. A cold breeze blew through the fur on his face cooling off the skin underneath. The light of the night sky shone into the room onto his desk. He sat down behind the desk and turned on a light bulb to read his book. The book was about biology and physics. He was just reading a chapter about electricity. Only a couple of years ago someone had invented the light bulb, quite an interesting piece of technology. Neil used it in his house. The bulbs did light up the room quite well, but they got hot as hell when you used them.

He was halfway through the chapter and he found it to be very interesting. He thought it could become way more efficient in the future and it might even get used for even bigger projects than just light up rooms. He probably wouldn't be around when that would happen, and that made him a little upset. Neil really liked science and loved to learn a lot about it. All kind of crazy theories were rising up out of nowhere. The cool thing about it was the fact that all those crazy theories can be backed up by math. Complicated

math that was above the level of his understanding, but it still fascinated him, so he kept reading.

‘Dinner is ready!’ Nicolas yelled from downstairs.

‘Coming!’ Neil responded. He flipped over the book without moving pages and put it down, so that he could continue later. He opened the door of his room and walked into the hallway. It was a long hallway with 4 doors. The first door from the stairs was his office. He did paperwork for the finances around town. The second was the bathroom. It was small, but big enough to also provide room for cleaning the clothing of three or four persons. The third was his sleeping room, where he just came from. Behind the fourth door was Chris’ room. Neil walked down the stairs. He could smell the soup his father made from the cooked lamb. He sat down at the table, opposite of Nicolas, who was filling Neil’s bowl with soup.

‘Smells good!’ Neil said.

‘Hope it tastes as good as it looks and smells,’ His father said.

‘A bit if faith in me would be in its place, thank you very much,’ Chris said. Neil looked at Nicolas and saw he looked somewhat grumpy.

‘Are you still mad at me?’ Neil asked. His father put down the bowl in front of Neil and sighed.

‘I’m just concerned something will happen to you. You are so careless sometimes,’ Nicolas said. Neil looked at him; ‘Don’t worry about me. I know you’re concerned I will do something stupid and get badly hurt, but I always learn from my mistakes. Something like this never happened before, so I haven’t learned anything from riding reckless. You learn from making mistakes. Not because someone says you have to do this or that. Sure, you might listen to what they say because they’re older and wiser, but then you will never learn why. That’s why mistakes are there to learn people what to do and what not to do.’ His father now looked back at him.

‘You sure are a wise man for someone as ignorant as you,’ He said with a small grin on his face. Chris grinned too, quietly enjoying his meal.

‘I’m not ignorant. I’m just a little naughty, whatever you want to call it.’

‘That sounds weird. Consider a different choice of words next time,’ Chris said. Neil looked at him with a somewhat annoyed but amused face too. He turned back to Nicolas.

‘What I won’t deny is that I’m clumsy though. But you make a lot of mistakes when you’re clumsy, so I do learn a lot,’ Neil said.

‘Maybe it’s a good thing.’ His father looked down at the bowl and stirred with the silver spoon the three all had.

‘Maybe it is...’

The rest of dinner they joked around a bit. It had been a long day for them. Neil had been training a lot today. He got training from a close friend from Nicolas, Carswell Enger. Carswell taught Nicolas a lot of different fighting techniques. Nicolas thought it was important for Neil and Chris to know how to fight.

‘You never know when it comes in handy,’ Nicolas said when he proposed training to Neil and Chris.

‘You are a bigger target than others, since you’re the son of the president.’

His father did have a point. Although almost everyone liked their ideas and believes, there still were some people who thought a little different about them. One of those people was Damien Foxima. The Foxima family was the previous presidential family, a family of foxes. Only Nicolas and a friend of him managed to get people to stand up against him. Nicolas did this because Damien was a cruel president, you could say, a dictator. He was one of those people who get overwhelmed with power. He did whatever he wanted. If you didn’t obey or stood up against him, he would let you get killed. Still, Nicolas somehow managed to get people to massively stand up against him. First, there was a lot of fighting, but eventually the people working for Damien realized who they were fighting for and for what. They were fighting for Damien’s wellbeing and power, not for their land and the people inhabiting it. This made them turn against Damien. Since Damien was kicked out, they decided that Nicolas and his friend as their leaders in the uprising against Damien where the only two worthy of being there where Damien once was. Nicolas’ friend did not want to become president, so Nicolas took the role. He has only done good since then.

Damien still had some followers left after the events. He managed to back up, somewhere in the far south-western corner of the land and rose up there. The number of followers wasn’t big, but big enough to sometimes cause some serious trouble. Luckily, Carswell was another good friend of Nicolas. He had asked Carswell to train the army. He had accepted the request and Nicolas made sure Carswell would get paid well. When Neil and Chris turned 18, Nicolas also asked Carswell if he could provide a personal training for them, which he accepted as well. Chris was good, but not as good as Neil. He was quite a good fighter. He was quick, strong and handy with weapons. His clumsiness seemed to disappear when he was fighting, almost as if he had been doing it for years. Neil only had had about half a year of training, but almost reached the skill level of the best professional fighters. Carswell was impressed by Neil and how fast he seemed to pick up

the different fighting techniques. Only one week ago Neil had had an exam for all the moves he had learned so far, which also contained aiming with his guns. Especially his revolver. Most of them he did with great precision. Some of them a little less, but still above average. He had passed and felt kind of professional already. Still, Neil had the feeling he would never be able to beat Nicolas in a fight. He had way more experience with fighting in real life-threatening situations, instead of your teacher going easy on you. He once challenged Nicolas, just for fun, but his father seemed to know what Neil was going to do even before Neil had even moved. His father was fast as lightning. It was very impressive to see him fight. He could even outsmart Carswell most of the time. Even when Carswell really tried his best to prevent losing. But instead of fighting for fun, Nicolas had been working on reports from a gang of followers of Damien. He was sick and tired of followers from him, but he didn't get the fox arrested. Technically speaking, Damien didn't do anything wrong according to the law. Only his followers did. Nicolas had been trying all day long to find a gap in the rules he made so that he could arrest him, while also sending troops out to fix cases where the followers had committed crimes. Damien had been sending massive amounts of people and the army had their hands full of them. Almost a quarter of the marine had been sent out. It had been a crazy day.

After finishing the meal Chris and Neil did the dishes together. After having cleaned the table, Nicolas said goodbye to them.

'I'll speak to you two later. I have to go home now.'

'Ride save,' Neil said, somewhat cynical.

'Thanks.' Nicolas walked to the door. When he opened the door and wanted to walk outside, he stopped and pondered. There was silence for a brief moment.

'Never mind,' He eventually said.

'I'll see you tomorrow.'

'What are we going to do then?' Chris asked.

'I want to talk about that situation with that gang tomorrow. I'll see you tomorrow at 12 o'clock at my house, okay?'

'What gang?' Neil asked.

'The Lutherland-gang. I suspect they're up to something. I just can't figure out what. I hoped to young and fresh minds could help me find what they are up to.'

'See you tomorrow then. Have a good day!' Chris said. By that note Nicolas stepped outside and closed the door behind him.

'Do you mind if I go upstairs?' Neil asked.

‘Sure thing. I’ll tidy up and stuff,’ Chris said.

‘Thanks,’ Neil said and he walked up the stairs and got to his room. He continued reading for almost the rest of the day and eventually went to bed.

The soft morning sun shone through the open window on Neil's face. He slowly woke up after a long night of sleeping. Neil yawned and swung his legs out of the bed, stood up and stretched. With a drowsy pace he slowly walked to the door of his room. He opened it and went straight for the bathroom. The door was still open. Chris probably forgot to close it the day before. Neil walked inside and looked in the mirror. Neil had black fur, just like Nicolas. He wasn't tall, but he was quite muscular from training and working a lot. He had yellow, almost golden eyes. The fur in his neck was long and He turned on the tap, put his hands in the water stream and washed the sleepiness out of his eyes. He rubbed in his eyes and turned off the tap. He took a towel and dried of his face. He walked back to his room and opened the closet. He took out a white blouse, black pants and socks. After buttoning up his blouse and putting the underside in his pants, he put on a waistcoat with a detailed back front and a shiny red back over his blouse. He walked downstairs while rolling up the sleeves of his blouse to fit with the waistcoat. Chris wasn't up yet, since it was very early in the morning. Neil always woke up very early and got out of bed as soon as he did. Chris, on the other hand, always woke up late and stayed in bed for at least another 30 minutes after waking up. He walked to the kitchen and prepared some coffee for himself. He waited with breakfast, because Neil and Chris almost always had breakfast together if they were together. Chris was better than Neil with everything that had something to do with food too, so Chris always made breakfast. Neil took a sip from his coffee and looked at the tall grandfather clock in the living room. The quietly ticking clock showed that it was 9 o'clock. Neil put his coffee down and walked upstairs to grab his book. When he walked past Chris' room, he could hear him wake up. Chris was stretching out, while making a weird noise. Neil wondered why almost everyone made a strange sound when they stretched. Neil thought that there must be some mental thing behind it, but he didn't know what it could be. He shook off the thought and got the book from his desk. It was still flipped down on the pages Neil had left it. He grabbed the book and walked back downstairs. There he waited for Chris to get out of bed.

Chris ended up taking about an hour to get out of his bed. Neil heard Chris' door opening and the shambling of Chris feet, making their way to the bathroom. He heard the tap going on and off, to be followed by the bathroom door closing behind Chris. He came walking downstairs in an energetic tempo.

'Good morning!' Chris said energetically.

'Good morning,' Neil responded, somewhat more laid back.

'Can I ask you something, Chris?'

'Of course.'

'How can you be so energetic after just washing your face in the morning?' Chris laughed a bit; 'I don't know, but I do know that it's something that I appreciate about my body.' Neil grinned. He always had fun when Chris was around. They were very close brothers and had always been. It also helped that Nicolas always treated Neil as his own son too, not putting him in a position beneath Chris whatsoever. Chris started making tea and breakfast in the kitchen. He had kept it simple by just simply making sandwiches, but even those tasted amazing.

'Thanks!' Neil said and he started eating. He was enjoying it to the fullest and Chris could see that.

'Good?' Chris asked with one eyebrow raised and a big smile on his face.

'Yes, as per usual,' Neil said. 'One day you have to teach me how to make these.' Chris shook his head.

'Why not?' Neil asked.

'Because then I can't use it anymore as a trade-off for the dishes.' Neil laughed. They had some kind of unwritten trade that if Chris made breakfast, Neil would do the dishes. It was only fair that way. They enjoyed breakfast together and Neil, as the unwritten rules told him to, did the dishes afterwards. They put on their shoes and coats and went out for their appointment with Nicolas. Chris locked the door behind them and they continued on foot, because of Neil's horse. They had to walk for about 20 minutes, so they had some time left before really heading there. They decided to buy Nicolas something like a fine wine, something he always appreciated. They went to the closest liquor store and bought a bottle of wine they thought Nicolas would like and went on to his house. When they arrived, they both smiled softly. It was their parental house. It brought back good memories from their childhood. Neil stepped forward and knocked on the door. After a couple of seconds, the door opened and Nicolas appeared in the doorway.

‘Good morning!’ He said.

‘Good morning!’ Neil and Chris said in unison.

‘We got you a little something,’ Chris said while handing over the bottle of wine he had been holding behind his back.

‘Thanks! You guys really didn’t have to.’

‘We thought it could come in handy while handling the stress of ruling a land,’ Neil jokingly said. Nicolas laughed.

‘You’re early. Come in.’ They stepped inside and closed the door behind them. The house was almost identical to Neil’s in the way it was build. The only way it differed from Neil’s house was the interior walls color and the furniture. They took of their coats and hung them up on the coat rack in the small hall leading to the living room. In the small hall was a cabinet with a photograph on it. It was a black and white picture of Nicolas, Chris and Neil. It was the first and only photograph Neil and Chris had ever taken. Nicolas apparently had taken a picture with a friend and his daughter before, but that picture was not in his possession. They walked out of the hall to the living room. It had a couch with two lazy chairs and a coffee table. In front of that was a fireplace which had a comforting fire going inside. They sat down, Nicolas in one of the lazy chairs and Chris and Neil on the couch. Nicolas picked up a pile of papers that laid on the coffee table. He held it up and waved with it while he explained what it was; ‘These are all the reports I’ve been getting from a new gang somewhere in the Southwest from here. The reports seem to all go back to Lutherland. It seems like they are supporters of Damien, but we are not completely sure.’ Neil nodded.

‘We have to find out what is going on I presume?’ He asked.

‘Yes. You can take some backup with you if you want. I do recommend it, because this band is very dangerous and aggressive. They have taken down two other bands within 2 months already and it is starting to become a pressing issue. They might help clean up some other bands, but unfortunately they also rob and kill a lot of innocent people. You guys have to make sure they get stopped.’

‘Do we have any identities in the group itself that are known to us?’ Chris asked.

‘Unfortunately we don’t.’ Nicolas said while laying down the papers again. ‘However, that doesn’t mean that we don’t know how to get to them. They have code names. The code name of their leader is Gunner. Stupid name if you ask me, but that is not the main issue right now. We have figured out they sell their stolen goods at auctions. The next auction will be in five days. You have to get the stolen goods back and lock them up. If you fail to do that,

the stolen goods will be sold and we can't prove them guilty of anything,' Nicolas explained.

'Alright. Then will set course to Lutherland,' Neil said.

'I do need a horse for that and since my horse is crippled right now, do you have any idea where I can find a horse that is just as well trained as Kalie?' Kalie was the name of his horse. Neil always gave animals canine names, just like Chris and Nicolas did. They thought animals should be treated the same way as canids.

'You can borrow Jack,' Nicolas said. Jack was his horse. He was trained together with Kalie. Kalie was the sister of Jack.

'Alright. We do have to pass by home to pick up your horse,' Neil said to Chris, who nodded and stood up; 'Then we better get going. No time to lose.' Neil stood up as well and gave Nicolas a hug. Chris did the same and they walked back to the front door. They said goodbye to Nicolas and walked to the back of the house. There was a small horse stable there for three horses. Jack was waiting in the middle one. The horse neighed when he saw the two approaching him. They had always had a strong bond with their horses. Neil greeted Jack by giving him a pet on the nose. Jack softly pushed his nose in Neil's hand as a response. Neil grabbed the leash which was hanging of a thick nail in the wall of the stable. Although he took the leash with him, he didn't leash Jack. Neil knew he was trained to just follow them by command. 'C'mon Jack!' Neil said and Jack got out of the stable.

'Don't you need the saddle?' Chris asked.

'No, I'll grab Kalie's saddle when we're home,' Neil explained. Chris nodded and Jack followed them as they made their way home.

When they arrived, someone was waiting in front of the front door, facing it. Neil couldn't see who it was, so he made sure he could grab his revolver at any time. The revolver was something Neil got from Nicolas. It was his old revolver, but after he managed to take the wheel from Damien, he swore never to use a gun again. It had his name engraved into it in elegant letters. It had some golden details on the side of the barrel. Neil loved the revolver and it was his number one choice when it came to weapons. He was also trained to use more ancient weapons like a sword and bow and arrow. He even learned how to fight with a stick; "In case it comes down to a fistfight when you don't really want your opponent to get close to you," is what Carswell said when Neil asked why in god's name he had to learn how to fight with a stick. It turned out Neil was also surprisingly good at it and he loved the way you had to make use of the stick. It was something new and exciting to him.

The wolf at the door shrugged and turned around when his eye caught Neil and Chris. It was Carswell and he looked worried.

'Hey! I was just looking for you two!' Carswell said.

'What seems to be the problem that makes you look so worried?' Chris asked. Carswell walked towards them to shake their hands.

'Hello again. The thing that got me worried is that the Lutherland-gang seems to be in Imaer. Their leader "Gunner" has been spotted by the SOI,' The SOI was short for "Security Of Imaer". It was a basic security that had the job to prevent gangs from entering the city, robberies and mostly acts of violence.

'What? Why didn't they capture him?' Neil asked.

'Because Gunner got to them first,' Carswell said. Neil looked worried and got lost in his thoughts. Chris look worried and started to stress out a bit.

'What are they doing here?' Chris asked. Carswell looked uncomfortable and scratched the back of his head; 'We don't know, but I do know that we got to go to your father to warn him.' They nodded and quickly got to the back of the house. Neil grabbed the saddle of Kalie and strapped it to Jack's back. Jack was nervous, knowing something was wrong. Chris got his horse from the stables, Maeghan. She was nervous too, but happy to see Chris, Neil and Jack anyway. She was the other sister of Jack. Chris also strapped his saddle to Maeghan's back and mounted her. Neil had also mounted his horse and they rode to the front of the house. There, Carswell was waiting for them on his horse.

'Let's go!' Carswell said and they galloped away at full speed.

Not even five minutes later, they arrived at Nicolas' house to find the front door broken open. Neil jumped off Jack, who slowed down when as soon as he got off. Chris and Carswell did the same and their horses did the same as Jack and waited in front of the house. Neil was in front, running inside.

'Dad, are you okay!?' He shouted while entering the hall. He made his way into the living room, only to find Nicolas collapsed on the floor with bloodstains in his dark fur.

'Shit!' Neil shouted. He ran to Nicolas and laid two fingers in Nicolas neck to feel a weakened heartbeat. 'Is he alive!?' Chris asked who was right behind him with Carswell.

'Yes, but barely,' Neil said, worried and stressed at the same time.

'Carswell, please get some water.' Neil said and Carswell ran to the kitchen. Neil lifted up Nicolas and laid him down on the couch.

'Dad, are you there? Wake up!' Neil said while softly shaking him on his shoulders. Nicolas groaned a bit and opened his eyes a bit. He tried to sit straight up. Neil carefully assisted him while Chris made sure everyone had left the house. Carswell stood next to Nicolas and helped him drink. He handed over the glass to Neil and got the medicine cabinet in the bathroom upstairs. He brought a small bottle of alcohol, bandage and a pair of scissors downstairs. He tended to Nicolas' wounds while Neil helped him drink and stay awake. When Carswell was done, Chris came back down; 'The house is clear!' He said and walked to the couch.

'Are you okay?' Chris asked Nicolas. Nicolas laughed a bit.

'Do I look like I'm okay to you?' He said in a cynical way while smiling softly. Neil was somewhat eased by the fact that Nicolas could still joke and probably wasn't dying. Neil put down the glass on the coffee table and sat down next to him.

'What happened?' He asked.

'The Lutherland-gang is what happened... I knew I had to send you two out earlier.'

'Hey, this isn't your fault okay?' Neil looked him in the eyes and realized something was up. Nicolas iris was not as unnatural green as always, but rather yellow, just like Neil's eyes.

'What happened to your eyes?' Neil asked.

'They got the gemstone...' Nicolas said. The gemstone was an important thing for Nicolas. It kept him alive, preventing him from ageing. No one knew how the gemstone caused that to happen, but what the four in the living room did know, was that if the gemstone were to be taken away from its carrier, the carrier would start to age up to the physical and mental state

of someone that is as old as the carrier is. In Nicolas' case, that could very well be over one hundred. He would probably be completely changed within 1 to 2 weeks, which they wouldn't allow to happen.

'Do you have any idea where they went?' Carswell asked.

'No, but I think they are making their way to Damien's hideout. We don't exactly know where it is, but I do know they will probably meet up in Lutherland. The gang always wants to be in safety when a trade happens.' Nicolas answered.

'A trade?' Chris asked.

'They won't do it for free,' Nicolas said.

'You two have to go now,' Carswell said. 'They probably are at the train station.' Neil nodded and they ran outside. They mounted their horses and went to the train station, to catch the train. Just when they arrived, the train was leaving and already passed the station.

'There was only one way to get there fast enough. We have to follow that train and get on!' Neil said. The next train would arrive at 6 P.M., which meant they had to wait 6 hours. No way they were going to wait that long with Nicolas dying back there. They rode to the train as fast as possible. Luckily, their horses were incredibly fast. Everyone who had seen them run had never seen a horse that went faster than them. Slowly, they caught up with the train. Behind the train was an open cart they rode to the side of the car and Jack jumped on the cart. The cart wasn't very high, but an untrained horse wouldn't have made it. Their horses were trained for this and had to do this multiple times when a train was being robbed and they went after it. The cart that came after the open cart was the cart for horses. Nicolas told the engineers who had to design the train to make a save and big double door at the back of the cart as well, instead of only on the side. This way, horses which came from the open cart behind could be brought in the horse cart. They got off their horses and Chris opened the big doors. They brought their horses inside and closed the doors. The inside wasn't big, smelled and was uncomfortable to breathe in. They stalled their horses and took off the saddles.

'See you on the other side,' Neil said. He stroked Jack over his nose. Jack pushed his nose in his hand as a response. They quickly got back to the doors and got outside. Next to the door was a ladder which could get them on the roof. Neil went first and peeked over the edge over the roof. He saw nobody, so he climbed onto it. Chris followed him when they suddenly felt the train slow down. It didn't stop, but it definitively went a lot slower.

‘The train is being robbed,’ Neil said as he was regaining his balance. He knew this because every train driver was instructed to slow down if a robbery was going on. This way, it was easier for police force to enter the train. They ran over the roof of the horse cart and dropped down on the other side. They couldn’t go through the cart because it was an older design in which they didn’t take for account it needed a door on the other side to get to the next cart easily. They positioned themselves alongside the door of the passenger cart and Neil peeked through the window of the door. There only were passengers who looked confused because of the slowing down train.

‘This cart is safe,’ Neil said. Chris nodded and moved his hand away from the revolver holster with his gun. Neil pushed down his hat and flipped open the collar of his jacket, to prevent people from recognizing him. Chris, on the other hand, didn’t. This was because the public knew Nicolas had children, but Nicolas never showed them to the public for their own safety. Neil had the problem that he really looked like Nicolas and sometimes got mistaken for him. They walked into the cart and people glanced at them, probably wondering what they were doing.

‘Good morning everyone,’ Neil said with a crackling voice.

‘The train has some troubles. Don’t worry please, we are here to fix it.’ Chris nodded behind him and they continued on their way. They reached the back of the cart and stepped outside. Neil closed the door behind them and looked at Chris.

‘You know nodding like that doesn’t help to convince people, right?’ Neil asked silently.

‘Sorry,’ Chris whispered while shrugging.

‘Just say nothing in the next one,’ Neil said. He opened the next door, forgetting to check if there were any members of the Lutherland gang inside and thus by turning around found someone pointing a gun at him. Within a fraction of a second, Neil ducked and pulled out his own revolver. He fired his gun and the bullet went through the hand of the man. The man screamed and collapsed on the floor. Chris came in and pointed his gun at another man, who was collecting valuable items from passengers.

‘Put that bag down immediately,’ Chris said; ‘Slowly.’ The man slowly put the bag down, but suddenly grabbed the man he was robbing just a second ago and put a knife at his throat. The man focused on Neil and Chris who were both aiming their guns at him.

‘Let him go, he is innocent,’ Neil said.

‘Do I look like I care if he is or isn’t?’ The man said.

‘He is just a means to an end to me, nothing more, nothing less. So, I propose you both put that gun down or this man is going to say goodbye to the world.’ The man was begging Neil and Chris to put down the revolvers. Neil knew that if he did, it was to know use at all. This was a member of the Lutherland-gang and probably would kill the man anyway. Neil was trying to find a way out of the situation without any casualties. Then he saw a fox sneaking up behind the man with brass knuckles around in his hand. The fox pulled his arm back and swung it to the Lutherland-gang member with a devastating force, causing the man to collapse. The fox caught the hostage who lost his balance.

‘Are you okay?’ The fox asked. The man was breathing heavily and tried to form a sentence; ‘Yes, thank you.’ The fox helped the man sit down on the chair. The woman next to him immediately gave him a hug and kept thanking the fox.

‘Thank you,’ Neil said. The fox nodded.

‘No problem.’ He put his hand forward to greet them. The fox introduced himself as Mason Dodewaard. Neil and Chris introduced themselves with their first names, but never said their last name.

‘That was very clever, I have to admit,’ Chris said. Mason smiled; ‘Thanks.’ They looked down at the two knocked out men. Neil rubbed his chin;

‘Could you guard these men while we get the others?’ Neil asked.

‘Of course. Do you happen to have a rope to tie them together?’ Neil nodded and grabbed the rope he had hanging on his belt. He tied the men together and stepped back from them.

‘We’ll be back,’ Neil said. Mason nodded and guarded the members of the Lutherland-gang while Neil and Chris went on their way to investigate the next card. They stopped at the back door of the cart they were in because they heard voices on the other side; ‘Where are Winchell and Gareth? They should have been here by now!’ Another voice responded; ‘I don’t know but I ain’t waiting. We have to get off the train before we reach the tunnel!’

‘Alright, let’s go!’ the other voice said.

‘I don’t think so,’ Neil said and he opened the door and pointed his gun at a man right in front of him. The man wanted to shoot him, but Neil shot his hand before the man could pull the trigger. Neil, focused on the man in front of him, didn’t realize there was still someone behind him. He got kicked from behind and lost his balance, causing him to fall over. He could just grab the end of the other cart in front of him. If he had missed that, he would be under the train right now, probably getting sliced and diced by the train’s wheels. The man that kicked him wanted to kick him in the back again, so

that he would fall, but luckily Chris grabbed the man and knocked him out before he could. The man who was still on the other cart drew his gun and shot Chris in the shoulder, who fell back against the door of the cart he was on. The man who had shot Chris, now turned his attention to Neil. He looked at Neil with a mean smile and started pushing his shoe down on his hands. It hurt like hell, but Neil didn't give in that easily. He hold on to the cart as long as he could.

'Shit, fuck, FUCK!' Neil shouted. He was panicking, not knowing what to do. Chris tried to get up, but the gang member pointed his gun at him and told him to sit back down. Chris did as he was told and tried to reach for his gun, but the man saw it and shot at him again. He didn't hit Chris, but the bullet landed right next to his hand. It was enough for Chris to realize he shouldn't try anything.

Neil couldn't hold it much longer and his fingers started to slip away from the cart. He looked under him, seeing the tracks racing below him, under the connection point between the two carts. He suddenly realized he could use the connection point as a beam to stand on. He pulled his feet away from the cart behind him and landed them on the connection point. The gang member was thrown of guard and drew his gun to shoot Neil, but Chris had grabbed his gun and shot the man before he could. The bullet hit the man in the arm, causing him to drop the gun. The gun fired when it hit the ground and fired a bullet through Neil's hat, which was somehow still on his head. The man stepped backwards and Neil could use his hands again. He quickly got on the cart where the man was holding his arm with his other hand and knocked him out. He was heavily breathing from the adrenaline rushing through his body. He turned around and jumped back to the cart Chris was on.

'Are you okay?' Neil asked.

'Yeah, I'm fine... We have to tie up these men.' Chris grabbed the rope he had on his belt and handed it over to Neil. They got the two men into the cart where the other man were tied up. Mason helped them and made sure the four got tied together instead of two pairs of two gang members.

'Thank you,' Neil said.

'No problem,' Mason said and he turned to Chris; 'Do you need help with that?' He asked while pointing at his shoulder.

'No, not necessary. Thanks anyway,' Chris said. Mason nodded. Neil looked up and spoke to the people in the cart who had seen everything happen.

'If you would be so kind to leave this cart and get into the next, that would be great,' Neil said. The people immediately got up and moved to the next

cart, except for the man who was held hostage. He turned to the gang members and started kicking them.

‘Hey!’ Neil said and he pulled the man away from the members. The man looked him in the eyes with rage and punched Neil on his nose. Neil stepped back and tripped over the seat behind him, causing him to fall backwards and hit his head against the inside wall. The world around Neil turned hazy and seemed to spin around him. He felt nauseas and extremely dizzy. His nose and the back of his head were bleeding, but Neil didn’t feel it through all the other effects he got from hitting his head. He saw a blurry shape in front of him with two angry eyes and an arm going backwards to deliver a next punch, but it was stopped by a white-furred hand and got pulled back. While Chris pushed the man away from Neil, Mason helped him up. He said something to him, but Neil couldn’t understand what. He sat down on the seat he tripped over and wiped his nose with his hand. When he saw the red stains of blood on his hand, he became mad. The nauseating effect and the dizziness started to disappear as Neil got angrier. His back hair slowly began to stand straight up and he started to growl. As he stood up, he seemed bigger and rougher than before. This was confirmed by his clothing ripping in some places. His eyes seemed to become a darker shade and were filled with anger. He stood up and walked to the man who had punched him. Without thinking, Neil grabbed him by the collar and lifted him up. The man looked at him with terror, but Neil didn’t care. He walked straight through the backdoor of the cart and held the man between the two carts where Neil had been hanging a couple of minutes ago.

‘Please, I’m sorry! I... I... I didn’t intend to do that! I... I swear!’ The man whined. Neil didn’t react. He just held the man in the air. He was trying to control himself as hard as he could, but it was extremely hard. This man triggered the howler-effect, which is very hard to stop without going ballistic on something or someone. Then Chris appeared in front of him.

‘Neil, look at me,’ Chris said. Neil turned his head to him, but held the man above the gap between the carts.

‘Calm down. It’s okay.’ Chris laid his hand on Neil’s shoulder and he started to calm down. Somehow, Chris had always been incredible in calming people down and getting them to relax. It was a really strange ability, but it was definitely handy to help Neil if he had a howler-effect.

He calmed down and put the man down. Almost immediately the dizziness and nausea came back. He fell backwards, but Chris caught him and made him sit down inside. The man who had attacked Neil was frozen in his place, staring at where Neil’s face had been only a couple of seconds ago.

‘You’re lucky I was here,’ Chris said. ‘Get to that cart or I’ll let him finish what he started.’ The man gave him a terrified look.

‘Okay, okay! I’m going! Please don’t!’ The man made his way to the next cart while keeping an eye on Neil. He touched around behind him, searching for the door handle. Only when he was through the door and closed it behind him, he looked away.

‘A howler, huh?’ Mason asked.

‘Yeah, half-howler actually,’ Chris said.

‘I’m going to tell the train driver to speed up again. And Neil; rest.’ Mason went off to the next cart and closed the door behind him.

‘Strange...’ Chris mumbled.

‘What?’ Neil asked.

‘Nothing important. You need to rest. Come on, I’ll get you inside.’ Chris helped him stand up and they walked inside slowly. He carefully assisted him in sitting down on the seat just next to the door.

‘You need to rest,’ Chris said. ‘I’ll take the first watch.’

‘Shouldn’t you do something about your shoulder?’ Neil asked.

‘You and I both know that isn’t necessary for me. It will heal.’ Chris had a very weird ability to heal very quick. After only a week, the wound probably wouldn’t even be visible anymore. You might only be able to spot it because the fur hadn’t grown back yet. They discovered his ability when he was using a saw and accidentally sawed off the third segment of his index finger, all the way past his nail. When they were taking care of the wound, they realized it had already stopped bleeding after a minute. After about four weeks, the segment had almost completely regenerated, including the nail. It was astounding and they let a doctor look at it. He couldn’t explain the phenomenon, but decided to research how it was possible by taking samples from the cut of finger and skin cells from his regrown finger. That was five years ago and he still hadn’t figured it out. This didn’t mean he would give up. He would still take samples from Chris’ skin. The part where the skin samples were taken from was visible on Chris’ finger, but it wasn’t very noticeable, because it was on the inside of his hand.

‘So, you take first watch then?’ Neil asked.

‘Yeah...’ Chris said, clearly with his mind somewhere else. Neil decided not to ask about it and closed his eyes. He opened his eyes again when he felt a piece of clothing wiping along his nose. It was Chris, who had taken off his waistcoat and blouse which he used to take care of Neil. Neil pushed away his arm to stop him from doing so.

‘No, don’t use your own clothing! Use mine, it’s destroyed anyway,’ He said.

‘Too late, it’s already on here.’ Neil sighed. He let Chris take care of his nose and head and thanked him.

‘You want my blouse instead?’ He asked.

‘I think blood stains are better than ripped clothing Neil... I can go without a blouse for a while. My coat is warm enough.’

‘And your waistcoat?’

‘I’ll just wear it without blouse I guess.’

‘Alright then. Just wake me up if you need something.’

‘Sure. When we arrive, we do have to get this bullet out of my shoulder quickly,’ Chris said.

‘Where does this train go?’ Neil asked.

‘Wealdstone, if I’m correct.’

‘Didn’t dad’s friend live in Wealdstone?’

‘Yeah, maybe we can ask him for help... Do you know where he lives?’

‘No, but maybe the people know him there. His name is Michael Fay.’ Chris nodded and looked at the pocket watch on the inside of his jacket. It was a golden watch which they both got from Nicolas when they turned 18.

‘We will be there in about an hour. It’s better if you rest until we are there. That injury on your head is pretty serious. We need to look into that.’

‘Alright then. Thanks.’ Chris smiled at him and Neil closed his eyes. After about two minutes, he was asleep.

Neil woke up of somebody softly shaking his shoulder; 'Wake up Neil. We arrived.' Neil opened his eyes and looked around him. For a second, he had no idea where he was, but then he remembered. He was on the train to Wealdstone after going after gang members who had the nerve to take something away from his father. On his shoulder was a white furred hand with a little patch of missing fur on the inside of the index-finger.

'Neil?' Chris asked. 'Are you coming?'

'Yeah...,' Neil said and carefully stood up. He was still a bit dizzy, but the nausea was over. He looked at the gang members and rubbed his chin.

'What are we going to do with them?' He asked.

'I told the local sheriff to come and get them. He will be here within five minutes. He told us we could go,' Chris said.

'What about the gemstone? Do they have it?'

'No. We apparently followed bait,' Chris said with a frustrated tone.

'Fuck,' Neil mumbled. One of the gang members laughed at him. Neil looked at him and walked towards him. He looked the man in the eye with a cold face. The man's smile disappeared and the man tried to back up, but his "friends" pushed him back, not wanting to be in front of the howler.

'Where are they?' Neil asked. The man was clearly panicking.

'I don't know,' he hastily said. 'They didn't tell us in case we got captured.' Neil bend over to the man. The man looked terrified, but Neil kept the stone-cold face and continued questioning the man.

'I presume you know where your hideout is located?'

'Yes, but I can't tell.' That, unfortunately for the man, was not the right answer to Neil. Neil grabbed him by the collar and pulled him towards his face, staring directly in his eyes.

'Are you sure?' Neil asked with a calm voice. The man looked like he was about to cry of fear but kept his mouth shut.

'I asked you something. It's quite impolite to ignore someone, don't you think?' The man swallowed and was clearly having a dilemma no one would want to face.

'You know...,' Neil began; 'You can tell me where it is and you'll go to prison. There your so called "friends" can't kill you, even if they wanted to. The other option is that you don't tell me and then either I will kill you, or your "friends" when you get out of prison because they took our father down.' The man looked surprised and maybe even more terrified than before, if that

was even possible. He didn't know Neil and Chris were his sons. When the man realized that it probably wouldn't be a great idea to mess with them, he decided to tell Neil where the hideout was located.

'Okay, it's in Westhaven. I can't exactly pinpoint where.' Neil let him go and the man quickly backed away from him.

'Alright. Thanks, you're a great help.' Neil said, giving the man a smile.

'Let's go get the horses,' Chris said. Neil nodded and grabbed his hat from the seat. He pulled it down on his head, just like he had done when they got onto the train. Chris closed his jacket, so that nobody could see he wasn't wearing anything underneath.

'What about mister Dodewaard?' Neil asked.

'He is fine. I spoke to him and he will take care of the gang members with the local sheriff,' Chris answered. Neil nodded and they went to get the horses. Their horses greeted them enthusiastically and they guided the horses out of the cart.

'So where can we find Michael?' Chris asked.

'I don't know, like I said. Our best option is to ask around, but looking as roughed up as we look right now, we ain't going to get any closer to him any time soon.' Chris nodded thoughtfully and tried to come up with a solution.

'Maybe we can ask the sheriff?'

'No,' Neil answered. 'Looking like this he probably won't take us seriously. Dad told me he didn't particularly like the man. He said even Damien had better motives and popularity than him.' Chris couldn't help but laugh a bit. 'But seriously, how are we going to find Michael?' He asked.

'Maybe we can ask Mason for help,' Neil offered.

'Sounds like a plan!' Chris said. They walked back to the cart with where they left the gang members behind. Mason was there, waiting on something.

'Mister Dodewaard!' Neil shouted from a distance as they were approaching him. Mason's long ears shot up and he turned his head to the two.

'Mister Mercia! How are you doing?' Mason said while walking towards them.

'You got a pretty serious injury on the back of your head.'

'I'm alright. I am still somewhat dizzy, but it will go away. We had a little question.'

'Alright, what can I do for you?'

'Do you happen to know anyone who knows where Michael Fay lives?'

'Yeah, I do. Why?'

'We need to have a word with him.'

'Does he have something to do with these four?'

‘No, not at all, but he might be able to help us.’

‘I’m a friend of him. I can guide you there if you want.’

‘That would mean a lot to us.’

‘Alright then, but we do have to wait for the sheriff to turn up. We can’t just leave the gang members here.’

They waited until the sheriff arrived while talking about what Mason was doing in Wealdstone. He told them he was visiting his parents since he hadn’t seen them for quite a while.

When the sheriff arrived, Neil put out his hand to the sheriff, but the sheriff only gave him a diminishing look. Neil was somewhat offended and now realized his father was completely right. The sheriff turned to Mason and whispered something in his ear, while looking at Chris and Neil.

‘Why don’t you ask them yourself?’ Mason answered. The sheriff seemed surprised by the answer and looked offended.

‘I’m the one asking questions and you should answer me,’ the sheriff said to Mason. Neil pulled up one eyebrow; ‘So, what were you going to ask us?’ Neil said it with a very arrogant tone to show the man he wasn’t planning on getting forced into doing or saying anything by the man. The sheriff turned to him and looked mad.

‘Who do you think you are?’ the man said.

‘Oh, just your average man,’ Neil said while shrugging. He could hear Chris chuckling softly behind him. Chris knew exactly what he was doing. Neil more than once used Nicolas’ identity to get people to shut up and listen. Neil knew the sheriff would ask for his name, since the sheriff was allowed to put a warning behind someone’s name for getting in the way of a sheriff. Knowing what type of sheriff the wolf in front him was, he would definitely make use of the system.

‘What is your name, fool?’ came out of the mouth of the man. Neil looked at him, exaggeratedly insulted.

‘A fool? Me? Sir, please. Where’s the respect for your superiors?’

‘What the hell are you talking about?’ The sheriff said, showing a trace of fear.

‘Isn’t it obvious? Well, in case not, the name is Nicolas Mercia,’ Neil said, while he took off his hat with a smile.

‘Nice to meet you. To whom do I owe the pleasure?’ He asked with a big smile. Technically, he wasn’t lying. His name indeed was Nicolas Mercia, but people didn’t know that one of the sons of Nicolas shared his name. Nicolas always told Neil to present himself as the president in case someone

recognized he looked like him. This way nobody knew Nicolas even had sons. This was to secure the safety of Chris and Neil against political extremists in case Nicolas would be killed. Although Neil was only allowed to use it in case of people recognizing him as Nicolas, he liked to use it to get his way sometimes. He was careful with it anyway, making sure not to cause any trouble for Nicolas himself. The sheriff suddenly made place for a terrified look, thinking he had just openly insulted the president. Chris laughed when he saw the reaction of the sheriff and faced away to not further embarrass the sheriff. The sheriff swallowed and scratched the back of his head.

‘I... I’m sorry, sir, no, president. I... I didn’t...’ Neil didn’t let him finish his sentence. He patted the man on the shoulder.

‘Don’t worry, I know I look horrible today. That doesn’t take away the fact that you act like this, in any case. I might have to look into that...’

‘Mister president, I really don’t...’ Neil interrupted him again, this time he looked serious.

‘Do your job.’ The man nodded.

‘What seems to be the problem, if I may ask?’ the man said, afraid to say anything wrong. Chris managed to pull himself together and turned back around, still grinning.

‘These four in the train need to be locked up, at least until I say you can let them go. No paying to get out of prison for them. Understood?’ Neil asked.

‘Yes mister president,’ the sheriff said while doing something that looked like bowing.

‘Well, we have to go,’ Neil said and put back his hat.

‘We don’t have much time. Mister Dodewaard?’ Mason nodded and took the lead. Neil and Chris followed with their horses. When Neil passed the sheriff, he patted him on the shoulder.

‘I’ll let you know when I decided what to do,’ Neil said with a big smile. Chris started laughing again, while the sheriff didn’t dare to say anything.

‘I didn’t quite catch your name by the way,’ Neil said.

‘Wayne Hughes mister president.’

‘Thank you! You were a great help,’ Neil said and they followed Mason.

‘You are a genius!’ Chris said, still laughing a bit.

‘Thank you,’ Neil said.

‘I wish I looked as much as dad as you do. Strange, don’t you think? How is it that you look more than dad than me?’

‘I don’t know. Must be a coincidence. Maybe because we are both black furred or something like that.’

‘I think so,’ Mason said. ‘But if people would look long at you for long enough, that would notice you are not him.’

‘How so?’ Neil asked.

‘Your eyes are golden, not bright green. It’s as simple as that.’

‘Didn’t even think of that myself! Good job on that one mister.’ Mason shrugged and smiled.

‘I work with a lot of people who I sometimes need to memorize. If you do, you become great at spotting similarities and differences.’ Neil realized that it could be a dangerous game if someone noticed it wasn’t him.

‘As they walked over the road, Neil looked around. It seemed like a town where poor people live. Some houses were visibly made by the owners themselves. They looked unstable and old. You could call it a mess of nails and wooden planks. There was a bar along the road as well. It was the only stable house which looked like it could be worth something.

‘Is that a well-known bar?’ Neil asked.

‘Yeah, I used to come there a lot with my parents, but since they don’t come here anymore, I haven’t been there either.’

‘Why did they stop going here?’

‘I don’t really know. They said the bar started to feel unsafe after Damien left. They don’t blame your father or anything, but they believe there might be smugglers in there.’

‘Strange,’ Neil said. ‘We haven’t heard anything about that before...’

‘Yeah, really strange.’ Chris said while looking at the bar with a thoughtful look on his face.

‘Kind of sad, to be honest. It was a great bar. It was very cozy last time I was there. I might take a look there on my way back.’ Mason said. He seemed to know a lot of people in the town. He was constantly greeting people and telling stories about what he had experienced with them in his youth. Neil learned Mason had always been somewhat of a naughty but honest man. He liked a joke and wasn’t scared to joke about himself. Neil liked that personality, since he was a little bit like him.

After a while, they came to a stop.

‘There it is,’ Mason said. He pointed at a quite good-looking house. It looked like this was designed by an architect. It wasn’t as big as Neil’s house, but it was big enough for a household of four to five people. As they approached the house, Neil and Chris let their horses stay right where they were. They gave them an apple Neil still had in his bag. Neil fed Jack and the horse neighed satisfied.

‘Well, I have to go! It was a pleasure to meet you two. I hope we see each other another time,’ Mason said, smiling at them.

‘Likewise!’ Chris said. They shook his hand and Mason took off.

‘Nice guy,’ Chris said.

‘Agreed. We should give him a special thanks on our way back.’

‘Definitely.’ By that note, they walked up to the front door. There was a bronze door knock. Neil used it and they patiently waited for Michael to open up. After a while the door opened a little bit.

‘Who’s there?’ A voice asked from the other side.

‘Neil and Chris Mercia. Are you Michael Fay?’

‘Ha, I was wondering when Nicolas was going to introduce you two!’ A wolf with a mix of grey, brown and white fur opened the door. The man looked at Chris’ shoulder and then looked at Neil.

‘What in the world happened to you two? Where’s your father?’ The man asked.

‘We will explain later, but we have to take care of these wounds first. We were hoping you could help us,’ Chris said.

‘I at least have to know what caused the wounds,’ Michael said.

‘A gunshot to the shoulder for Chris and I got my head smashed to a wall,’ Neil said. Michael looked worried.

‘What the hell have you two been doing?’ Michael asked.

‘We will give you details after we have taken care of the wounds. For now just keep it at fighting gang members.’ Chris said.

‘Well, follow me then. Close the door behind you, please,’ Michael said. Neil closed the door and they followed him to the living room. The living room was square with a big circular carpet on the ground with multiple colors in lines going round. At the left side was a couch that stood against the wall. Next to the couch was a small table with a glass and a bottle of wine on it. At the back of the room was an entrance to the kitchen. At the right side of the room was a window with a desk underneath it, just like the one Neil had in his room. On the desk was a picture of someone. Neil walked towards it and looked at it. It was a picture of a black female wolf, with orange, almost red eyes.

‘Strange...’ Neil thought.

‘A medical condition I guess?’ He actually kind of liked it. He turned around.

‘Hey mister Fay, who’s this?’ He pointed at the picture. Michael turned around and immediately his ears went down, flat on his head.

‘That’s my daughter, Sarah. You can call me Michael by the way...’

‘What’s with the eyes? They look pretty nice.’ Neil said, not noticing Michael’s reaction.

‘I don’t know. It’s just like Chris has unnatural blue eyes. Wolves shouldn’t have those.’

‘Could be...’ Neil said. Michael walked to the medicine cabinet. He opened it and took out something that looked like some kind of pliers, a roll of bandage and a pair of scissors.

‘Let’s start with you then,’ Michael said and he walked to Chris.

‘Go and sit down,’ He said. Chris sat down on the couch. Chris took off the jacket he was wearing and Michael was surprised to see he wasn’t wearing anything under it.

‘Where exactly did your clothing go?’ Michael asked.

‘It’s in Neil’s bag.’ Neil got it out and showed it to Michael.

‘Alright, understandable. That blouse is ruined by the way.’ Chris grinned and looked at Neil.

‘If you just hadn’t hit your head like you always do...’ Neil gave him an annoyed but amused face. He laid down his jacket on the chair in front of the desk and came to them. He looked at the wound.

‘Already healed, as expected...’ Neil mumbled. The wound had partly healed already.

‘Very interesting... Your father told me about it,’ Michael said.

‘Amazing to see it in action. How old is the wound?’

‘About two hours,’ Chris said

‘So how are you going to take the bullet out then?’ Neil asked

‘We have to open the wound again,’ Michael said.

‘Do you have anything like a knife on you?’

‘Does a dagger work?’ Neil asked.

‘That will do.’ Neil handed him his dagger from his belt, which somehow survived the howler effect. He got the dagger from his father. He made the best professional black smith he knew make it. He also requested him to engrave Neil’s name on it, like on his revolver. He also did this for Chris’ gun and dagger.

‘Sit still Chris. This is going to hurt a bit,’ Michael said. He slowly cut open the healed wound a tiny bit, just to make enough space to get the pliers in and take the bullet out. Chris moaned quietly, but didn’t move. Michael put in the pliers and took out the bullet.

‘Could you lay that blouse of him on the table?’ Michael asked.

‘Sure,’ Neil said and he did what he was asked. Michael laid down the bullet he had taken out of Chris’ shoulder on the blouse.

‘Alright, we only need to disinfect it,’ Michael said.

‘Mister Mercia, could you get the disinfection alcohol?’

‘Yeah, of course. Please call me Neil,’ Neil responded. Michael nodded. Neil walked to the medicine cabinet and took out the disinfection alcohol. It wasn’t used before and it seemed to be an old bottle, seen as the etiquette was coming loose. He closed the cabinet and gave it to Michael. He opened it and applied some of it on Chris’ shoulder.

‘Fuck..,’ Chris mumbled while trying to deal with the pain.

‘Sorry,’ Michael said, ‘It has to be done.’ Michael used the same disinfection alcohol to clean the dagger and pliers. He used a white towel to dry them.

‘Alright, let me take a look at the wound on the back of your head then.’ Michael said to Neil.

‘Don’t you need to suture the wound? Or at least put a bandage around it?’ Neil asked.

‘No, then it might get stuck in the wound since Chris heals this quick.’ Neil shrugged. He sat down on the couch and took off his hat. Michael looked at the wound and carefully inspected it. In comparison to Chris’ wound, his was still the same as it was before. Michael got the towel and carefully wiped away some of the remaining blood. He got the disinfection alcohol again and disinfected the wound. He used the pair of scissors to cut off a piece of bandage and wrapped it around Neil’s head. He put the cap back on the small bottle, picked up the stuff, except for Neil’s dagger of course, and put it back in the medicine cabinet. Neil picked up the dagger and put it back in the holder. Michael closed the cabinet and walked to the bullet on the table. He picked up the bullet and threw it out the open window behind the desk. He took the bottle of wine and walked to the kitchen. He grabbed a glass and poured wine in it. He put down his glass down on the dinner table in the kitchen.

‘Come sit down,’ Michael said.

‘You like wine?’

‘No, thanks. Coffee would be great if that isn’t a problem.’

‘Not at all! Anything you want Chris?’ Chris came walking in and sat down at the table next to each other.

‘Do you have anything like wine?,’ He asked.

‘Sure!’ Michael said and after pouring Chris a glass of wine, he made coffee.

‘So,’ Michael began. ‘Now that we have taken care of that, what has happened to you and where is your father?’

‘Well,’ Neil began, ‘We are on our way for our father, since the Lutherland-gang has stolen...,’ Neil stopped for a second. He realized Michael might not know about the gemstone.

‘Hey Michael, do you know that gemstone our dad has?’

‘You mean the one that slows down his ageing?’ Neil knew enough.

‘The gang has stolen it, probably for Damien.’ Michael accidentally dropped the coffee filter with freshly grinded coffee beans by hearing that.

‘Shit,’ he mumbled. Neil stood up to help, but Michael refused; ‘No, sit down please. You have done enough today. Go on.’ Neil sat back down.

After explaining what happened shortly, Neil’s coffee was ready. Michael put down the coffee in front of Neil and sat down.

‘Seems like it hasn’t been easy,’ He said. ‘You two had a rough day. You both need to rest. There are guest rooms upstairs. I can guide you there.’

‘Thank you for the hospitality Michael,’ Neil said.

‘No problem!’ Neil grabbed his jacket and they followed Michael upstairs. It was not big. There were four doors, just like at Neil’s house. The two doors on the left lead to their rooms.

‘While you two inspect your rooms, I am going to get stuff for dinner. You two can grab on of the blouses in the second room. It’s in the drawer of the large dresser. Don’t mind the rifles in there. They are for hunting,’ Michael said.

‘Thanks again,’ Chris said. Michael smiled and walked downstairs.

‘Well,’ Neil said; ‘I’m going to lay down for a minute.’

‘Alright,’ Chris said. Chris opened the door to the second room and they stepped inside. It wasn’t as big as his room at home, but big enough for Neil to stay for a day. It was clean, the bed tidy. There was a small desk at the side of the room, just like Neil’s room at home, but contrary to that, the window was positioned in the back of the room. Next to the desk was the dresser. On the dresser was yet another picture of Michael and his daughter Sarah. Neil hung his jacket and hat on the chair at the desk and took a look at the picture. Michael seemed very happy with her and it made Neil wonder what Sarah was like and who her mother was. Despite his interest, Neil decided it would be best to not ask anything related to Sarah for the time being. He didn’t want to upset Michael in any way. Chris opened the drawer on the bottom of the dresser and looked inside. There was clothing that looked like theirs and was the same size. They got themselves fresh sets of clothing and Neil grabbed his hat and jacket with it. He entered his own room and looked around. It was almost identical to the room Chris was in, only it was mirrored. There was a bookshelf instead of a dresser too. Neil

changed clothes and dumped his ripped clothing on the chair behind the desk. He looked at the books on the shelf and searched for something that sounded interesting. To his surprise, he found the book he had been reading at home. He grabbed it from the shelf and laid down on the bed. He searched for the page he ended on the day before and started reading. Just when he was about to reach the end of the chapter, he heard keys opening the door downstairs.

'Home!' He heard from downstairs. That was Michael's voice. Neil put away the book and stood up. He opened the door and found Chris walking down the stairs already. He followed him into the living room. Michael looked at them and smiled.

'Looking better. The clothing suits you two very well!'

'I guess so,' Chris said.

'So, what have you two been doing?' Michael asked.

'I've been reading a book,' Neil answered.

'I brought my horse to the stables at the back of the house and then I fell asleep and had the strangest dream ever,' Chris said. Neil looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

'What happened?'

'Nothing important.' It was clear Chris didn't want to talk about it, so Neil didn't ask anything else about it.

'I should bring my horse to the back as well then. Could you lead the way Michael?'

'Of course! Follow me.' Neil followed Michael to the front door. Michael opened it and they walked to the back of the house. Jack just followed Neil.

'Well trained horse you have there!' Michael said, impressed by Jack's obedience.

'Yeah, we train our horses that way so that we don't run into trouble on our way to wherever we're going.'

'You're saying it like it's nothing to train a horse like that. Took me a hell lot of training to even make my horse do tricks like that.'

'Guess we just have a lot of good horse trainers in Imaer,' Neil said.

'Here you go. It's not big, but it's better than the front yard.' Neil escorted Jack into one of the three stables at the back. The other two were occupied by two other horses. One was Chris' horse, looking kind of curious at Jack. The other one didn't seem to really care. It was a brown horse, just like Jack, only the brown had a slightly darker tint than Jack's fur.

'So, who is that?' Neil asked, pointing at the brown horse.

'I named her Charlie.'

'Guess we all like regular canid names for our horses,' Neil said with a grin.

‘I think it’s stupid to call them something like Horsy or something like that. It’s not like they don’t deserve a normal name like we do, you know? I don’t think a canid life is more worth than a horse,’ He said.

‘True,’ Michael said. They walked back to the front door.

‘So uhm... we will have to leave tomorrow to go and find the stone, but we need food before we do. Do you know where we can get that?’ Neil asked.

‘Well, there are multiple stores here, including my own, but I don’t think the food will last for two weeks. Another point is that I don’t fully support the idea of you two going alone and me just sitting at home waiting for you two to return or die. Maybe...’ He pondered a bit.

‘What if I join you guys as well? More hands are always good, right?’

‘Are you sure? I don’t want to drag you into something like this when it isn’t absolutely necessary,’ Neil said.

‘Your father tells me otherwise... If the rumors are true, you could “die tripping over a damn stick”. His words, not mine,’

‘You don’t want to know how many times I have heard that sentence,’ Neil said and Michael laughed.

‘I think you could use some help. I can hunt too, which makes it easier to get food. And by the way, Nicolas is actually my only real friend. I can’t afford losing him. I can’t afford losing anyone close to me again. Like Sarah...’ Michael sighed. He looked down a bit. They stopped walking and Neil looked at Michael.

‘What was she like?’ Neil asked.

‘Nice,’ He said. ‘Nice, but very independent and harsh sometimes. Nicolas knew her too,’

‘Did he? He never told me about her.’

‘Your father has had a complicated life Neil. I know him since I was somewhere in my twenties. I still don’t know everything that happened in his life, but I do know he has seen a lot of things. A lot of horrible things... I just don’t get why it must be him. What has he done to deserve it? He’s like the definition of an angel! He never does anything on purpose to hurt anyone. He has always been good. For everyone. You know, people wanted to kill Damien. Nicolas actually made sure he would make it out alive.’

‘Why did he do that?’

‘Because your father has seen too many people die Neil. He doesn’t know Damien’s motives either. It’s complicated and Nicolas is not one to kill or even hurt anyone. As far as I know, the worst thing he has done is smack someone in the face when he had a howler effect or something,’

‘Wait, he is a howler?’ Neil asked.

‘Half-howler, actually. Just like you. He is old, very old. He’s wise too and wouldn’t make reckless decisions.’ Neil nodded.

‘Yeah.’

‘Come on. Let’s get inside and prepare dinner. It’s getting late.’ Michael said. They walked to the front door. Neil was trying to give everything Michael just said a place in his mind. While he did that, they walked inside. Neil took place on the couch in the living room while Michael started preparing dinner in the kitchen. Neil was thinking through it. Chris came sitting next to him. He could see Neil was in thoughts.

‘What’s on your mind?’ He asked.

‘Did you know dad is a half-howler too?’ Neil asked, silently.

‘No? Where did you get that from?’

‘Michael just told me! Why did he never tell us?’

‘I don’t know! Why wouldn’t he tell us about it?’

‘He has never been very talkative, but I at least expected him to tell us these things, right?’

‘So,’ Michael suddenly said, ‘I guess we’re leaving tomorrow morning?’

‘Wait, you’re going with us?’ Chris asked.

‘Yes!’ Michael said.

‘But who’s going to take care of the house then? I don’t want your house to be at risk of being robbed when we are gone. It seems like that will happen if no one guards the place here!’

‘Well, I think I can take care of that,’ Neil said, ‘You know the sheriff, right?’

‘Yeah, but he doesn’t lift a finger,’ Michael said.

‘Oh, I can make him move,’ Neil said.

‘I spoke to him when we arrived. He’ll do anything I say, believe me.’ Chris grinned thinking back at what happened.

‘Well then... Does that mean he’s going to get into my house? I mean, I don’t trust him more than I trust any stranger, to be completely honest with you.’

‘No, I’m sending mail to Carswell. He will take care of the house as soon as he arrives here. Do you know Carswell?’

‘Yes, I do. He’s a good guy. He can get in whenever he wants.’

‘Nice. Let’s go to that sheriff then.’

‘Alright. I will prepare dinner while you two are gone.’ Michael said.

‘Where can we find the sheriff?’ Neil asked.

After explaining where the sheriff was located, Neil and Chris went to the sheriff. When they arrived, it had been an easy job for Neil to make the man listen. He would be at Michael’s house at 12 o’clock the next day. When they returned, dinner was ready. They ate and had a little chat with Michael. Michael explained that because of his British background, he usually had dinner around 5 o’clock, instead of noon and had a light meal at noon instead. Neil wasn’t used to it, but it was fine by him to go with it for a couple of days. They talked for the rest of the evening by the fireplace and went to bed afterwards.

Neil woke up. He stretched out in the bed and yawned. He had a light headache. The night before, he had written a letter to Carswell and let it get delivered as soon as possible. Carswell would arrive within two to four days if everything went well. Neil had explained that the gang was in Westhaven to Michael and made a plan with him and Chris.

He swung his legs out of the bed and stood up. He stretched once more and put on his clothes. He walked out of the room and got downstairs. Chris was already there, making coffee.

‘Good morning,’ Chris said.

‘I made you some coffee.’

‘Thank you.’ Neil said. He sat down at the dinner table.

‘Hope the coffee can help cure my headache.’ Chris put down the coffee in front of Neil. Neil put his hands around the mug to warm them, since it was very cold downstairs.

‘Is Michael still sleeping?’ Neil asked.

‘Yeah, I’ll wake him up in about 15 minutes.’

‘Hmm...’ Neil took a sip of coffee. Chris sat down with a cup of coffee for himself too.

‘It’s going to be a long ride. We’ll be riding all day.’ Neil said.

‘I know. That’s why I’m drinking coffee right now. I don’t really like it, but I sometimes take it if I have to work or if I am tired and don’t want to sleep.’ Neil shrugged.

‘Never saw you drink it before.’ Chris laughed a bit. Somehow, it worked very contagious and Neil had to laugh as well. Something was up with Chris. He had a relaxing aura around him that caused Neil to relax too. Neil decided not to say anything about it. He drank from his coffee, leaned back in his chair and sighed.

‘We do have to get us some food and water for the trip. We won’t be seeing another town within one and a half day, even if we are on schedule.’

‘I know. Michael planned on hunting tonight. By the way, do we have our water bags with us?’

‘No, we don’t. If there’s a shop where we can get it in town, we can go buy two.’ Chris nodded.

‘We should check if Michael has one. He probably does, but it isn’t a problem for if he doesn’t. We can get one for him as a little thank you for the hospitality, I guess. And maybe something else.’

‘Sure, sounds good.’

‘I do have a water bag, but I wouldn’t mind an extra one!’ Chris and Neil turned their heads to the location where the sound came from. There was Michael, making his way downstairs.

‘Good morning,’ he said. They both greeted him and Chris got back to the plan Michael and Neil had made the night before.

‘When are we going?’ He asked.

‘I just got to make breakfast for us first. In the closet upstairs in Chris’ room should be hunting equipment. If two would get it, that would be nice,’

‘Sure,’ Chris said. Neil drank the last bit of his coffee and got up. Chris did the same and they walked upstairs. Neil followed Chris to the room where he had been sleeping that night. In the room stood a nicely detailed closet. The doorknob of the closet had a lock. Chris bend over and moved his hand under the closet, behind the left leg of the closet, which stood against the wall. Neil heard a click and Chris fiddled around a bit before he pulled out a small silver key.

‘How did you know it was there?’

‘Michael told me yesterday when I was asking him what to do with my clothes,’ Chris said.

‘Apparently, Michael designed it. It’s a handy little hiding spot.’ He put the key in the lock on the nicely varnished doorknob and turned it round in the lock until a click was heard. Chris opened the closet to reveal two hunting rifles hanging on pins on the back of the closet. There were four large camouflage-colored bags on the bottom of the closet. On the inside of the doors of the opened closet, there was an array of multiple daggers and knives from different proportions. Above the riffles was another plank with little cubic boxes on it. On the cover of the boxes was a bullet. It didn’t look like the bullets Neil’s revolver had at all, but seen by the length and familiar shape, Neil knew these were rounds for the hunting rifles. Chris grabbed three bags and put them upright against the wall next to the closet. He opened them and turned back to the closet. He looked over to Neil.

‘Let’s see...’ Chris mumbled. He had hunted before and knew what he needed to get. He looked over the knives hanging on the left door where the bags were resting against. He carefully selected three hunting knives and handed one over to Neil.

‘Take this one. You can use it for skinning and cooking,’ While he said that, he put the two other knives in two of the bags. He went over to the knives again and selected three different knives and handed on over to Neil again.

‘This one is for filleting. We’re probably not going to use these in the forest, but they might come in handy on our journey to Westhaven.’

‘Alright,’ Neil said. He put the knives in the knife holders on his belt, on the opposite site of his revolver. Chris put the other two knives in the bags again. He took out the rifles and swung one over his shoulder. He handed the other

one over to Neil. He took it and swung the gun over his shoulder as well. Chris took two boxes of ammunition and put one in both of the two bags he had put in the other knives as well. Then he reached out behind the boxes in the closet. He fiddled around a bit and took out a box with revolver rounds and handed them over to Neil.

'Thought you might need that, since you probably forgot your own,' Chris said with a small grin on his face.

'Thanks. I didn't forget them by the way. I just wasn't really planning on getting some extra bullets before jumping on a train that's on the move.'

'It's just a joke.'

'I know.' He took the box and walked to his own room to put it in his jacket. With his jacket over his shoulder, he walked back to Chris. Chris stood there, bend over the bags and checked the inside. He took an old drinking bag out of one of the backpacks and swung one of the, over his shoulder. Neil grabbed two of the bags. He swung one over the shoulder which was not occupied by the gun and took the other bag with him in his hand. Chris locked the door of the closet and hid away the key where he had found it earlier.

'He really needs that new water bag,' Chris said and he showed the bag to Neil. It was in bad shape and was repaired multiple times.

'We'll fix that before we leave,' Neil said and they walked downstairs to see Michael eating a sandwich in the kitchen. He had made two other sandwiches for Neil and Chris which were on the table.

'Alright, we've got the stuff we need from upstairs. We only need to get you a new water bag, because this is just pathetic in my opinion. We'll go get you one after breakfast' Chris said.

'I have meat we can use for today, but tomorrow we'll have to hunt. We'll ride for two days, sleeping one night under the stars. The second night we might be able to rent rooms in Low Lake, a town on our route about a quarter in of the total distance we'll have to cover. We'll see what we'll do next, but this is the plan for now.' Michael said.

'Okay, then Neil and I will be heading of the store to get him a water bag. We'll be back in fifteen minutes or so.' Michael nodded and continued breakfast. Neil and Chris walked out the door and to the stables at the back of the house. Chris put the saddle on Maeghan's back and tightened the belt under her belly. Neil did the same with Jack and mounted him.

'We might need to get something like a rifle,' Neil said.

'Seriously?' Chris looked at him as if he was stupid.

'Yeah, you never know. Plus, if we are going to hunt, we are going to need a hunting rifle or something in that vein.'

'That's true. Have you learned how to shoot with a rifle, let alone hunt?' Chris asked.

'Yes, I have experience with rifles, but I have never hunted before.'

'Finally it's my turn to tell you something about guns you didn't know!' Chris said over excitedly. Neil laughed a bit.

'Forgot you hunt with dad from time to time.' Neil said and they continued riding to the store. They got off their horses when they arrived and hitched them at the fence placed in front of the store. They walked in.

'Good morning!' The store owner nodded a friendly hello to the two of them. He took a good look at Neil and Chris.

'I presume you are new in town, although your face does look very familiar to me,' The man said while nodding to Neil.

'Won't be the first time someone thinks I look familiar.' Neil laughed. They greeted the man smiled and looked around the shop. Chris already walked further into the shop, searching for water bags. Neil slowly walked through the store, observing his surroundings and the stuff that was for sale. He saw hunting rifles hanging at the wall.

'Chris? Do you have any idea which one is the best one to buy?' Neil asked. Chris' head popped up behind one of the shelves.

'Let me take a look.' He looked at the guns one by one, sometimes picking one of the wall, checking its aim and weight. He was mumbling some names of the rifles; 'Maybe the .50-70 Government... Or the .56-56 Spencer... I think... hmmm...

Eventually he picked one and handed it over to Neil.

'I think this is the best one; the .50-70 Government.' Neil took the gun, carefully aimed it and let himself adjust to its weight.

'Feels strange,' Neil said.

'You'll get used to it. Rifles are very nice once you do.'

'Shall I buy it then?'

'I presume that is why I had to pick one?' Neil gave him an annoyed but yet amused face and swung the gun over his shoulder.

'Don't you need a rifle?' Neil asked.

'No, Michael had two of them, remember?'

Neil nodded and grabbed some boxes of ammo from the shelf above it. Chris walked to the back of the shop to search for the water bags. In the meantime, Neil wandered around a bit more. He saw revolvers, knives, daggers and more that could be useful for hunting. After a while Chris had found the water bag and they went to the counter. Chris paid for the bags and Neil bought the rifle and they got out of the store.

When they got back to the house, Michael had saddled up Charles and was locking the door behind him.

‘Ah, you are back,’ he said. ‘Good. Before we go, we must visit the sheriff and deliver the keys to him.’

‘Are you sure you trust him?’ Neil said.

‘No, that’s why I hid away anything valuable.’

‘Alright then. Carswell should be here. I send mail to him.’ Michael got on his horse and got out the map.

‘We should be going now. We’ll leave town via the back of the house. It’s faced in the direction we have to go. We’ll probably hunt tomorrow morning or after we visited Low Lake.’ Neil was a little bit surprised to hear that they were going to Low Lake.

‘That wasn’t on the planning, right?’

‘No, but it’s on the path and we might be able to sleep there. I prefer that oversleeping in the open air to be honest.’

‘Alright, let’s get riding then!’ Neil said and they were on their way to Low Lake.

Michael, Chris and Neil had been riding for over 5 hours straight and the three were starting to become uncomfortable in their saddles.

'I'm starting to become uncomfortable,' Chris said.

'Why not take a break?'

'Good idea,' Michael said.

'We'll take a break as soon as we're out of the forested area. I would like to have an open field for a break,'

'Why not in the forest?' Neil asked.

'Because I don't fancy wild animals coming to annoy me when I'm trying to eat.' Neil laughed; 'You don't what?' Michael sighed.

'Fancy. I've made a trip to London not too long ago to meet up with my father. He's the most British person ever. I got "to fancy something" from him. It has become some kind of standard thing. You don't like it?'

'Well, I do, but it sounds kind of strange to hear it from you. I didn't expect it. I actually really like the British language, but it just sounds funny to me. They're so polite in every word. I don't think they even know what a swearword is!'

'Don't be such a silly person,' Michael said jokingly. Neil laughed again, causing Chris to join in on the fun; 'You guys are totally bonkers, you know that?' Now Michael started to laugh too. They kept on making stupid jokes and bad accents trying to imitate the British until they reached an open spot. It was not big, but certainly big enough for an average sized camp. It was open in the sun and there was a small river running downhill.

'Ah!' Chris said overexcitedly. 'Finally, a place where I can rest my buttocks and get me a nice cup of tea!'

'Cut it out,' Michael said while he was trying to recover from the laughing.

'Alright,' Chris said. They stopped and got off their horses to take a break. They made a simple plan for the break they were going to have.

'Neil, if you go and get us some dry wood for a fire so we can make some coffee, Chris can go to the small river and get us water while I take care of the horses,' Michael said.

'Sure,' Neil said and went off to get dry wood. It wasn't exactly hard to find since the open spot was in the middle of the forest. He walked into the forest and started picking up dry sticks and put dry leaves in his bag. He returned to camp with the wood and leaves he had found after five minutes. He laid it down in a circle of stones Michael had made. Chris had already returned with two buckets of water. He put one next to the circle of stones and gave one to Michael who used it to let the horses drink. Neil grabbed some of the dry leaves he had taken with him, laid it down in the circle and build a tipi

out of the dry wood. He grabbed a flint and steel out of his bag and started the fire. The leaves quickly combusted into flames. It quickly lit the wood on fire as well and the fire was started. Michael came walking to the fire and put down some kind of construction made out of metal over the fire. It seemed to be a grill attached to four metal pins which Michael pressed down into the dirt as soon as the fire got going well. He put a kettle on top of the grill and poured in some water. While they waited for the water to cook, Michael took out three paper bags out of his saddle bag and gave both Chris and Neil one of them, keeping one for himself. Upon opening the paper bag, Neil smelled the sandwiches that were waiting to be eaten. They all sat down around the fire and dug in.

‘These are some good sandwiches you’ve made Michael, well done!’ Neil said and Chris nodded as an agreement. Michael smiled; ‘I’m flattered,’ he said, continuing the running joke of the British language under the three.

‘You seem very experienced with food. Are you a cook or something along those lines?’

‘No, I just like to experiment with food. If you hunt and harvest the food yourself it’s fun if you can play around with different recipes. When you make something nice, you feel extra satisfied. Most of the time it works out well, but sometimes it tastes horrible. That’s how it goes.’

‘Well, you’re a great experimenter with food then,’ Chris said.

‘Thanks.’ Michael stood up and grabbed a bowl and grinder out of the saddle bag. He also fished out a bag of coffee beans and sat back down. He put some of the beans in the bowl and started grinding. While he ground the beans to a fine powder, the water slowly started boiling. Michael added the powder to the boiling water and took the kettle of the grill. He put it next to the fire and stirred in it with a small silver spoon for a while. When he stopped stirring, he let the coffee rest.

‘May I ask what happened to Sarah?’ Michael’s smile melted away immediately, causing Neil to feel sorry.

‘I’m sorry. If you don’t want to talk about it that’s okay,’ Neil said.

‘No, it’s okay... It’s just a heavy subject for me, but it helps to talk about it sometimes.’ Michael repositioned himself and made himself comfortable.

‘Sarah is my daughter, like I told you before. Me and your father started a campaign 9 years ago against Damien, without violence, from our side at least. You and Chris were twelve, so you probably know that story already and you probably also know about me, but not about Sarah. That’s probably because Nicolas had trouble with what we think happened to her just as much as I do. When Damien started to fight back, I told my wife to flee with

Sarah and return once it was safe again. Unfortunately, I have never heard anything about them after. I still hope they are alive, but I fear the worst.’ Neil was quite shocked.

‘I’m terribly sorry for you. I hope they still are with us.’

‘Don’t be sorry, you couldn’t do anything about it.’

‘What was dad’s connection to her?’ Chris asked.

‘Your father had to care for her a lot when I wasn’t home. He has seen her grow up almost as much as I have. I think that for him it kind of felt like she was his daughter too. It makes me sad really. I feel like I’ve not cared for her well at all when I look back. Nicolas was amazing with her. It seemed like he knew her even before she was born. He knew exactly what she wanted, what she liked, what she meant when I couldn’t make sense of it... It’s a mystery how he knew, even to me. You might want to ask him about it, but he’s probably going to respond with the classic “Some things are best for you not to know. Not yet at least.” Probably sounds familiar, doesn’t it?’ Michael said while looking at Neil. He was surprised he knew.

‘Yeah, I think so... How do you know?’ He asked.

‘That’s not important right now. Let’s just say we are good friends and I’ve heard some stories from your father. I know him quite well. He’s very much like you, really. Only with a somewhat more depressing past, probably also a known fact to you two. But back to Sarah; 9 years ago, we had planned a day off the campaign against Damien, which turned out to be the biggest mistake we’ve ever made. At the time I lived with Sarah and my wife in a village. I managed everything in that village and it was a very close community. Unfortunately, Damien decided that it was going to be destroyed so that he could build more storage for all the oil he was collecting out of the ground. I tried to stop it together with the people in the village, but Damien didn’t care and burned everything to the ground and got people killed. Our motive was to stay non-violent and so we did. As soon as he realized I wouldn’t fight, he went for my weak spot. He threatened to imprison or kill Sarah. I got scared and let my wife flee with her, like I said. I’m scared they might have known I did and killed them.’ Michael looked sad, ears flat on the head and starting to tear up. He sighed and filtered the coffee into another cup, using a knife to hold back the remnant. He did it two times and gave Neil a cup and took one for himself. Neil put his hands around the cup to warm them up.

‘Are you two religious?’ Michael asked. Neil was surprised by the question because everyone always assumed they were. Neil, contrary to just about anyone, didn’t believe in God, because Nicolas always thought him that way.

Unfortunately for him, people despised the idea of not believing in God. Atheists couldn't serve on juries or testify in court, they could be arrested for distributing printed materials, and many-faced harassment or violence from neighbors. This caused Neil to always act like he did believe in God.

'Yes,' Neil said. Michael pulled up an eyebrow and grinned.

'Are you sure?' he asked. Neil didn't know what to say when Chris suddenly jumped in; 'Actually, we aren't.' Neil looked at him, shocked.

'Don't worry Neil,' Michael said. 'I know about your father. I won't judge you or tell anyone.'

'Thank you,' Neil said.

'Do you believe in hope?' Michael asked.

'What do you mean?'

'Do you believe that if you hope enough, something might come true?'

'No, but that doesn't stop me from doing it anyway.'

'Why do you still hope if you don't believe it works?'

'I... don't know,' Neil said, feeling a bit stupid.

'What do you think hope is?' Michael asked while focusing on Chris. Chris turned to him and thought about the question for a while.

'I think hope is something that our brain constructs to keep us going and prevent us from completely shutting down mentally. Hope slowly dies out and we slowly adapt to the situation.'

'So, you are saying hope is a way of processing traumas?' Neil asked.

'Yes, you could put it that way.'

'Interesting,' Michael said and he took a sip of his coffee.

'Do you have any superstitions? Like 13 is an unlucky number?'

'No, I don't think so,' Neil said.

'Are you sure?'

'Yeah, where are we going with this?'

'Nothing, I'm just curious. Everyone has superstitions, all be it something that doesn't seem like a superstition at all.' Neil wasn't sure if Michael just said that to prevent falling back on the subject of Sarah or if he was really interested. Anyhow, Neil decided to go with it.

'You mean something like the sixth sense?' He asked.

'Yes, something like that. Do you believe in the sixth sense?'

'Yeah, I kind of do. I don't see it as a magical or telekinetic something but rather something biology can't explain yet.'

'So you think everything is controlled and can be explained by science?'

'Yes, I do. It just doesn't seem logical to me that some entity is controlling or making all of this. Especially not when people say God made all of this

for us alone. I mean, if you were God, wouldn't you have a bit more fun than that?

'The lord works in mysterious ways,'

'Right,' Neil said. "But how are you so sure He exists then?"

'I'm not. Just like you can't be sure everything is controlled by nature,'

'Fair enough. What about you Chris?' Chris had just been listening to the two having a conversation and didn't expect to be asked something, so he still had his mouth full.

'I'm not religious, but I'm open to believe. Just as long as any kind of proof can be shown to me.' he said, somewhat hard to understand. He swallowed the last bit of his sandwich. Neil kicked him under the table. Chris looked at him in an indignant fashion.

'Manners.' Neil said. Chris rolled his eyes and apologized to Michael. Michael waved it away and Chris continued talking:

'Sometimes I had the feeling He might have talked to me, but it could just be my thoughts taking shape in a God-like fashion.'

'How does that actually work? Talking to God?' Neil asked, genuinely interested.

'I don't really know. Sometimes He, or my thoughts, just appear in my head and then we discuss the problems and sins I might have,'

'Do you have any sins?' Michael asked.

'No,' Neil answered; 'There is no such thing as Chris and sins.' Michael managed to laugh again. Chris response seemed a bit awkward. He laughed, but it didn't seem sincere. Neil waved it away, as he knew everyone had sins and that one thing they will never tell anyone else. Neil was happy that he didn't just ruin their break by bringing up Sarah. He was still wondering what the bond between his father and Sarah had been, but he wasn't going to continue the subject anymore. Not today, at least.

They finished their coffee and sandwiches and stood up. Neil put out the fire with the bucket of water next to the fire and put it in his saddle bag. They climbed onto their horses and went on to their now one and a half day trip to Low Lake.

After riding for about an hour, they found a road that went in the same direction as they needed to go. When they got onto the road, they noticed three men on horses in the distance, facing them. They weren't moving. They were waiting. Neil lined up next to Michael.

'Who are those guys?' Neil asked.

'I don't know. I've never seen them here before..,' Michael responded.

'I don't expect trouble, but prepare for the worst.' Neil made sure his revolver was less than half a second away from shooting, if deemed necessary, while Michael and Chris got the rifles of their shoulders and kept it in their hands. The three men didn't move a muscle whatsoever as they were approaching. When they came close, the man in front of the group spoke; 'Halt.' They took hold and kept calm. The front man observed them carefully from his position before proceeding to ask where they came from. Neil wanted to step forward and ask them what in the world they thought they were doing, but Michael put his hand in front of Neil and spoke up; 'We come from a small town, about seven hours away from here. What seems to be reason of the hold up, gentleman?' Michael asked. 'Well,' the man in front said, while taking a step forward. As the man came closer, Neil's hand moved to his revolver, ready to pull it out. The man's eyes shot over to Neil's hand and he grinned. 'Always prepared for anything I see,' the man said. He got off his horse and walked around the three without looking away from them. As he circled around them, Neil followed him, not keeping his eyes off him. The man was a gray wolf, with a lighter color of fur on the underside of the muzzle, going down his throat, possibly covering his chest too. He had yellow, almost gold eyes behind the rectangular shaped glasses he wore. The gray wolf was long and strong, evident by the width of his chest compared to his middle. When the man looped back around, he got back on his horse. 'Sloppy,' he said, 'Two of you were following me walking around you.'

'Only one of you was really ready to shoot in time.' Neil looked at the man to the right backside of the gray wolf. He had similar body structure and fur accents as the gray wolf, only in shades of brown. He also wore glasses, only these were round with a golden colored frame. The man had green-blueish eyes and had long hair on his neck, just reaching his shoulders like Neil. The only difference except for the color was that it went in random directions opposed to Neil's smooth hair style. Now the third man also started speaking; 'And the white was trying to pay attention to two men in the far front at the same time while the threat was closest to him.' The man who

had spoken was somewhat bulkier than his companions and had light gray fur. He also had a third, even darker fur accent on top of his muzzle, surrounding the eyes and going between his ears to his neck, clearly effecting the color of the fur on his neck. He had light blue eyes, but nowhere near as blue as Chris' eyes. He, for a change, didn't wear glasses.

'Who are you?' Neil asked.

'John,' the gray wolf in front said. The brown wolf came after him; 'Lixian,' and the third followed; 'Markus.'

'We have received the order to guard the way to Hilwell,' John said.

'We are not allowed to let anyone through who might cause problems,' Lixian continued, only to be followed by Markus again; 'Or is part of a couple of selected groups,' Neil was starting to see a pattern of these three being one mind with three pairs of eyes and ears. Judging from their commentary on the awareness of Michael, Chris and himself, they were probably specialized in spying and psychological negotiation.

'I see you have figured us out,' John suddenly said to Neil. Neil looked surprised as to how he knew that.

'How did you...,' Neil began, but Michael interrupted him; 'So are we allowed to go by or not?'

'Well...,' John said, raising his eyebrows.

'I think we can't really say no...,' Lixian said, again followed by Markus; 'Since mister Mercia here is kind of in charge.' They really started to work on Neil's nerves now, trying to be smart and mysterious. How did they know his name? Maybe his father?

'Damn right you are!' Neil said; 'And who in the damn world are you guarding for?'

'You,' John said.

'His foster father,' Lixian followed.

'Basically the same right?' Markus responded.

'And for your great grandmother, or grandmother...'

'...Who is, despite being very old, still alive...'

'...and known by the name Veronica.'

Neil had heard Nicolas talk about Veronica before and got to know she was, indeed, very old. But how did these guys know about her?

'Okay, I'm done with your games now,' Neil said as he was getting angry, getting closer to grabbing his gun.

'Why are you guarding Hilwell and how do you seem to know my entire family?'

‘We’ve got some important business there, regarding saving lives of rejected and forgotten souls...’

‘...Helping them get a new change in life...’

‘...while making sure they feel home in this world.’ Neil really started to get mad.

‘Stop talking in riddles and tell me what you are doing here!’

‘I’m afraid that’s not possible...’

‘...We’re not allowed to...’

‘...and if we did it anyway, we and you guys would be dead.’

‘So it’s your choice...’

‘...Continue without asking questions...’

‘...or stay here asking questions you will never get an answer to.’ Neil felt rage coming up and slowly started to lose control, but luckily Chris saw it happening and calmed him down.

‘Neil, calm down. We don’t want any trouble, especially no howler action. Not right now. We have more important matters.’ Neil calmed down and sat straight in his saddle again. Michael turned back to the three men.

‘May I suggest a third option?’ Michael asked.

‘Depends...’ John said.

‘Can you guide us to Hilwell? We could use a place to sleep tonight and it seems to be on our route. We promise not to cause any trouble whatsoever.’ John looked thoughtful.

‘We can’t guide you because of our job here...’

‘...But we know two guys who can guide you...’

‘...Who can protect you from both far and close distances.’

‘Seems good to me,’ Michael said. John nodded and looked over the three and yelled; ‘Shot, Bulk, you can get out,’ Neil and Chris turned around, while Michael kept an eye on the three men.

‘You’ve learned,’ John said. Behind Chris a wolf and fox came walking out of the bushes. The fox was small and had a light brown flat cap on his head. His fur had a light tint and almost seemed to have a somewhat pink mixed in it. The colors of his fur were soft, light gray with a similar lighter accent on the underside of his muzzle as the other three had. He had bright blue eyes, but still no match to Chris’ eyes. Judging by the fact that next to him was someone almost three times as big as the little guy, the small one must be Shot according to Neil’s thought process. Bulk was, as the name suggested, very bulky, but seemed to be a very sensitive guy. He unpleasantly was plucking branches and leaves out of his light brown fur. He had a dark brown quaff with the same color on the outsides of his ears.

He also had the lighter accent again under the muzzle, but had a darker spot on his chin. The fur around his eyes was darker, going down sideways in spikes like a fox has on his or her muzzle.

While Shot remained silent, Bulk was complainingly mumbling because of his roughed up fur.

‘Hello there!’ Chris said in a happy way.

‘Hey,’ Shot said, somewhat shy.

‘Hello! Excuse me for the complaining but that bush really wasn’t big enough for me,’ Bulk said with the kindest voice. ‘Can we just hide behind a tree next time, please?’ Bulk asked John.

‘Maybe,’ He responded.

‘I presume you have heard what your job is?’

‘Yeah,’ Shot said, still silently faced down looking at his foot which he was rooting around in the dirt. Apposed to him, Bulk sprung into position with his hand against his head, chest forward shouting; ‘YES SIR!’ Chris raised an eyebrow and grinned while making sure Bulk couldn’t see. It seemed funny that such a big guy was like an obedient dog, while you would think he would have a similar attitude as the guy on the train who had pushed Neil the day before.

‘Alright, you may pass,’ John said.

‘Thank you,’ Michael said, nodding a thanks.

‘But how are Shot and Bulk coming with us without horses?’

‘Simple sir!’ Bulk said. He grabbed Shot by his middle and put him on his shoulders. He smiled and said; ‘I don’t need a horse since I’m somewhat of a horse myself!’ Michael grinned and nodded.

‘Alright, let’s go then!’ John, Lixian and Markus stepped aside and the expanded group of five continued going forward, Bulk with Shot on his shoulders now in front. Neil wasn’t sure about Michael’s decision to just go on and let them be guided by the two strangers. He came riding next to Michael to discuss if it was really such a good idea: ‘Michael, are you sure we should do this? We don’t even know them!’ Neil said quietly, hoping neither Bulk nor Shot would hear him.

‘No, we don’t,’ Michael said in the same quiet tone.

‘So why exactly are we relying on them while my father is back home, dying?’

‘Because I think I know who these guys are and if they are who I think they are, we have no worries at all and should be the most save persons to walk the earth right now.’

‘Who do you think they are?’

‘I’m pretty sure they’re from the Carbon Organization, an organization that helps people who have seemingly unrecoverable lives, like John said in a more mysterious way. I think we’re lucky enough to have met the best team in the organization too; “Carbon 7”.’ Neil was blown away for a second. He had heard of Carbon 7 before, but he thought Carbon 7 was a legend or a folktale. As far as the tales go, the Carbon 7 existed out of seven members; a technician, a loving giant, a gunslinger, three people who were one mind and a leader, never named or seen in any of the tales. Some might argue there is no leader and the seventh member is not actually an entity but rather the team-spirit or a soul that is divided between the six others.

‘Isn’t that a folktale? I mean, it really sounds like something made up to tell kids stories before they go to bed or something like that. I mean, my father used to tell me stories about them, one more than the others, but that’s beside the point.’ Neil said

‘People think it’s like a myth, but it’s more like a legend. It’s based on the truth and I think this might be such a recent legend that the story is pretty much intact. I mean, look at what just happened to us! That can’t be a coincidence, now can it?’ Michael did have a point there.

‘But what about the Carbon Organization? Never heard of that before.’

‘Have you ever met your grandmother?’ Michael asked.

‘Uhm, no?’ Neil answered, doubting Michael’s intention to as why he was asking that question.

‘Why, exactly?’

‘That explains why you don’t know about the organization. Probably for the better... I’ll let her decide what to tell you and what not, since some things are, like your father always says, for you to find out yourself when you’re older.’

Neil was annoyed. Why did he too hide information for him that was about his own family? If the organization was related to his grandmother, why in the world didn’t *he* know about it, but Michael did? He really wanted to ask why it was better if he didn’t know, but he let it slide. He knew he wasn’t going to reach anything with asking questions anyway, since Michael seemed as persistent, if not more, than Nicolas. He hated it that everything and everyone was always so secretive about everyone and everything involving his family. But he waved the negative thoughts away and instead made place for curiosity to as who these new people who seemed to be part of Carbon 7 were. He came riding next to Bulk and Shot.

‘So, who are you two then?’ Neil asked.

‘I thought you had figured it out by now,’ Shot said, still quietly looking down, fiddling around with a coin.

‘We’re Bulk and Shot!’ Bulk said.

‘We are very good friends and always help each other out in case of emergency. Unfortunately Tech is not with us right now. He had to help someone back home in Hilwell.’

‘Tech?’ Neil asked; ‘Who is that?’

‘Tech is our friend! He is very handy and can do really great stuff with... uhm... forgot what it was called again...’

‘Electricity?’ Shot asked.

‘Yes! Electricity, that’s it! And not only that! He also makes stuff with gears, from very small to very big.’ As Bulk was talking about his friend Tech, he was supporting his words with gestures, wildly waving his arms around. It added flavor to his storytelling, but also meant he wasn’t holding Shot anymore. Instead, Shot was holding himself by grabbing the braces of Bulk’s short pants. Under the braces he wore a woolen blouse with a pattern consisting of crossing lines, making a pattern that reached over a color spectrum from red to black. The sleeves were rolled up, exposing half of his strong upper arms. He was still rambling on about his friend while Shot was having a hard time keeping grip on the braces. Neil enjoyed the scene and smiled. Shot noticed and gave him a deadly stare causing Neil to laugh under his breath. Bulk was too busy telling stories about Tech, that he didn’t notice the show that was going on his back. Michael and Chris were riding next to each other and were having a conversation when Chris noticed it too. He also laughed under his breath and pointed at Bulk and Shot. Michael also looked that way and started laughing too. Shot didn’t seem too happy about it.

‘Hey, maybe it’s a good idea if you don’t literally leave me hanging here Bulk.’ Neil couldn’t hold back anymore and laughed out loud, causing Michael and Chris to laugh too.

‘Whoops,’ Bulk said; ‘Sorry Shot. I got kind of carried away.’

‘You don’t say...’ Shot said, climbing back on Bulk’s shoulders. Neil regained control of his laughter and apologized to Shot. He got a mild reaction, not sure if he accepted the apologies or not. But whether he did or not, Neil didn’t really care. How much damage could that little dude actually do if he got mad?

‘So what can you do best, Shot?’ Neil asked.

‘I can shoot annoying people really fast,’ he said.

‘How fast?’ Neil asked.

‘Fast enough to surprise even the fastest gunslinger in the West, myself.’

‘Right,’ Neil said. He didn’t believe the little guy. Of course, he might be fast, but definitely not the fastest. But Neil decided to just go along with what he said.

‘Can you demonstrate it?’

‘Not right now, unless I’m allowed to shoot any of your possessions or even better, one of those laughing idiots back there.’

‘No need to be that aggressive,’ Neil said.

‘It just looked funny. People have laughed at me too.’ Shot kept on mumbling while Chris and Michael were regaining control again. They continued on their way, guided by Bulk who was still talking to Neil but without the wild gestures, assuring Shot wouldn’t go through the same again.

After another five hours of riding, a small town became visible in the distance. Neil figured it must be Hilwell.

‘I presume that is Hilwell over there?’ Chris asked.

‘Yeah,’ Bulk answered, clearly tired from the journey. Neil was very impressed by his stamina. He had been walking with someone on his shoulders for five hours straight except for a couple of small breaks to drink.

‘Is your friend Tech also there?’ Neil asked. By hearing that name Bulk’s ears immediately went up and he looked a lot less tired.

‘Yes! I’m sure you two will get along since you both really seems to like science and stuff!’ Neil really liked the excitement Bulk always seemed to have, compared to the grumpy and quiet Shot. He probably had a reason for it, but Neil was more of an open type. He didn’t like it when people weren’t up to social interaction. Of course, not everyone was as open to it as Neil and he understood that, but Shot was just closed off from his environment.

As they approached the town, Neil saw it was relatively rich. The houses were clearly constructed by engineers and architects who knew what they were doing. The roads were made out of bricks, well maintained and clean. The people walking around in the town were mostly dressed in expensive and fashionable clothing. Nobody set eyes on them as they rode by, clearly not interested in new people whatsoever. They rode straight to the biggest house, villa if you will.

‘Is this it?’ Chris asked.

‘Nope,’ Shot said. ‘Those people are renting their basement to us.’

‘Oh.’ The disappointment was clear in his voice. Neil was a little disappointed too. He had hoped to see it from the inside. It was huge, even compared to his own house which was already quite a bit bigger than average.

‘Don’t be disappointed,’ Bulk said, happy as always; ‘The basement is full of ingenious machines, which are almost all created by Tech!’

‘Sounds interesting too,’ Neil said.

‘Do you guys actually have these names?’ He asked.

‘No, these are code names related to what we are good at. Only people we trust with our lives know our names,’ Shot said. They rode to the back of the house where there were horse stables. Chris, Michael and Neil got off their horses and led them into the stables and closed them behind the horses. Adjacent to the stables was a double door angled sharp relative to the

ground, but about twenty centimeters above it at the lowest point. The door was reinforced with iron plates on the outside and most likely on the inside too. The handles were made out of iron too and were secured by a chain going through both which was held together by a heavy and quite big padlock. Shot grabbed a big keychain that had been hanging on his belt for the entire journey. There was an excessive amount of keys on the chain, so it took him a while to find the right one for the padlock. Once he had found it, he unlocked the door and left the chain on one of the handles so it would be easier to lock it up again.

‘How are we going to lock it once we’re inside?’ Neil asked.

‘We don’t, we just let you wait outside,’ Shot said. Neil grinned. The little guy seemed to at least have some sense of humor.

‘Right,’ Neil said.

‘We’ve got a wooden beam on the inside to lock it,’ Shot explained; ‘That does mean nobody can get out when others have locked it from the outside and the other way around,’

‘How do you get out in case of emergency?’ Michael asked.

‘We won’t say that until we can be 100 percent sure you guys don’t cause us to use it.’

‘Makes sense.’ Chris said.

Shot opened the door and they got through. Shot and Bulk went in first.

‘We’ve got visitors!’ Bulk enthusiastically shouted when he got down the stairs. The basement was surprisingly clean for a basement. It was quite big, almost as big as the surface area of the house above their heads. It had a main room, almost like a living room which they were standing in the moment they reached the bottom of the stairs. In the back was an door arc leading to a hallway with multiple rooms behind it. It seemed like there were four rooms, all the same size. At the end of the hallway was fifth door, possibly leading to a kitchen or bathroom. There were multiple big machines in the corners and against the walls of the living room. Neil recognized some machines from the book he had been reading, but the amount of machines that he didn’t know outnumbered the recognized machines.

Suddenly, they heard some rattling sounds coming from a room. A few seconds later, the first left door in the hallway opened and a head popped out. The head belonged to a fox with dust and all kinds of stains in his orange and white fur. He wore a leather waistcoat which was red on the front and brown on the back over a white blouse. It had leather straps attached to it at the top and went down to his pants, holding it up together with the wide, leather belt with small pockets attached to it. The pocket had small holders

on it, one of them holding a hammer. Under the small pocket hung a leather sac containing a screwdriver and some other tools. Chris stepped forward to greet the fox; 'You must be referred to as Tech,' he said. The fox wiped his hands clean on his pants and shook hands.

'Yes, nice to meet you! The name is?'

'Chris Fay,' he said. Michael and Neil followed Chris example and they sat down in the room on a large sofa. It was very comfy which was very pleasant after the long ride.

'What brought you travelers to Hilwell?' Tech asked.

'We're after the Lutherland-gang,' Neil said.

'Oh,' Tech said while he poured himself a big mug of coffee.

'I can assure you they are not here,'

'We figured that out ourselves, but this is just a stop in between. We happened to run into your friends.,' Neil said, annoyed by Tech's tone.

'Aha,' Tech answered.

'Why are you after them?' Bulk asked.

'They have stolen something that keeps our father alive.' Chris explained.

'So you're hunting them down or something like that?' Tech asked. The way Tech said it annoyed Neil again. Maybe Bulk wasn't right on Neil and Tech liking each other.

'Yes,' Neil said, somewhat annoyed. Tech heard the annoyed tone, clear by what he said after; 'No need to be annoyed, just calm down a bit and make yourself comfortable.' Although Neil knew Tech intended to prevent a confrontation, it did trigger Neil. It was something in the way he said it that did it once again. He was getting more annoyed. Neil was nervously fiddling around with his fingers. He seemed to get a somewhat rougher fur. Michael took notice and changed the subject before things got out of hand between the two; 'Ah, such a comfy sofa after riding for so long. I needed that.'

'Pfft,' It was Tech again; 'That wasn't long at all. I've had way longer rides.'

'Tech, stop it,' Shot said. He clearly noticed the annoying behavior of Tech too and seemed to have had trouble with him multiple times.

'What? I didn't do anything!' Tech said, sounding insulted.

'Tech, we talked about this.,' Shot said.

'Since when are we listening to you?' Shot got annoyed too; 'Since I can blow five holes in your head within a second. It wouldn't be the first time I do.'

'As if you would do that.' Neil was getting worried.

'Guys please,' he said, but Tech and Shot kept on going.

'You think I won't?' Shot said.

'Yes I do.' Shot's hand was slowly going to his revolver.

‘Guys stop it,’ Neil tried, but to no use again. Shot pulled out his revolver and pointed it at Tech.

‘This is your last argument with anyone,’ Tech said. Bulk was very tense and nervous, and shuffled his way over to Michael like a child trying to get away.

‘Guys, stop.’ Neil wasn’t asking anymore.

‘As if that dwarf can kill me,’ Tech said.

‘Stop.’ Neil was getting mad and Chris got worried it could get out of hand. He stood up to intervene, but Neil told him to sit back down.

‘I can shoot a fly, so you won’t be a problem, idiot,’ Neil started to become so mad he was making fists, trying to contain himself.

‘Stop.’ He said, this time so aggressive Chris stood back up, placing himself between Neil and the two arguing.

‘Neil, come on,’ Chris tried, but Neil pushed him aside.

‘Shoot me,’ Tech said. Bulk turned around and decided not to look at the two.

‘If you ask for it,’ Shot said. They stood face to face, Shot with his gun against Tech’s chin, not flinching.

‘3,’ Shot said. Neil set a step in their direction, shoulders high, hands made into fists, ears flat on his head. Neil started to growl, unable to control himself.

‘2,’ Shot continued, not noticing Neil at all, who had set another step in their direction.

‘1.’ Bulk winced, fearing the worst, Michael squinting his eyes, expecting a loud bang. Chris wanted to intervene again, but he was too late and Neil took over; ‘ENOUGH!’ Neil shouted. He didn’t even sound like Neil anymore and neither did it look like him. He had become rough, big and scary. As if that wasn’t bad enough, Neil stepped between the two and pushed them aside as if they weighed nothing. Shot got lifted off the ground and flew two meters back, Tech got pushed back almost as far and they both landed on their back. The gun fired when it hit the ground and shot the lamp above Neil’s head. The light bulb exploded into a thousand shards, raining down on his head. He didn’t flinch. He just stood there, arms wide and heavily breathing, almost growling. Bulk was wining, thinking someone was shot, which was far from the truth. Chris had backed all the way to the sofa where Michael was watching the scene play out. Shot got up and crawled backwards to the wall, while facing Neil. He was so shocked he didn’t even think of the gun anymore. Neil looked at him, growling, teeth shown.

‘Don’t,’ Neil said, his voice louder and lower than normal. He turned around to Tech, who was leaning on one arm, looking at him, scared to death. Neil’s growl made place for a somewhat more normal mad face. His fur went back down and seemed to get softer and shrunk back down to his original size. He stopped the arm spreading gesture and moved his hand to his head, clearly having a headache. He struggled to stay up right. Chris shot up to help him and guiding him to the sofa. Michael was frozen and still looked at where Neil just stood.

‘Water,’ Chris said. He turned around to the two shocked man.

‘Is there any water?’ They didn’t respond. They just looked at Neil, terrified.

‘ARE YOU GUYS DEAF?’ Chris shouted. They both backed up more.

‘E... e... end of... of... th... the ha... hallway,’ Tech managed to say.

‘Thanks,’ Chris said. While he turned around, Michael noticed Shot looking at his fallen gun.

‘Oh no, you don’t,’ He said and he raced to the gun before Shot could grab it. He grabbed the gun just before Shot could. He put it in his holster.

‘Watch these two for a second,’ Michael said to Chris and he got to the end of the hallway and opened the door. He came back with a glass of water and brought it to Neil, who was extremely dizzy and felt nauseous.

‘Just try to stay awake,’ Chris said.

‘What in the bloody damn hell was that?’ Michael asked, with a very strong British accent. Neil couldn’t help but grin a bit.

‘Howler.’ Neil managed to say.

‘I should have known that. Nicolas told me your father was a howler, but it comes as a surprise anyway.’

Bulk managed to turn around and looked at the situation for as far as he could, since the main light had been shot. Suddenly there was a knock on the outside door. There was a voice from behind the door; ‘Can you guys stop arguing please? We have guests. Thanks!’ They heard some annoyed mumbling and footsteps that slowly faded until they were heard again on the roof of the basement. ‘That must have been the owner of the villa,’ Neil thought. He fixated his attention on Chris who was still supporting him.

‘I’m fine,’ He said and he tried to push Chris arm away, but he didn’t have the power to do so.

‘Okay, maybe not...’ Chris guided him back to the sofa.

‘I might be able to help you feel better,’ Chris said. Neil pulled up an eyebrow and looked at him.

‘How?’

‘Okay, this might seem a bit weird. Just let me do my thing,’ Chris said and he moved in front of him. He put his thumbs on Neil’s forehead. He moved his fingers in circles. After doing that for a while, Neil’s headache seemed to wear off and Chris moved fingers to Neil’s shoulders. The pressure Chris applied hurt a bit, but after a while he felt a lot better.

‘I don’t know how you did it, but I feel a lot better. Thank you.’

‘No problem.’ Chris said and yawned.

‘I do feel quite tired now though. Kind of got a headache.’

‘How so?’

‘I don’t know... All I know is that I could use some rest.’

‘Well, go take a nap then. I’ll handle those two over there,’ Neil said, pointing at Shot and Tech. Chris nodded and laid down on the sofa.

‘Alright,’ Neil said while standing up and looking the two shocked canines in the eyes; ‘You two are going to get a new lightbulb if you have them. If not, you can begin with cleaning up the glass shards.’ He turned his head towards Shot; ‘You can have your gun back if you’re done with threatening Tech and are done cleaning.’ Neil turned around to Tech; ‘As for you, what the fuck is wrong with you?’ Tech got up and supported his back with his hand. He was breathing heavily, trying to suppress the pain in his back.

‘I’m... Sorry... I didn’t have much sleep. Not even one minute for the past two days... I’ve been living on coffee... It’s a bad habit. I think I’m just going to lay down for a while. Maybe a bit longer...’ He turned around and started walking back to the room he came from before things got out of hand. He opened the door but waited before entering. He took a deep breath; ‘I’m sorry Shot...’ Tech went into the room and closed the door behind him, locking it. Shot got up, got a broom from the corner of the room and gathered all the glass shards. Neil kept an eye on him, not trusting him to be alone with Chris. Shot got a new lightbulb from a closet next to the door arch and replace it with the old bulb, or what was left of it. He did it with a rag so that he wouldn’t burn his hands on the glowing remains of the old bulb. He walked to Michael and put his hand out, expecting his revolver back, but he seemed to have other plans.

‘You know, I would like to give it back, but I don’t think that’s a very good idea...’ He said. Shot looked up to him with a surprised and slightly unsettled face.

‘C’mon dude, give it back,’ Shot said.

‘So you can shoot Neil?’

‘No.’ Neil saw he was not lying, but not telling the truth either. He wasn’t sure yet.

‘Bulk, can you lend me a hand here?’ Shot asked. Bulk looked up at Shot angrily.

‘Are you out of your mind!?’ Bulk shouted.

‘You almost killed Tech with that thing! If it wasn’t for Neil he would be dead!’ Shot seemed surprised.

‘Good,’ Michael said. ‘Then would you mind keeping it with you?’

‘Not at all,’ Bulk said. Michael handed the revolver over to Bulk and sat down next to Chris. Shot just stood there, jaw dropped. He didn’t expect Bulk to not choose his side. Shot may seem like he didn’t enjoy being with Bulk, but Bulk was like a brother to him. He felt betrayed, but knew Bulk wasn’t the one to blame. He gave up with a deep sigh and went to his room. Michael walked to the kitchen and came back with two cups of coffee, trying to drink out of them at the same time. Neil grinned since it looked ridiculous to say the least.

‘What in the world are you doing?’

‘Processing on an accelerated pace.’ Neil laughed and they sat down on the chairs.

‘So...’ Michael mumbled, putting the cups down.

‘That was quite something,’

‘I’m sorry,’ Neil said.

‘It’s not your fault. They’re just idiots,’ Michael said.

‘Should have stopped you,’ Chris mumbled.

‘You did your best and it all turned out fine. Go take a rest now and I’ll wake you up when necessary.’ Michael said.

Chris nodded and laid down on the sofa.

Neil wanted to have a little while for himself to get some fresh air.

‘Please watch over Chris. Call me if you need something, I’m outside.’ Michael nodded and Neil walked up the stairs and opened the doors at the end. He took a deep breath of fresh air and sat down next to the doors, leaning his back against the house. He had to process the stream of information that had been entering his mind in the last two days. He got to know more about his family in these two days than he had ever known. As far as Neil knew his own family, Chris, Nicolas and he were the only ones in his family-line. Sure, you could count in Neil’s parents, but that was it. He had never known more people in his family than him and the 4 others. Now it seemed Michael knew his entire family, which apparently has a grandmother in it who runs a secret organization he had never heard about. Nicolas turned out to be a howler, like himself. It was the last thing Neil thought he could be. He had never seen him angry or aggressive. He had

always been the silent and observant man who solved problems with words, not fists. Also, Chris suddenly had the ability to “heal” Neil from the Howler-effect pain, which made him wonder why he had never used that ability before. If that wasn’t enough to think about, they also seemed to have run into people who were a folktale to him, but apparently were a living legend and they let him, Chris and Michael in their shelter without a real second thought.

‘That’s weird,’ Neil mumbled while thinking about it.

‘Why would they let us in if they don’t know us?’ He thought. Of course, they did recognize him and Chris as Nicolas’ sons, which could be a reason to let them in, if they recognized him too. The thing bugging Neil was that they let Michael in without a doubt too. The weirdest thing was that Michael had suggested to go to Hilwell, not taking them to their shelter. It’s like he knew they had a shelter in Hilwell. Neil started to get the feeling Michael might know the people they had met. Michael seemed to know a lot about this organization called “the Carbon 7” too. For now, they had met six members of the organization, so the question was who the seventh member was. It could be Veronica, but they never pointed that out specifically. He decided it was time Michael started explaining some of the weird things going on, but before he did, he made sure he was okay to get hit in the face by more strange and barely believable facts, in case necessary. He cleared his mind and rested for a couple of minutes, breathing in the fresh air around him. It was late noon, evident by the many smells of food crossing by his nose. As a wolf, he was able to smell a lot in the town. He could pinpoint many different kinds of food and the ingredients of them. He did this without really thinking about it, but it somehow functioned like a distraction to keep his mind away from the many questions and riddles floating around in it. After sniffing around for a bit longer, he noticed a stronger smell coming from behind him. Someone downstairs had started cooking and it smelled delicious. Neil got up and went downstairs to see who was making dinner. Chris was still sleeping on the couch. Neil thought it might still be from the day before. He continued to the kitchen and found Michael and Bulk preparing dinner together.

‘Ah, hello!’ Michael said.

‘Hey,’ Neil answered. Michael noticed Neil had a somewhat different tone and attitude towards him than before.

‘Is there something wrong?’ He asked.

‘Not necessarily. I just want to speak to you about some things, privately.’

‘Now?’

‘No, it can wait.’

‘Then I’ll continue dinner first.’ Michael turned back to the stove and continued doing what he was doing before. Neil got out of the kitchen and sat down next to Chris. He could see bags under his eyes, which were more visible through his white fur. Neil most definitely had them too, but they probably weren’t visible under his black fur. It was quite cold in the basement of the house and he saw Chris was laying on the sofa with his arms crossed. Neil searched for a blanket, but failed to find one. He decided Chris needed it more, so he took off his jacket and laid it over Chris. Neil had always cared for Chris like he was his own son. Not because Nicolas didn’t, but just because he cared for Chris very much. Chris was pretty much the only family he had that grew up alongside him. Neil was only one year older than Chris, making Chris 20. They had always been very close brothers and did almost everything together.

As Neil wanted to get up after a while, a white furred hand stopped him. Neil turned around and saw Chris had woken up.

‘Did I wake you up?’ Neil asked, fearing he might had.

‘No, not at all,’ Chris said. He rubbed in his eyes and sat up straight. The jacket slowly slid down his shoulder and ended up on the couch. Neil picked it up and put it back on Chris shoulders, making sure he wouldn’t get cold.

‘Thank you,’ Chris said. Neil smiled and patted him on the shoulder.

‘No problem. You needed it more than me. Plus, I owe you one.’

‘You don’t owe me nothing,’ Chris said with a smile. Chris lifted his snout a bit and sniffled.

‘I smell some great food coming from the kitchen!’

‘Yeah, Michael and Bulk are cooking in there.’ Chris got up and walked to the kitchen to take a look, while putting on Neil’s jacket. Neil felt tired himself and decided a little nap before dinner wouldn’t be a problem, so he laid down on the sofa and closed his eyes for a while.

After some time he was woken up by someone calling his name. He opened his eyes and slowly sat up straight.

‘Are you coming for dinner?’ He heard Bulk ask.

‘Yeah! I’m on my way, give me a minute.’ Bulk nodded and returned to the kitchen. Neil slowly got up and made his way to the kitchen. By opening the door, he found everyone sitting by the dining table; Chris, Michael, Bulk, Shot and Tech. He did notice Shot and Tech were as far from Chris as possible, positioned at the other end of the table. Chris was on the right end of the table, with Bulk next to him and Michael being on the other side of the table next to Shot, who sat on the left end of the table. Neil sat down next to Michael and Chris.

‘We haven’t met properly yet, I believe,’ He said to Tech. The fox looked, but stayed silent. Neil put out his hand to greet him.

‘The name is Nicolas Mercia.’ Tech looked at him and his pupils widened as he went in some kind of panicked state. Neil saw his reaction and tried to calm him down; ‘I’m his son. It just so happened I share his name.’ Tech seemed to relax a bit, but he still didn’t seem comfortable with the idea that he had been a dick to someone in a position as Neil’s.

‘Tech, don’t worry. We all have our bad days. It’s forgotten and I made you pay for it already, in my opinion at least.’

‘I guess so... I’m still sorry, but happy you can forgive me,’ Tech said.

‘It’s no big deal. You we’re just being a dick, compared to Shot over there who had a little bit more cruel plan with you.’ After saying that, Shot almost disappeared under the table, trying to hide, but his long blue-grayish ears gave him away.

‘Did you get your gun back?’ Neil asked. The fox slowly appeared above the table again and nodded silently as a confirmation.

‘Alright.’ Neil said.

‘By the way, if you behave normal, I ain’t as bad as I seemed. Your friend Tech over there is way worse.’ Chris laughed and Michael heavily nodded yes. Tech managed to laugh a bit and Shot grinned a bit; ‘I beg to differ...’ Neil laughed too. The atmosphere started to become a little happier and Neil turned to the food. It seemed to consist of mainly cooked mutton and mashed potatoes. It was simple, but tasted very nice when Neil.

‘My compliments on the food,’ Neil said to Michael and Bulk. The others insisted by nodding and Michael thanked them. Bulk too, but he started to explain how they made it, not forgetting any detail. They just let him ramble on while eating, knowing that it probably wouldn’t be possible to get him to shut up about it anyway. On the plus side, they had something to listen to

and didn't have to think of something themselves to talk about. If it wasn't for Bulk, there probably would have been a dead silence while they were eating because of them still being somewhat shocked of what had happened. Chris didn't seem to mind at all. The relaxed mood of Chris seemed to work contagious and Neil relaxed too. He looked around the table and saw the others were starting to relax too. The only one who didn't change in behavior was Bulk, since you couldn't get him to relax. He was just happily rambling on about the food, acting like he didn't know what had just happened. After dinner Neil stood up and started collecting the empty plates and cutlery.

'Michael and I will do the dishes,' He said and he looked at Michael. Michael nodded and got up to help Neil. The others got out of the kitchen and got to the living room. When the door closed behind the last one of them, Neil turned to Michael.

'Michael?'

'Yes?'

'I have some questions for you that have been bugging me and I thought it would be best to just get straight to the point.'

'Alright.' Michael seemed a bit thrown of guard, not really knowing where Neil was going with this.

'First of all, do you know this three?' Michael stopped with what he was doing for a second, but then continued with what he was doing.

'From the stories, yes,' He answered. Neil wasn't sure if he was telling the truth. It sounded like it, but the stopping before giving an answer seemed weird to him. Nicolas had learned Neil a lot about body language. He had thought him how to recognize if people were lying or not or how they are feeling. Neil could predict people quite well because of this and it was starting to become something he did automatically.

'And the three we met before going to Hilwell?' Neil asked.

'Where are we going with this?' Michael asked. He seemed very uncomfortable. Neil could see he was hiding something, but Neil couldn't quite figure out what. He had come as far as realizing he probably did know these people, but why would he lie about it?

'You'll see. But do you know them?' Neil asked. Michael remained silent for a little while and then sighed softly.

'Yes,' He said.

'Why didn't you tell us?'

'I don't know.'

'There must be some reason for it.'

'No, there is none.' Neil saw Michael was trying to get him to shut up.

‘I know...’ Neil began, but Michael interrupted him; ‘I told you there is no reason why I did it.’

‘Do you know the seventh member?’

‘Why do you want to know this?’

‘Because it seems weird to me three random men from a folktale let us into their shelter which so happened to be in Hilwell after you suggested to go there.’

‘Are you accusing me of some sort of conspiracy?’ Michael asked, sounding somewhat indignant.

‘No, I’m just saying it seems weird to me. It doesn’t make sense.’

‘So what?’ Michael sounded a bit aggressive, which made clear he had hit a nerve. He was hiding the reason as to why he wanted to go to Hilwell.

‘We have shelter and food. That’s what matters.’ Michael said and he threw the towel on the kitchen table and walked away, but Neil stopped him in front of the door.

‘Listen Michael, I appreciate your help a lot, but I have to know what’s going on. You seem to know a lot more about my family than I have ever known. You have to realize that, for me, it is a very unpleasant thought. To me you are still somewhat of a stranger. I only know you for one day now and have seen you are a nice guy, but I don’t want you to hide things from me or lie to me and definitely not to Chris.’ Michael sighed and put a step backwards. He sat down on a chair and pulled out another chair.

‘Sit down,’ Michael said. Neil did as he was asked and sat down on the chair.

‘I haven’t been completely honest with you on the side of knowing this people and I get that upsets you. There’s no good excuse why I shouldn’t have told you. Not one that’s valid to you at least, not at the moment. All I can do is say I’m sorry.’ Michael seemed sincere this time and Neil nodded.

‘Apology accepted.’ Neil shook hands with him and sat back down.

‘But I do want you to be a little bit less secretive about his kind of stuff. I need to know what we’re doing and why, because otherwise I would just be running around like a complete idiot trying to save my father. But now that we’ve got that out of the way, back to my question; “Do you know who the seventh member of the Carbon 7 is?”

‘Yes, but I am not allowed to tell you.’ Michael said.

‘Why not?’

‘It’s for personal reasons of the seventh member and security reasons. If I told you, I don’t know what they’ll do to me.’

‘Sounds illegal,’ Neil said.

‘Yet it isn’t. If it was, Nicolas would have put it down a long time ago.’

‘That’s true. Thanks for being honest with me.’

‘I’m sorry I wasn’t. I’ll try to be more open.’

‘I would appreciate that.’

They shook hands once again, but Neil didn’t completely believe him. He had the feeling he was not telling the whole truth. Michael didn’t seem sorry at all. Neil shook it off and got up. They walked back to the living room, where Bulk, Chris and Tech sat on the sofa, while Shot sat on a lazy chair.

‘Where did the chair come from?’ Neil asked.

‘My room.’ Shot answered.

‘Do you happen to have two more chairs for Michael and me?’

‘I don’t, but Tech and Bulk do.’

‘Indeed!’ Bulk said and he jumped up to get the chairs. Neil and Michael thanked him and both sat down.

‘So, what brought you guys here?’ Tech said.

‘Well, like I said before, our father is in danger. The Lutherland gang has stolen something from him that keeps him alive.’ Neil explained.

‘The gemstone, right?’ Neil looked confused for a second, not expecting Tech to know about it.

‘How did you...’

‘We work with him, remember?’

‘Right. Anyway, the gemstone is what they took indeed. Nicolas said they are probably going to trade it with Damien. We know the gang is probably going to Damien’s hideout which appears to be in Westhaven. The only question is where in Westhaven.’

‘I think we might be able to help you with that,’ Someone suddenly said from behind Neil. A familiar face appeared behind him, the face of John. Behind him were two more faces. They belonged to Lixian and Markus.

‘How did you get in?’ Neil asked in all his confusion.

‘We have a secret entrance...’

‘...that you and others don’t know about...’

‘...but we do!’

The order was the same as before; John first, Lixian second and Markus third.

‘We have been observing the Lutherland gang...’

‘...under the command of your father...’

‘...and we’ve had success.’

‘So where are they then?’ Chris asked.

‘Somewhere in Westhaven, like Neil told us. That’s what we are going to figure out.’ Shot said. Neil turned to him.

‘Do we have enough time for that?’

‘Probably. Oh and it won’t be a trade.’ Shot pointed at John.

‘John found out Damien is the leader of the Lutherland gang. Mr. Mercia could have suspected something like that, but somehow it still came as a surprise to him. We only have to figure out why he stole the gemstone.’

‘Probably money...’ John said.

‘...or power...’ Lixian followed.

‘...or something we can’t know yet.’ Markus said mysteriously.

‘Like what?’ Neil asked.

‘We can’t know yet,’ Markus answered.

‘Alright, should have seen that one coming...’ Neil mumbled and Chris laughed in the background.

‘Do you have any clue where in Westhaven they hide?’ Chris asked.

‘Not exactly, but we can track one of the members down once we’re there.’ John said. Chris nodded thoughtful.

‘How long will it take to get there?’

‘About three days, maybe a little longer.’ Lixian said. Those three days concerned Neil. They had already travelled two days, three days would be thrown on top of that and they also had to go back, thus multiplying the five days to the destination by two. That meant they would be travelling for ten days, in the best case. They could run into problems that would slow them down massively. It was going to be difficult getting back with the gemstone in time, but there was no way Neil was going to be too late. He would never forgive himself if he would be.

‘I’ll go set up a plan with John so you guys can rest. Is there any place they can sleep tonight?’ Michael asked.

‘Yes. They can sleep on the sofa and chairs, since we unfortunately don’t have extra beds.’

‘That’s okay. Do you have any blankets?’ Neil asked.

‘Yes we do. Bulk, could you go fetch them some blankets?’ John asked. Bulk nodded and got off the sofa to get them blankets. Michael, John, Lixian and Markus went to the kitchen to discuss the plan at the dining table. Neil turned his attention to Tech, curious to what he was good at.

‘So, what are you good at, Tech?’ Neil asked. He had caught Tech off guard, evident by the fact Tech looked at him but didn’t respond. After a while Tech finally said something; ‘Excuse me, I didn’t hear you. Could you repeat that please?’ Tech asked.

‘Well, at least I now know the answer is not listening,’ Neil thought.

‘I asked you what you are good at.’

‘Oh, I make a lot of technical things. It’s not really impressive or something. It’s pretty basic stuff.’

‘Can I see it?’ Tech seemed to fear that question.

‘Uhm, I don’t think so...’ Tech said.

‘Why not?’

‘Some stuff is, you know, secret.’

‘Why don’t you pick something that isn’t and show that to me?’

‘Those things are probably not impressive at all.’

‘There must be something interesting you can show me right?’

‘I might have something that I got from a friend of mine.’ Tech got up and disappeared in his room. While he was searching for something he could show to Neil, Bulk came back with the blankets.

‘I found three nice blankets. They are not very warm, but it’s more than nothing I guess,’ he said while handing them over.

‘Thank you,’ Neil said and smiled. Just when Bulk sat down, Tech came back from his room with a lamp connected to a metal plate, which seemed to have a layer of some sort of metal-like material on top with a top layer of what seemed like gold. He laid down the lamp and showed the plate to Neil.

‘What is that?’ Neil asked.

‘This is something I got from a colleague and friend of mine, Charles. This is what he calls a “solar cell” and it is something I think has a lot of potential in the electric world.’

‘Alright, sounds impressive, but what does it do?’

‘Watch!’ Tech said and he lifted up the plate to the lamp on the ceiling. As he moved it closer and closer, the lamp on the table which was connected to the plate started to softly glow. Tech demonstrated this by moving the plate closer and further away from the lamp on the ceiling. Neil was stunned and amazed at the same time, not exactly knowing what was happening.

‘Wait, how do you get it to turn on?’

‘Light,’ Tech said.

‘What do you mean light?’

‘Exactly as I say, light is what turns the lamp on. The light is transferred to electric energy by this small plate and powers the lamp! Unfortunately, this only converts a fraction of the energy that goes in, but I see it improve overtime and might even become controversial!’ Neil looked at the plate and asked if he could inspect it. Tech handed it over and Neil took a closer look. Neil could see the bottom plate was of metal and the top plate of gold, but he wasn’t sure about the middle plate.

‘What is the middle plate made out of? Is it a metal?’

‘No, it’s a non-metal, selenium.’ Neil nodded and handed it over to Tech.

‘I knew there would be something interesting in there,’ Neil said with a grin on his face. Tech shrugged and took it back to his room and returned.

They talked for a while longer and eventually decided it was time to sleep. Everyone went to their room, except Michael. He was still busy making a plan in the kitchen with the three one-minded guys. They had been in there for almost an hour and Neil started to wonder what was taking so long.

‘When do you think Michael will return?’ Neil asked. Chris turned around on the couch and shrugged; ‘I don’t know, but I do know I’m probably sleeping before he returns.’

‘Well, good night then,’ Neil said.

‘Good night.’ Chris turned around and pulled the blanket up. After about ten minutes Neil could hear him snore softly. Neil pulled on the lever on the lazy chair he was sitting in and it flipped the back side up and the foot rest up. Neil made himself comfortable and after a while fell asleep as well.

Neil woke up early in the morning. It seemed like he woke up first, judging by the fact Michael and Chris were still sleeping and the lack of activity around him. He got off the chair and grabbed his hat and jacket from the back of the couch, being careful not to wake up Chris and went up the stairs to catch some fresh air. He carefully opened the basement doors and was greeted by someone standing next to the opening. It was Lixian, leaning against the wall of the house, smoking.

‘Good morning sir,’ Lixian said.

‘Good morning!’ Neil said, somewhat surprised by the fact Lixian called him sir instead of just Neil.

‘You don’t like sir?’ Lixian asked.

‘Okay, wait a second. How do you guys read my mind?’

‘Well, we don’t. We just observe. I saw your eyebrows go up even further than they already were after you realized I was here when I said sir. Judging by that, sir was not something you expected.’

‘You should become a detective.’

‘I already am, sort of.’

‘Well, that comes as no surprise then.’ Neil came standing next to him and leaned against the wall. As soon as he smelled the smoke of the cigarette, Lixian threw it on the ground and put it out with his shoe.

‘You ain’t going to tell me you knew that too,’ Neil said.

‘No, I didn’t. But your father doesn’t smoke so I’m guessing you don’t smoke either. Most people who have never smoked before hate the smell.’

‘Well, thanks for taking that into consideration.’

‘No problem. It was almost gone anyway.’

Neil took a deep breath and sighed.

‘Something on your mind?’ Lixian asked.

‘No, not really.’

‘Sure? You seem worried.’

‘Of course I’m worried. This is a life or death situation regarding my father. And it doesn’t help that Michael is hiding something from me.’ Lixian’s eyebrows went up. ‘You’re somewhat of a detective yourself, I see.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Exactly as I say. You are recognizing that he isn’t telling the complete truth like I can recognize you don’t like to be called sir.’

‘Wait, so he is hiding something? How do you know?’

‘I have been working with him for two hours last night. I sense the same attempt to hide the truth from him as you do, something I never thought I would see him doing. That’s why I was silent about it until I could be sure, but now that you mention it, you can back it up,’ Lixian explained. Neil nodded understanding and scratched the back of his head.

‘So what do you think he is hiding?’

‘I don’t know. What do you think?’ Neil thought for a second about it.

‘I think it is something personal, because he instantly went into some sort of aggressive defense when I asked him a question.’

‘What was the question?’

‘Well, I explained to him that I found it strange we just so happened to go to Hilwell and meet you guys. Now, that could be a coincidence, if we weren’t allowed to pass you guys and enter the shelter without a second thought. He immediately went into defense and asked if I accused him of some sort of conspiracy. Later, he did confess he knew you guys, which, to me, seems strange to hide.’

‘Well, we did threaten to kill him if he told anyone about us...’

‘Sure, but he even kept on pretending on our way to Hilwell with Bulk and Shot. By then he could have already told me.’

‘Maybe. Maybe he wasn’t sure about Bulk and Shot. They had never met before.’

‘Yeah, but you send them with us.’

‘Fair point.’ They fell silent for a second both thinking.

‘Could it be something about his daughter, Sarah?’ Lixian seemed to recognize the name, judging by his facial expression, but he very quickly fell back to his non-emotional face.

‘I don’t know. Don’t know her. Not personally at least.’

‘Hmm...’ Somehow Neil had the feeling that was not sincere, but he waved it away. How could Lixian know Michael’s daughter personally if Michael didn’t even know where she was. If Lixian would have known her, he would tell Michael for sure.

‘Anyway,’ Neil began; ‘What’s the plan?’

‘We’ll discuss that when everyone is awake. That will spare me the talking, or rather John.’

‘Well, knowing you, you’ll finish his sentences anyway, so you got something to do to.’ Lixian laughed.

‘You’re a funny one, kid.’ Neil grinned. He had never been called kid before by anyone, not even Nicolas. He always called him son, just like Chris.

‘Shall we see who is awake then?’

‘That won’t be necessary. Believe me when I say this; you can call yourself lucky because of waking up early.’ Lixian said.

‘How so?’

Lixian didn’t even have to respond or Neil could hear what he meant. He heard the sound of at least ten alarm clocks going off at the same time coming from behind the door to the basement. He heard some mumbling from behind the doors, but the alarm clocks kept going.

‘TECH! TURN OFF THOSE DAMNED THINGS!’ That was Shot, yelling in the basement. Neil laughed; ‘Thank god I’m not in there. Why does Tech have that many alarm clocks anyway?’

‘I don’t know. Guess he just doesn’t wake up from one,’ Lixian said, also enjoying the struggling sounds from downstairs. When the alarm clocks stopped ringing, they went inside. Neil saw Shot arguing with Tech again, but when he noticed Chris looking at him, he stopped arguing immediately. Chris grinned and enjoyed his feeling of power for a while.

‘Good morning everyone!’ Neil said while coming down the stairs. Everybody mumbled something towards him that sounded like some kind of greeting, except for Chris; ‘Good morning Neil!’ Neil was surprised Chris was this energetic after waking up like that.

‘You seem happy for someone who woke up like that.’ Neil mentioned.

‘I’m never annoyed for long, until yesterday of course...’ Chris shrugged and stood up. Everywhere around Neil were people that were trying to fight their sleep, although much of the sleepiness was already eliminated by the clocks. Tech came walking out of his room, not looking to bothered by the clocks. He turned to Neil and greeted him with some kind of wave.

‘Good morning to you too,’ Neil responded. Everyone got themselves ready and they slowly made their way to the kitchen. Michael and Chris made everyone some food and they sat around the table. It seemed like John and Markus had been awake for a while, since they already were in the kitchen with a map laid out on the table. While everyone was eating, John explained what they were going to do.

‘Alright, the plan is pretty simple. Markus, Lixian and I will ride out to Westhaven in a straight line, so we arrive before everyone else does. We will scout the area and try to find the location of the Lutherland-gang. It could very well be that when you guys arrive, we haven’t found it yet, in which case you guys will have to lay low. As the rest of you, you will travel for three more days. The first night will be out in the open, about halfway on the way to Arbington.’ John explained while pointing at the map.

‘When you arrive there the next day, you’ll be welcomed by Mr. Mercia’s grandmother, Veronica.’

‘How do you know about her anyway? Neil asked.

‘Is that really important right now?’

‘I would like to know...’

John sighed; ‘Not now. We’ve got more important matters right now.’

Neil was disappointed, but understood and told John to continue

‘Like I said, you will be welcomed by Veronica. You don’t have to search for her. She will know you’re there before you even arrive. Please don’t ask me how, because even I nor Mr. Mercia knows how. It is what it is. Anyway, the day after, you guys will be riding to Westhaven. Once in Westhaven, I will provide you with more information. We will have scouted them for about a day by then. The chance is small that we have located them by then.’

‘Alright,’ Neil said while he took a look at the map. He tracked the route from Hilwell to Westhaven as they would be following the route. When he tried to track back to Imaer following the general direction they would go in, he noticed something very odd. Imaer was nowhere near that line. He looked around the map, trying to find Imaer, but was interrupted by Michael picking up the map.

‘I think I can get us there. Do you happen to have a compass?’ Michael asked, not paying attention to Neil who looked at him indignantly.

‘Sure thing,’ John said and he gave him a compass from his shoulder bag. Michael put the compass away and rolled up the map.

‘Uhm, Michael... Do you mind if I take a look?’ Neil asked.

‘Don’t worry, I got this under control. You can trust me, no more holding back remember?’ Michael stood up and wanted to leave the kitchen to get his stuff, but Neil stopped him; ‘Michael, let me take a look at that map.’ Michael sighed.

‘Neil, we are not going to argue about this now. We have more important matters.’ Michael continued leaving, but Neil didn’t let him go that easily.

‘Michael stop. Give me that map.’ Neil tried to grab the map, but Michael pushed his arm away from the map.

‘Hands off!’ Michael said.

‘What is it with you?’ He angrily said and he left the kitchen.

As soon as everyone had left, Chris and Neil were left.

‘What the hell was that with Michael?’ Chris asked.

‘What do you mean? I just want see that map!’ Neil responded.

‘We have more important matters right now, Neil. Know your priorities.’

‘Maybe it is a priority to me, Chris. I don’t trust that guy at all. How fucking hard can it be to just let me look at that map?’ Neil slammed on the table, causing a glass to fall off. Chris managed to catch it and looked at Neil. Neil looked mad, almost raging even. Chris put the glass back on the table and looked him in the eyes.

‘Listen up Neil, I don’t know why you don’t trust him, but I do. We can’t use you going against him. We are going to need to work together.’ Neil calmed down and sighed.

‘I get that, but I just don’t feel comfortable with the idea we are running around with people we don’t even know that know more about us and our family then we do. I mean, why do they have the right to know stuff we don’t?’

‘I don’t know Neil, but you’ll have to let it go for now. We must concentrate ourselves on saving dad. If we lose control we might lose him and possibly our own lives.’

‘Okay, let’s get our stuff then.’ Chris smiled and gave him a hug.

‘One more thing though,’ Neil said and Chris stepped back.

‘What is it?’ Chris asked.

‘Try to get hold of that map Michael has. I think he might have pushed us here for other reasons then saving dad.’

‘Where did you get that idea from?’

‘I couldn’t find Imaer anywhere near the general direction line we are going to follow. I suspect Hilwell was a detour Michael wanted to take for something that I haven’t quite figured out yet.’ Chris pulled up one eyebrow.

‘You do realize you sound completely crazy right? Michael wouldn’t do such a thing, dad is his friend, his only friend even.’

‘Well then there shouldn’t be a problem in checking the map, right?’

‘I suppose so...’

‘And if it indeed is a detour like I suspect, he should have a good reason for it right?’

‘I don’t know, maybe he just read the map wrong. I don’t even know how to read a map!’

‘No, but someone who can doesn’t make mistakes like that.’

‘I you say so... I’ll see what I can do.’

‘Thank you.’ Neil patted him on the back as a way of saying thanks and they went into the living room to get their stuff together so they could leave.

When John, Markus and Lixian left, Neil and the others were about to do so too when Tech walked to the front door of the house they had been staying under.

‘What are you doing?’ Neil asked.

‘Telling them we’re going on a little trip, so they know the basement needs some extra security.’ Neil nodded. Tech knocked on the door and immediately a fox opened the door. He was dressed as a butler, which probably was his profession. Tech talked to the fox and he nodded. The fox closed the door and Tech made his way to his and Bulk’s shared horse.

‘Why didn’t you guys have horses when we met you?’ Chris asked.

‘Because it would be weird to see three men on horses and two random horses next to them,’ Shot explained.

‘Makes sense.’ Michael came riding to the front where Neil and Chris were positioned with the map in his hands.

‘Alright, teatime is over. We must go now. Follow me and we will be staying on track.’

‘Yeah, right,’ Neil mumbled under his breath. It was loud enough for Chris to hear, but just soft enough to prevent Michael from hearing it. Neil got poked in his waist by Chris, who gestured he had to shut it. Neil rubbed his waist and gave Chris an annoyed look. Chris didn’t pay attention to Neil anymore and followed Michael. The rest followed him as well and Neil stayed at Chris’ side, while watching Michael closely. Tech came riding next to Neil and Chris.

‘So, what did you think of the thing I showed you yesterday?’ Neil turned his attention away from Michael.

‘It was quite impressive if you ask me. I think if we would still burn witches, you would have burned yesterday.’ Neil jokingly said. Tech laughed; ‘Sure thing. Luckily, we’re past that and we’re free to explore and advance on a scientific basis. We’re living in strange time. The world is changing fast, for the better in my opinion.’

‘I’m sure there are more people disagreeing with that than agreeing. It’s mostly the rich people who benefit from it and I don’t like that, even though I’m rich myself. It doesn’t seem fair to me that power is linked to money. It means that if your parents are poor, you are probably going to be poor too, causing people to have unfair changes in life. But people are blind to the well-being of others if they themselves are well fed and rich. That doesn’t mean I am against the big cities and technology though. I think money should go that way, while giving enough to the poor.’ Tech nodded.

‘Hmmm... So you think the world is changing in a bad way?’

‘I don’t think the world has changed enough to judge. Maybe in ten or twenty years I will be able to tell if it is or not. It really depends on if I am right or wrong. Maybe the rich people will give to the poor. Maybe they don’t have a lot of power and maybe the changes will be equal for everyone, but I highly doubt that. The world has never been fair. People have never been fair. Fair people are rare. Too rare. If only we had a little bit more of kind people, the world would be so much more peaceful.’

‘What do you consider as bad people then?’

‘People who use power to make themselves rich and others poor. People who only care about themselves. People aren’t good or bad because they kill or rob, people are good or bad because of the reasons why. Now that doesn’t mean I think killing is good or must be forgiven. Killing is horrible and is rightfully so punishable, but I always like to think from someone else’s perspective. Imagine everyone around you solves their problems by killing of folk they don’t like or that are in their way. Wouldn’t you start to see something like that as normal? Wouldn’t it make sense for yourself that is the way thing just are?’

‘You do have a point there.’ They fell silent for a second before Chris broke the silence: ‘I agree, but I was wondering; what kind of people are the Carbon 7?’ Tech gave the question some thought and eventually answered.

‘It’s hard to describe what we do, but we help people. We give them a new change in life when all hope seems lost. Our job is to care for people who need saving and feeding and make sure they get what they need to get on with life in exchange for work. We too came from a situation like that. All of us. We decided to stay with the people and we formed the Carbon 7.’

‘So, who are “the people” then?’ Chris asked.

‘That isn’t important. What matters is that they helped us and in exchange we help them.’ Neil wasn’t sure what to make of that, but he waved it away as the people seemed to help others, which is exactly that what Neil stood for.

‘So how did you come up with the name?’

‘We didn’t. Your father actually did.’

‘What does he have to do with the Carbon 7?’

‘Quite a lot, actually. You should ask him once.’

‘Well, if I do that he will probably tell me I’m not ready to hear it yet.’

‘Probably is more than nothing. What’s to lose?’

‘I guess..,’ Neil mumbled.

‘But why don’t you tell me?’ He asked, but Tech had moved back to Bulk and Shot already, not hearing his question. Neil sighed.

‘Why do they keep disappearing once they say something clever. It really annoys me.’

‘I don’t know, but I think it adds to the mystery,’ Chris said.

‘That’s exactly the problem. I want answers, not mysteries. Mysteries are for the Pinkerton Detective Agency, not me.’

‘You know, sometimes it’s better not to know the entire story. Sometimes it’s best to let it go.’

‘Maybe...’ Chris jokingly slowed down.

‘Don’t you disappear on me now too!’ Neil said, laughing. Chris grinned and sped up and came riding next to Neil again.

‘You’ll find out eventually Neil. Let’s just concentrate ourselves on getting that stone back for now.’

‘Okay.’

‘Would you two please shut up?’ Neil asked desperately, but to no avail.

‘I should have shot them when I had the change.’ Chris grinned. They were having a break and had settled next to a small river. Neil and Chris were at the river skipping stones, while Tech and Shot were arguing again. Neil had no idea what it was about, but he assumed it probably wasn’t anything serious. Bulk was trying to get them to stop arguing, but both Shot and Tech acted like he didn’t exist. Michael was looking at the water, leaned against a big rock while eating his lunch. He seemed to be in an entirely different place in his head, causing Neil to wonder what he was thinking about.

‘Leave him alone Neil.’ Neil turned around and found Chris looking at him. ‘Was I bothering him?’

‘No, not specifically. But...’

‘Then don’t make a point out of it.’ Chris gave him a confused look.

‘What’s gotten into you all of a sudden?’

‘Nothing! I just don’t trust him, that’s all.’

‘Come on Neil, it’s probably nothing. He’s a friend of dad, why would he do anything to prevent us from saving him?’

‘I don’t know! That’s what I’m trying to figure out!’

‘Well, you do you. Any friend of his is a friend of mine. I trust him.’ Neil skipped another rock, stood up and turned around.

‘Where are you going?’ Chris asked.

‘I’m going to try to get those idiots to shut up.’ He said while approaching the arguing Shot and Tech. As he came closer, he overheard what the arguing was about:

‘You don’t know the first thing about horses!’ Shot yelled.

‘You can’t even get on one without someone’s help!’ Tech responded.

‘Don’t make fun of me because I’m shorter than you!’

‘Your height doesn’t even matter in this case... You can’t even get on a damned pony, dumb dwarf!’

‘Oh, now you’ve gone too far!’

‘What are you going to do? Head-bump my knees hoping I’ll fall down?’

Neil sighed; ‘Here we go again...’ He walked up to the two until they noticed him and cleared his throat. Tech and Shot both fell silent, remembering what had happened before.

‘Thanks. It’s much appreciated.’ Neil said and Bulk made a thankful gesture to him while getting back to caring for the horses.

‘Why are you two arguing all the time anyway?’ Neil saw Bulk face palming, indicating Neil had probably started another argument.

‘Well, because this dumbass here keeps thinking he’s better than me,’ Shot said.

‘Is he?’ Neil asked.

‘Of course I am!’ Tech answered.

‘That question was not directed to you.’ Shot said aggressively.

‘So what? We both know the answer anyway, so what’s the difference?’

‘The difference is that I tell the truth and you don’t,’

‘My god, you two are hopeless.’ Neil said.

‘What do you mean!?’ they both said while angrily looking at him. Neil could only grin, finding it funny.

‘Look at you two; you act like kids! I thought you were supposed to help and save people, not bother them.’

‘Hey, I’m not bothering anyone. He is!’ Shot said while pointing at Tech.

‘Me? I’m sorry but I don’t think you understand how annoying you are.’

‘Yeah? Well neither do you!’

‘You are both equally annoying,’ Neil said.

‘Like you ain’t annoying,’ Tech mumbled.

‘I never said I wasn’t. You two should try being a little nicer to each other.’

‘That’s enough ladies, break’s over!’ Michael said.

‘Who are you calling a lady?’ Tech responded.

‘Is that an insult or a compliment?’ Tech realized the mistake he had made and waved it away. Shot found it to be very funny and started laughing, but Tech poked him and the joy disappeared. Michael shook his head disapprovingly and got on his horse. The others followed and soon they were on their way again.

Neil silently got out of his bedroll, making sure he didn't wake Chris up and sneaked over to Michael's tent while everyone was asleep. At the front of the closed tent that belonged to Michael and crouched down. He moved his ear up and laid on the tent. He could hear Michael snoring and silently got inside of the tent while being careful not to step on Michael. He looked around, searching for the map. As he scanned the tent, he saw the map was in Michael's backpack. He stepped over Michael to reach for the backpack next to him. He grabbed the back and lifted it up. It made some sound in when he did, but it didn't seem to bother Michael. Neil backed out of the tent and closed it up. He sighed in relief that he didn't wake Michael up and turned around, only to be met by the face of Chris. Neil almost yelled in shock, but Chris grabbed him by his muzzle so he couldn't. Chris pointed back at their tent. They sat down on their bedrolls. Chris looked at him angrily; 'What in the world do you think you are doing?' Chris whispered.

'I was getting the map,' Neil answered.

'Why in the world wouldn't you just ask him?'

'Because he didn't want me to have it in the first place so why would he give it to me now?'

'Oh, come on Neil. He isn't doing anything wrong!'

'Well in that case it doesn't really matter if I take a look at the map, right?' Neil opened the tent to let the moonlight shine inside so he could see the map properly. As he looked over the map, his suspicions got confirmed. Hilwell was totally off the road from Imaer to Westhaven.

'See? I told you!' Neil said.

'Yeah, but didn't he say we were going to Low Lake when we left?'

'Yes, but why did he suggest going to Hilwell? The guys from before weren't guarding the way to Low Lake.'

'Could be a coincidence, right? Where is Low Lake on the map?' Chris took the map and looked around. It turned out Low Lake was to the west, going in the direction of Westhaven, while Hilwell was to the North., meaning that after half a day of traveling there couldn't be a shared road between the two towns, thus implying they went for Hilwell.

'I can't believe it... You were right...,' Chris mumbled.

'Of course I was! I'm going to get that bastard right now!' Neil stood up angrily and wanted to leave the tent, but Chris stopped him.

'Wait, what if he made a mistake and he is just afraid to admit it?'

'If that were true, he wouldn't have asked me if I was accusing him of a conspiracy.'

'But I see no reason why he would do that!'

'Me neither. That's what I'm trying to uncover.'

'Do you think the others know about this?'

'I don't think so. I mean, Michael didn't know Bulk, Tech or Shot. I don't know about the other three. I spoke with Lixian and he seemed to know nothing about it.'

'He could be hiding it too, right?'

'That's true. They do seem to be capable of holding something like that back. They don't let any information slip by.'

'But the plan that is made by them does follow a straight line. If they are with Michael we would have stayed in Hilwell for longer or moved somewhere else, right?'

'I don't know, we'll have to figure this out later. I think it's better if we don't say anything about this to Bulk, Shot and Tech. For now I don't want everyone to turn against each other in our group. We need to try to stay neutral but keep an eye on Michael. For now, we are going to closely monitor our movements with the map.'

'How are we going to get the map?'

'We can ask Michael and if he refuses we just steal it again like we did tonight, but please promise me you leave him alone, alright?' Neil didn't want to agree, but he knew just as well as Chris did that causing the team to split up was a bad idea.

'I'll bring back the backpack,' Chris said and he disappeared into the darkness with the backpack. Neil waited until he returned and they went back to sleep.

“Wake up, you lazy sack of shit,” Shot said while giving Tech a soft kick. Tech only moaned in response, but he didn’t move a finger. Neil came walking to Tech’s tent to see what was going on.

‘Good morning,’ Neil said while taking a sip of his coffee.

‘Morning,’ Shot responded somewhat annoyed.

‘Can I have a try waking him up?’ Neil asked. Shot put up his hands, backed up and let Neil do his thing. Neil put down his coffee cup next to the tent and got into the tent.

‘Time to get out of bed Tech,’ he said while grabbing the underside of his bedroll. Tech looked up to see what he was doing, but before he realized what Neil’s plan was, he was getting dragged out of the tent with his bedroll.

‘What the hell!’

‘You had your chance,’ Neil said and he pulled the bedroll away. There was Tech in his underwear only laying in the wet grass.

‘God damn it!’ Tech angrily got up and gave Neil a death stare. Neil smiled in response and threw his bedroll to him.

‘Go put your clothes on. You can’t travel like that.’ Tech angrily walked to his tent, giving Shot who couldn’t stop laughing a kick. The kick didn’t help very much, since Shot just continued laughing as if he never got kicked in the first place. Neil picked up his coffee and sat back down at the campfire. He warmed his feet at the campfire and his hands on the coffee cup. It was very cold, close to freezing. Unfortunately for Neil, he didn’t have gloves since they left in a hurry. Chris, who sat next to him, always had pair of gloves in his coat and didn’t have to worry about his hands freezing to death. Michael was making a stew for breakfast and the smell made Neil hungry.

‘That smells good!’ Neil said while taking a look inside the small kettle on the fire.

‘Hope it tastes as well as it smells. The meat is not fresh anymore,’ Michael mumbled.

‘It will probably be fine.’

‘So, we will be arriving in Arbington today, right?’ Chris asked somewhat sleepy.

‘Yes, if everything goes according to plan,’ Michael responded. Neil wanted to make a sarcastic remark, but was stopped by Chris tapping his foot against Neil’s leg. It seemed like Michael had seen it, because he looked at the two questioningly for a second. Neil and Chris didn’t react and Michael turned his attention back to the food.

‘You know what’s strange?’ Michael asked. Neil and Chris looked at each other with light panic in their eyes.

‘I could swear I left my backpack next to me when going to bed, but when I woke up it was on the other side of my tent.’ Chris started to show signs of panic. Before Chris said anything, Neil took control:

‘Weird. Maybe you are mistaking.’

‘Must be,’ Michael said and Chris relaxed again. The three others joined the at the campfire as well. Bulk seemed exited for the food, looking in the pot until it was done. Michael gave everyone a bowl with stew and sat down next to Neil. He was wondering if Michael did that on purpose or not, but waved the thought away and started eating. It was a great stew and the others seemed to confirm that. Especially Bulk, who’s bowl was already empty after about twenty seconds. He looked at the kettle with stew and to Michael. Michael nodded in approval and Bulk got himself another bowl of stew. This time, he ate it at a normal pace, enjoying it like the others. After everyone was done, everyone except Chris and Bulk made some more coffee and they got on their horses. Bulk had to help Shot on his horse and Shot seemed ready for a remark from Tech. Tech looked like he was about to make a remark, but seemed to doubt whether or not he should. He decided not to make a remark and got on his horse too. Neil was surprised and saw Shot was too. He was smiling a bit; probably happy Tech didn’t annoy him this time.

‘Is that Arbington?’ Chris asked.

‘If we followed the map correctly, yes,’ Michael responded.

‘How do we know if we did?’

‘Well, Veronica should be waiting there for us. If she isn’t there, we didn’t follow it correctly.’ Chris nodded.

‘But where in Arbington is Veronica?’

‘I have no idea, to be honest. But either Bulk, Shot and Tech will show us the way or Veronica will find us.’ Chris slowed down and joined Tech to ask if he knew anything about Veronica.

‘Hey Tech,’

‘Yes?’

‘Do you know where in Arbington Veronica is?’

‘No. Like John said, she will find us. How is unknown to any soul except hers. Not even your father knows. I think.’ Chris nodded and rode back to Michael.

‘It seems like she will find us.’

‘So it would seem. Then we will go to the bar and wait for her there.’

‘Alright.’

‘I wonder how she is going to move a group of six without anyone noticing.’ Neil said.

‘Everyone does.’ Shot responded, who was riding next to him.

‘Rumor goes she once moved an army overnight without anyone noticing!’

‘That can’t be true...’

‘It’s a rumor. I’m not saying it is true, but it could have happened.’

‘I’ll keep it at a rumor. I don’t like the thought of someone being able to do such a thing. Imagine what she could be doing behind your back if she is able to pull off something like that!’

‘Just believe me, you will never notice her doing anything until you see the result of the action.’ Neil found it hard to believe and waved it away. He wanted to see it for himself before he believed in such a ridiculous claim.

‘I’ll be the judge of that,’ Neil said. Shot shrugged and grinned which made Neil somewhat uncomfortable, since it made it look like Shot was very certain of his claims.

As they approached the town, Neil could see it was a rich town. The streets were well maintained and made of cobblestone. Many people were dressed in upper class clothing like Neil wore most of the time. The amount of wealthy people compared to the poorer people was way higher than in Imaer. As they made their way to the center of the town, the amount of poor

people seemed to drop. As they reached the center, there only were rich people.

‘How come this town is so incredibly rich?’ Neil asked Shot.

‘Because the people here are incredibly rude and greedy. As someone of lower class you don’t want to live here.’

‘Then I probably won’t be getting along very well with these people.’ Neil said and Shot shrugged.

As they arrived at the bar, they got off their horses and got in. Neil pulled down his hat to cover his face again and looked around. It was really crowded, probably because they arrived in the evening. Everyone collected here after to work to grab a drink and catch up with friends or talk business. ‘Probably the latter,’ Neil thought. They looked around if they could find a table for six. They managed to find one and sat down. Neil sat down next to Chris, Michael on the opposite of them. Neil looked at Michael from under his hat, surprised to meet with Michael’s eyes. The look on his face wasn’t too happy. It seemed frustrated and annoyed.

‘Is something wrong?’ Neil asked. Michael didn’t seem to expect the question and seemed confused for a second.

‘No, I just have a backache from riding all day long,’ Neil nodded. Chris saw the interaction between the two and decided to intervene.

‘Does anyone want a drink?’

‘Sure!’ Neil said, happy Chris made for a new subject. Chris asked around the table what they wanted and asked Neil to come with him. Neil stood up and followed him. As they sat down at the bar and waited for the bartender to show up, Chris turned to Neil.

‘What was that all about?’ He asked.

‘Well, I just looked up at him and he gave me some kind of death-stare.’

‘Do you think he knows about last night?’

‘Yes, definitely. He might even know we know what he did.’

‘Shit...’ Chris mumbled. The bartender showed up and asked if he could help them. Chris ordered what was requested at the table. The bartender turned around to make the drinks, but Neil held him back for a second.

‘Make that Whiskey a double, please.’ He said. Chris looked at him questioningly.

‘Feeling like getting drunk tonight?’

‘No, but I know someone who should.’ Chris slightly turned his head sideways, not sure of Neil’s intentions.

‘If we get Michael drunk, he might start talking.’ Neil said.

‘But how are you going to force him to get drunk?’

‘He and I will play a game. If he loses he has to drink. If I lose I have to drink. It’s very simple. You on the other hand should stay sober so you can ask the questions and prevent anything from going wrong.’

‘Seems like a plan. But what will make you lose or win?’

‘I have a deck of cards. We’ll just play blackjack, only we play against each other instead of you.’

‘Okay, but what if he refuses to play?’

‘He won’t. Dad told me he likes a game like that too much.’ The bartender came back with the drinks. Neil paid and they walked back.

‘Okay, I’ll ask him for a game. If he says yes, I’ll ask you to be the dealer. You say you want to, but refuse to drink more than the drink you already ordered.’ Chris nodded and they arrived at the table.

‘There we are!’ Chris said. They gave everyone their drink and sat down. Michael questioningly looked at Neil’s second drink.

‘Hey Michael, I was wondering if you were up for a little game. I’m curious to see how well you play.’ Michael pulled up one eyebrow and grinned.

‘Well, I won’t refuse a game. What game do you suggest?’

‘I happen to have a deck of cards with me, so why not play blackjack?’

‘Ha! Definitely! Who’s the dealer?’

‘What about you Chris?’ Neil asked.

‘I don’t know, I don’t feel like getting drunk tonight.’

‘Doesn’t matter. Maybe you can deal without playing along? So it’s just me against Michael?’

‘Sure, why not?’ Neil handed over the deck of cards from the inside of his jacket and Chris opened the pack. He shuffled the cards and dealt two cards for both Michael and Neil. Neil received a seven and an ace. Michael received a five and an eight.

‘I hope you aren’t as good as your father, otherwise I’m not going to get away without getting horribly drunk,’ Michael said. That sounded like music to Neil and he grinned.

‘I learn from the best,’ he responded and they started playing.

The first round was won by Neil. He had received a two, after which he gave the turn to Michael. Michael received a nine, bringing Michael’s total to 22 and causing him to lose.

After a couple of games, Michael had gotten pretty drunk, because he had lost the majority of the games. Neil himself was quite tipsy and was laughing because he won again.

‘Seriously, I do not understand how in the hell you got so good,’ Michael said in a somewhat slow pace. He drank another shot and decided he had enough of the game.

‘Well played. It was fun playing with you,’ Neil said. Michael nodded in response and leaned back in his chair.

‘Chris turned his attention to Michael; ‘Hey Michael.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Why did you actually decide to go with us?’

‘Well, Neil is a friend of mine of course.’

‘Wait you call him Neil?’ Neil asked.

‘Yeah, when he was your age, everyone called him Neil too.’

‘Anyway,’ Chris said; ‘I was wondering about Low Lake. What is it like there? Since we skipped it, I’m quite curious.’ Michael took a sip of a beer he had ordered on top of all the liquor they had already consumed.

‘It’s a total shithole there. Not a place you would want to go.’

‘Good we didn’t go there then. I would want to know what the hotel there would have been like.’ Neil spotted a slight trace of stress in Michael’s eyes as Michael realized his story didn’t add up.

‘Nah, it wasn’t so much of a hotel. They call it that but it’s more like a bed in a small room, probably the cleanest in town there.’

‘Well, we’re lucky we ran into your friends!’ Chris said while looking at Shot, Tech and Bulk. Bulk smiled back; ‘Indeed!’

‘So how far is Low Lake from Hilwell?’ Neil asked.

‘About a day of traveling, I suppose.’ Shot said.

‘Huh, weird how we found you on the way to Low Lake then.’ Neil said.

‘What do you mean?’ Shot asked.

‘It’s getting late. Shall we go and see if we can find a hotel?’ Michael said.

‘No wait, I want to know what Neil is talking about.’

‘I really want to go.’ Michael said.

‘Why the hurry?’ Neil asked.

‘I don’t feel well.’

‘I wonder why... You seemed just fine a minute ago.’ Neil said while looking at him somewhat aggressively.

‘Alcohol is a real killer, you know?’ Michael said.

‘Well, then alcohol seems just fine with you.’

‘What are you trying to say here, huh?’ Michael said angrily and stood up from his chair.

‘Guys please cut it out,’ Chris tried, but the two kept on arguing. Slowly more and more people turned around to see what was happening.

‘You know exactly what I’m implying!’ Neil said.

‘Don’t you fucking dare call me that!’

‘Cut it out!’ Chris said.

Shot had backed up, remembering what had happened to him when Neil got mad at him. He, Tech and Bulk were confused and had no idea what was going on.

‘Why would you lead us somewhere else then?’ Neil started to become rougher.

‘I didn’t do such a thing!’ Michael yelled. The fact that Michael was denying that it was true made Neil really mad.

‘Don’t you fucking dare lie to me, you piece of shit!’ Neil started to show howler-effects.

‘Neil please!’ Chris begged while holding both of them back.

‘Fuck off Chris!’ Michael yelled and he aggressively pushed Chris’ arm away. Neil got even more angry.

‘Don’t you fucking touch him!’

‘I do what I damn well want!’ Michael responded.

‘Okay, now you have done it!’ Neil wanted to climb over the table, but something held him back. He turned around to see what was holding him back and met Bulk, holding him at his waste.

‘Get off me!’ Neil yelled as he tried to break free from Bulk’s grip. Bulk was strong, but not strong enough to hold back a Howler. As Neil broke free, Bulk fell backwards and tumbled over a chair. Shot quickly caught Bulk’s head, making sure it wouldn’t hit the ground. Neil turned back, but Michael was nowhere to be seen.

‘Where is he?’ Neil mumbled growlingly. As Neil looked around, he managed to spot Michael’s tail at the exit of the bar. Neil wanted to go after him and ran towards the exit, but before he could leave the building, three strong men came inside and grabbed him by the arms and pushed him on the ground. Neil wanted to kick them off him, but they had already tied up his legs with a thick and very strong rope. They turned him around and tied his arms up with the same type of rope behind his back.

‘Get off me!’ Neil yelled, but the men held him down.

‘Calm down and you’ll get what you want,’ one of the men said.

‘I’m not letting you command me! You have no idea who I am!’ Neil protested.

‘We do and that makes this something to be ashamed of.’

‘There’s no shame in stopping a murderer!’ Neil yelled as he desperately tried to break free again. He managed to kick one of the men on his knee, causing the man to budge. He hoped it would be enough to get loose, but the man had not loosened his grip in the slightest.

‘That’s a bit of an extreme accusation, don’t you think?’ the same man as before said. Neil growled, but then he noticed Chris kneeling down in front of him, looking him directly in the eyes. Neil looked away trying to see the men on his back.

‘Neil, look at me,’ Chris calmly said. Neil couldn’t help but listen to him. As Neil looked at him, Chris’ eyes pierced right through his soul, seemingly glowing a bright blue. It had some kind of hypnotic effect, calming Neil down. Slowly, his fur laid back down and he shrunk back to his normal size, loosening the ropes. A massive headache started to swell and Neil groaned.

‘You’re coming with us,’ the men said. Neil didn’t resist, as he had no energy to do so. They lifted him up and took him with them. As Neil was upside down on the shoulder of one of the men, he could see Chris and the three members of the Carbon 7 following them. Then everything slowly turned black as he passed out.

Neil woke up in a small room. He was in a bed, undressed, except for his underwear. He slowly got up and looked around the room. Because he was a wolf, he could see pretty well in the dark. His night-vision was still closer to that of a human than a non-anthropomorphic wolf though, as it was a less important feature later on in the evolution of his species.

As he looked around the room, he noticed Chris was on a chair opposite of him, asleep.

‘Chris?’ Neil whispered. Chris woke up and looked in Neil’s direction.

‘Chris, where in the world are we?’ Neil asked. Chris rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and answered; ‘I’m not really sure, but I suspect this might be Veronica’s work.’

‘Fuck,’ Neil mumbled. ‘She’ll have a great first impression of her grandson...’ Chris laughed a bit and stood up.

‘Do you think you’re able to get up?’ Chris asked.

‘I think so,’ Neil said as he stood up.

‘Where are my clothes?’

‘They are on the chair,’ Chris said as he pointed at his clothes, hanging on the back of the chair. As soon as Neil got his clothes on, Chris told him to follow him. They walked out of the room and got into a long hall with doors on both sides. Neil had to adjust to the light in the hall and squinted his eyes. As they walked down the hall, he noticed there were painted portraits of people on the wall. He didn’t recognize them, until he looked at a photo of a young black wolf with his arm around a white wolf. Almost instantly, he recognized himself and Chris back when they were 12 years old.

‘What the hell are we doing on the wall?’ Neil asked.

‘Well, if I’m correct, this is Veronica’s place, meaning she found us.’

‘Guess they were right about Veronica finding us...’ Chris chuckled a bit and they continued.

‘They told us to go here as soon as you woke up,’ Chris said as they got to the last door on the left. Chris knocked on the door and a female voice from the inside told them to come inside. As they walked into the room, it turned out to be an office. On both sides of the room were large bookshelves, filled with books, papers and folders. There was a window in the back of the room, with a desk in front of it, faced away from the window. Behind the desk sat a black, female wolf.

‘Please sit down.’ The voice of the female wolf was soft and kind, but at the same time strong and demanding. She had a strong British accent as well,

which Neil could appreciate. Neil and Chris sat down at the chairs in front of the desk, while the woman closed the book she was writing in and put it aside. She looked up at Neil and Chris and smiled. Her bright brown eyes enforced the smile and made it seem bigger.

‘You two have grown to be two fine young man,’ she said.

‘Well, thank you!’ Chris said, flattered by her comment.

‘You must be our grandmother, right?’ Neil asked.

‘Sort of. Please call me Veronica.’ They shook hands and Neil sat back down.

‘I assume you two know why you are here?’ She asked.

‘As far as we know we’re here to stay for the night,’ Neil said. Veronica nodded. She stood up and put away the book she had been writing in.

‘Let’s get downstairs then. It’s not really cozy in here, is it?’ They both agreed and got out of the office. As they walked down the stairs, they stepped into the entrance hall. The floor was made out of a dark type of wood and the walls had dark brown wooden plating on the bottom up until Neil’s waste, with red wallpaper with gold-like decorations covering everything above it. On the right Neil saw an arch, about a single door wide. On the left was another arch which was twice as wide as the one on the left. As he looked into the right arch, he saw a big kitchen, with black and white tiles on the ground and beige colored walls. In the middle was a cooking island with gray marble plating. All hooks for pots and pans and the sink had a golden color, making the kitchen look extremely expensive. Neil turned around and followed Veronica and Chris to the bigger arch. The arch led to the living room which had the same beige color as the kitchen, only the floor had the same dark wooden pattern as the hallway. As he looked into the living room from the arch, there was a big dark wooden sofa with red coated pillows and seats. To the left and the right were two lazy chairs with the same appearance as the sofa. As they walked further in, Neil noticed a fireplace facing the chairs and sofa. It was a grand Victorian fireplace and existed out of decorated black marble. Above the fireplace on the chimney, there was a big painting of a gray wolf. The underside of his muzzle was white, going down his throat, probably covering his chest and belly too. His hair was rough and short on his head. His eyes seemed golden and looked independent, which was supported by his assertive and thick eyebrows.

‘Who’s that?’ Neil asked. Veronica turned around and looked at the painting. She smiled softly and sat down on the sofa.

‘That would be your father.’ Neil sat down next to Veronica and looked at the painting. He had never seen his father before, but he believed her

immediately. Neil definitively had the same eyes and eyebrows. His facial structure and type of hair on his head we're almost identical.

'You look a lot like him,' Chris said. Neil softly nodded and leaned back.

'What was he like?' Neil asked.

'Wonderful,' Veronica said. 'He is just like you. Self-assured with a good sense of justice.'

'What about my mother?'

'She was a beautiful woman. She was a really good scientist. Such a shame what happened between the two.' Veronica stared into the fireplace shortly and sighed.

'Does anyone fancy a cup of tea?' She eventually asked.

'Yes please.' Chris responded. Veronica stood up and walked to the kitchen.

'It's beautiful in here, isn't it?' Chris asked.

'Yeah...,' Neil responded while looking around. As his eyes drifted through the room, he noticed a picture on a small stand. It was a photo of Nicolas and Michael, probably taken somewhere around the time the picture of Chris and Neil in the hall upstairs was taken. This was evident by the fact there was a girl in front of Michael. She was a black wolf, even blacker than Neil and seemingly everyone else in his family besides his father and Chris. She had the same dark brown, almost red eyes as Neil had seen in Michael's house. Neil wondered what she would look like now, considering she was about Neil's age now. Then Neil's thoughts went back to Michael.

'Hey Chris,' Neil said while turning back around to Chris.

'Where did Michael go?' Chris shrugged.

'I have no clue where he could be. At least he's not here to obstruct our way anymore.' Neil agreed. Maybe it was better that Michael wasn't around, otherwise another fight might have been started. Veronica came back with a tray with three cups of tea on top. She put it down on the coffee table in front of the sofa and sat down with one of the cups. Neil took one of the cups with green tea and took a sip. He relaxed and got himself comfortable on the sofa. It was still bothering him that he didn't know where Michael was, so he decided to ask if Veronica knew: 'Veronica, do you happen to know where Michael went?' Veronica put down her cup of tea and pulled up an eyebrow.

'What's the matter?' She asked.

'Well, he was leading us the wrong way, thereby slowing us down in saving our father,' Neil explained. Veronica nodded.

'Why do you think he did so?' Neil shrugged; 'I have absolutely no clue.'

'Then why do you assume he wants your father dead?' Neil was surprised.

'How do you know I think that?'

‘I know a lot of things, but do you know why he did what he did?’

‘No,’ Neil shortly answered.

‘Well, until then you must not judge him based on his actions. Like you always say; “It’s not about a man’s actions, but about a man’s motives.”’ That comment made Neil’s mind stop and go into overdrive at the same time.

‘Wha- How-’ Neil stuttered.

‘I told you I know a lot of things..,’ Veronica said with a somewhat smug face.

‘But if you know so much, do you know why he did what he did?’ Chris said.

‘Maybe. Of course I have my theories, but the only one who can truly answer that question is Michael himself.’

‘But where is he?’

‘Michael is not here, but he will find his way back to you eventually. Michael is a good man. He will try to help you, no matter what you think of him or if you try to get rid of him. No matter what his reason was behind the detour, it is something you will forgive him for, maybe even support it.’

‘So, if we talk to him again, do we have to ask him about it?’

‘Nothing is a must. I think it might be for the better if you don’t ask about it. If Michael is ready to tell you two about it, he will.’

‘If you say so... I mean, you know him better than we do.’ Chris said.

‘But what could possibly be the reason to do such a thing?’ Neil asked.

‘Being desperate can lead people to do stuff they never thought they would or wanted to do.’ Veronica said. She did have a point there. Maybe Neil indeed judge him too quickly. He had never asked for Michael’s motive and like Veronica said, he always said motives are more important than actions. Neil started to feel somewhat bad for what he had done that night.

‘I hope he gets back to us than...,’ he said.

‘Do not worry child, Michael will be back. You two both need some time for yourselves.’ Veronica said while giving Neil a reassuring smile.

‘Come now, we have dinner to prepare before the other three arrive!’

‘Speaking of,’ Neil began; ‘Where are they?’ Veronica stood up and collected the teacups while giving her answer:

‘They stayed at the bar to talk things right.’ She walked into the kitchen and Neil and Chris followed her. They started preparing dinner with her and just before it was done, the three Carbon-members came in. It was quite the spectacle; Shot was very drunk, clinching himself to Bulk’s leg while laughing like a maniac. Tech was just as drunk and tripped in the doorway, falling on top of Bulk who lost his balance because of Shot. Within a second of arrival, they were sprayed on the ground, laughing as if it was the

funniest thing they had ever experienced. Veronica got a little mad at them for getting so drunk and send them upstairs. It reminded Neil of a mother telling their kids to be good, which made him chuckle at the sight of it. He wasn't sure, but he could almost swear to hear Chris laugh behind him too. As the dinner was fully prepared, Veronica prepared three plates and brought them upstairs, while Neil and Chris prepared the dining table. As she came back, she prepared three more plates and served them out. They sat down at the table and dug in.

'Veronica, how come we have never heard of you before?' Chris asked.

'Well, most likely because nobody has ever told you,' Veronica said with another smug face. Neil pulled up one brow and looked at her. Veronica looked back at him, but didn't seem bothered to give another answer.

'So this is the game we're going to play..,' Neil thought.

'Okay, why has nobody ever told us?' Veronica smiled; 'Maybe they didn't feel the need to do so.' Neil sighed; 'You know what I mean.'

'I do.' Veronica confirmed. Neil waited for an answer again, but Veronica simply continued eating.

'Why aren't you telling us?' Neil asked, somewhat annoyed.

'Because I already gave you an answer.'

'Alright, let's get more specific then; Why has nobody ever felt the need to tell us about you?' Veronica shrugged.

'I'm not dignified to answer that question, since it is their minds, not mine.' Neil gave up. There was no way he was going to get an answer out of her and he didn't want to put up a show again. Chris chuckled and Veronica gave him a questioning look.

'You're the only one I know that stopped the train of questions that is Neil. I'm genuinely impressed,' Chris said. Neil gave him a kick under the table, causing Chris to flinch. Now it was Veronica's turn to chuckle. Neil couldn't help but smile too and his mood faded away.

After finishing dinner, Neil and Chris helped Veronica with cleaning up. Once finished, they said goodnight to Veronica and went to their room. Neil and Chris had to sleep in the same room, since there only was one guest room. There was one large bed, but luckily it could be separated into two single beds. They did exactly that and leaned the big matrass against the wall. Next to the big matrass were two smaller matrasses, which they put on the beds. The same went for the blanket. There already were two pillows, so that was something they didn't have to change. After they finished all of that, they talked for a bit and went to sleep later that night.

‘Come on Chris, you have to get up if you want breakfast before leaving,’ Neil said.

‘I’m coming...’ Chris mumbled.

‘What caused you to be this tired anyway?’ Neil asked.

‘I don’t know. I just couldn’t fall asleep.’ Neil shrugged. Chris sat up straight on the side of his bed and yawned.

‘I’ll see you at the table,’ Neil said and he walked out the room, closing the door behind him. Compared to Chris, Neil slept pretty well, causing him to be in a good mood. He walked down the stairs with a smile and entered the living room. Veronica was already there, enjoying a cup of tea when she noticed Neil walking in; ‘Good morning dear.’

‘Good morning to you, my lady,’ Neil said with a slight bow.

‘Oh dear, have I ascended to a higher status overnight?’ Neil laughed and sat down next to her on the couch.

‘Where is your brother?’ Veronica asked.

‘If he didn’t fall asleep again, he should be downstairs in a couple of minutes. I’m guessing he didn’t sleep very well. Normally he’s the one to wake me up.’

‘Well, everyone has a bad sleep every now and then, don’t they?’

‘Indeed.’ Veronica stood up and took her empty cup and saucer as she turned to Neil; ‘Would you like something to drink?’

‘I would love to have a coffee, please.’ Veronica nodded and went to the kitchen. While Veronica was busy, Neil looked at the big painting of his father. He thought about what Veronica said about his father. If he really had been a lot like him, Neil wondered if he might end up the same as his father ended up with his wife. It gave Neil chills thinking about hurting a loved one so bad they just couldn’t live on their own anymore. It made his mood swing a bit as he got lost in his thoughts.

‘What’s wrong my dear?’ Neil shot up, not realizing that Veronica had returned with the coffee and sat down next to him.

‘Oh, uhm... Nothing in particular,’ Neil said. Veronica handed him a cup of coffee and Neil thanked her. Veronica had a mysterious smile on her face of which Neil wasn’t sure why. He suspected he might remind her of his father, so he just let her be.

After about ten minutes or so, Chris came slopping into the living room with a cup of coffee.

‘Morning,’ he shortly said with a crack in his voice.

‘Good morning, dear,’ Veronica said. Chris made his way to one of the lazy chairs and sat down (or rather crashed down) in it. Neil could see the bags

under his eyes through his white fur. Chris took a sip of the coffee while trying to stay awake. Neil was worried about Chris, since he almost never slept this bad.

‘How come you’re so tired?’ Neil asked. Chris shrugged in response, but Neil didn’t believe he didn’t know.

‘Come on, there must be something keeping you awake at night, right?’

‘Well I’m not aware of what it could be,’ Chris said. Neil noticed he wasn’t speaking the truth. He had no idea how he knew it, but as his brother he had learned to read him quite easily.

‘You sure?’ He asked. Chris looked up with an annoyed face; ‘Yes.’ Neil pulled up an eyebrow and wanted to ask again, but Veronica intervened by asking Neil to wake up Bulk, Tech and Shot. Neil nodded and went upstairs. He heard Veronica talk to Chris when he walked up the stairs and hesitated to wait and listen, but decided that if Chris didn’t want to tell him it was better left unknown to him. Just when Neil entered Tech’s room after knocking, Tech’s alarm clock started to ring. Neil gave it a couple of seconds to wake up Tech, but it didn’t seem to work. He walked towards Tech’s bed and brought his muzzle to Tech’s ear.

‘Hello.’ Tech immediately shot up and was well awake. He was breathing heavily and took a while to realize what woke him up. As soon as he saw Neil’s grinning face, he started to get mad; ‘You son of a...’ He pulled away the blanket angrily and stood up to catch Neil, but Neil was long gone.

‘Fuck you!’ Tech shouted from the door post through the hall, Neil already in front of Shot’s room. When he knocked on the door, Shot responded from the inside of the room; ‘I’m up.’

‘Count yourself lucky,’ Neil said and went to Bulk’s room. As he entered his room after knocking, he found Bulk in his bed, but with his head and feet at the wrong sides. Neil chuckled: ‘Are you alright?’

Bulk moaned and put his thumb up. Neil pulled up an eyebrow and shrugged; ‘Alright then, see you downstairs in a couple of minutes.’ Neil walked back downstairs and noticed Veronica had moved to the kitchen, so he walked in.

‘Hey Veronica, what was that with Chris?’

‘It’s not up to me to decide if that is something you should know. All I can say is that everything you need to know will be revealed in time. When Chris is ready, he will tell you. Until then, it is best to leave it to him.’

‘Is it something bad?’

‘What do you define as bad?’

‘Does it affect his health or those of others?’

‘No, it is a heavy weight on his mental health, but he will be fine.’ Neil nodded and looked over to the food Veronica was preparing. It looked like she was making a salad and sandwiches.

‘Can I help?’ Neil asked.

‘Well, if you would be so kind to help me make sandwiches, I would appreciate it! I will set the table in the table.’

As everybody sat down at the dinner table, Neil asked a question that had been on his mind since the beginning of the journey; 'I was wondering, how did you all meet?' Neil asked while grabbing himself some of the salad Veronica had made.

'Well, Indy, your biological father, was our connection point.' Veronica explained. 'John, Lixian, Markus and Indy have been friends since they were little kids. Back then they already had a critical and truthful way of looking at the world. One day, John's home had been robbed. They left his father disfigured and did things to his mother I will not speak over at the dinner table. They did horrible things that should never have happened and both they and I are disgusted by it.' Neil could see the mix of saddened and angry emotion in Veronica's eyes while she explained.

'John, full of anger, wanted revenge and wanted to find them. If the others had not stopped him from doing so, he would have done things that he would have regretted for the rest of his life, possibly becoming just like the men who he hated so much. Although they had stopped him from doing something regrettable, he still wanted to do something, all be it to prevent this from happening to others and helping those who had been struck by such tragedy. Indy asked me to help in making a plan and I, of course, agreed. Besides the fact that we as this group wouldn't be sufficient enough, I asked your father, Nicolas, for help. He agreed and got more people involved in the organization than I could have wished for. He brought over people of our family line to begin with. It started to become a family-organization and so came the name with it: "The Carbon 7", named after the members of the organization'

'So if you, our father and my father were involved, who were the other 4?' Neil asked, hoping to finally get more information on his family-tree.

'It consists of Indy, Nicolas, Nicolas' wife, Indy's wife, you, my father and me. It would have been the carbon 8 if Chris' mother would already be pregnant. After bringing in the family, we started looking for more people. When Nicolas met Michael and learned about his protest against Damien, the entire thing started kicking off. We never told him about the organization, but he had always known it wasn't just a folks tale and now he knows it's true.'

'That's amazing... Dad never told us that,' Chris said, seemingly feeling better after the talk with Veronica.

'But how did you three get involved?' Chris asked, looking at Bulk, Tech and Shot. All three of them looked up at him with their mouths full, looking at him with a face that told him they had not been paying attention at all.

Veronica laughed a bit and explained it; ‘One time, when Nicolas was at Michael’s home, Michael told him he had to go somewhere, saying he would be back soon. When Nicolas asked him where he was going to, Michael insisted that he should stay at his house. Nicolas didn’t trust it and asked again. Michael told him to just trust him and he went off.’ That bit of telling him to just trust Michael, reminded Neil exactly of what had happened to him. Unknowingly he flicked his tail and raised his ears. Veronica pulled up and eyebrow and looked at him; ‘Something caught your attention, Nicolas?’ Neil, feeling a bit jammed up, shook his head quickly and put down his ears again.

‘Right,’ Veronica said, but she continued anyway; ‘As Michael left, Nicolas followed him. Michael headed towards a small alley and Nicolas followed, making sure Michael couldn’t see him. He saw Michael giving money to three figures in the alley, who gave him a hug for doing so. Nicolas realized he was simply giving money to the poor, he came out from his hiding spot and called out for him. He asked him why he was so secretive about it. Michael explained people always saw it as a weakness that he was helping the poor and that he didn’t want Nicolas to think of him as weak. Nicolas was dumbfounded about it and told him that it was exactly the thing Nicolas thought made him strong. Michael is a caring, intelligent and independent man, but has always been scared of what others think of him, especially those who are close to him. Nicolas proceeded to help the three and wanted to see what they were capable of. Their perfect chance was when Damien became president and Michael and Nicolas decided to do something about it. Nicolas involved the three and saw their potential in their now very obvious disciplines. He decided we could use them on our team.’

‘And what about Michael? Why didn’t you involve him? Does he know you guys are in the Carbon 7?’ Chris asked.

‘Well, now he does,’ Shot said.

‘We didn’t involve him because he was a complete outsider. I had to be careful as to not expose ourselves, so I decided he was not going to be part of it. If he wanted, he could have left at any point and told others. He had a life of his own, compared to most people in the organization.’ Neil nodded. It gave him a new look on the three. They had climbed from rock bottom to the top, living for the organization.

‘I didn’t know it was such a complicated story. It seemed so much easier when you guys explained it to us.’ It also started to make Neil think about Michael’s actions. It was evident by now he was searching for the Carbon 7. Why was unknown to him. Maybe it was because he knew they could help

them, but that would be a big risk, assuming he couldn't be sure of their location. It could be a personal reason, but whatever that could be was unknown to Neil. He gave the load of information a place while they finished breakfast and cleaned up. Tech walked upstairs and came back with a map and unrolled it on the table. Everyone except Veronica gathered around the table. Veronica went upstairs to her office, probably doing her business regarding the organization.

'Alright, today we're travelling to Westhaven, hopefully our final destination before returning home with the gemstone. We have a long road ahead of us and a lot can go wrong. This means we have to pack light to be fast and make sure we are not being followed. Veronica can make sure we're not followed until about halfway. From then on, we're on our own. We will make use of the border by taking a break right before that border, so that we don't have to stop on our way to Westhaven unprotected.' Tech explained. Neil nodded and looked at the map. It seemed like they were going to have to cross over multiple rivers and considering they didn't want to be followed, they were not going to follow the path and use the bridges, but rather cross through the rough terrain and cold rivers.

'That is going to be one hell of a ride,' Neil said.

'Yes, but if you're anything like Nicolas, you won't have any trouble going fast over rough terrain.' Chris grinned and Neil looked at him annoyed.

'It wasn't my fault!' Neil said in an attempt to defend himself.

'No, the rock moved in front of you,' Chris mumbled while trying to contain his laughter. Bulk sighed; 'As if two of them wasn't enough already...' All four looked at Bulk and he put his hands in front of him defensively; 'I didn't mean anything by it!' He quickly said. Everyone turned their attention back to the map and Tech continued explaining; 'Once we're there, we will go to a hotel and we wait until the others show up.'

'How do they know in which hotel we are?' Chris asked.

'I have discussed it with them the day before yesterday after we all went to sleep. When we arrive at the hotel, the rooms should already be reserved.' Chris nodded and Tech stood up.

'Any questions?' Tech asked.

'What about provisions?' Neil asked.

'We'll have to prepare those now. Once done, we leave immediately, so make sure you've got everything from your rooms. We will not head back until we are done in Westhaven.' Neil nodded but had another question; 'What do we do if we meet Michael again?' Tech pondered for a bit and answered; 'We

inform him about the plan we have at that moment and make an adapted plan in which Michael will be able to help us.'

'Okay then. Let's get our stuff and provisions and get in our horses then.'
Neil said and they went off to do exactly that.

As the group was riding towards Westhaven, Neil started to get more nervous by the second. Stuff was about to go down and he was worried somebody might get hurt really bad or even die. These outlaws they were going to catch had shown that they didn't feel sympathy towards Neil and Chris on the train and they probably didn't develop the need to do so. Neil looked around the group and noticed he wasn't the only one who was nervous. They didn't speak much and mostly just focused on the road ahead of them. Neil looked back and saw the people guarding them in the distance. He couldn't quite make out who or what species they were, but Neil was too busy with worrying about Westhaven that he didn't have time to think about it. Chris seemed to have noticed that Neil was on edge and slowed down to ride next to him.

'Are you okay Neil?' Chris asked with a worried look.

'No. I'm worried to the point I can't put my mind to anything else except thinking about what could go wrong there.'

'We're going to be fine Neil, don't worry. We will be with six trained men, seven if I include you. They stand no change!'

'How are you so sure? Maybe they are trained too. They probably will be with more as well, putting us at a disadvantage.'

'You always find something that might bother us, don't you?'

'Yes, I do. It's important to know what can go wrong, so you can prepare for it.'

'True, but if you only think about what could go wrong, you forget what could go right, putting you in a negative mindset and making you lose confidence. You sometimes tend to forget that, don't you?' Neil was a little annoyed, since he didn't like to be lectured by his brother, but despite that he did understand Chris' point.

'How do you stay in a positive mindset?' Neil asked. Chris thought about it for a second and answered; 'I think about what happens if, no, *when* we succeed. It's motivating and it puts my negative thoughts away.' Neil nodded and thought about it for a while, before asking yet another question;

'But don't you ever think of what could go wrong?' Chris shrugged.

'Not much, but I have you for that!' Chris smiled at him and Neil couldn't help but smile too. He felt that relaxing aura again and focused on what happens if, no, *when* they succeed and managed to put most of his worries aside.

As they approached the border, they stopped by a river to have a break. As they settled down, they could see the men whom had followed them for their protection settle down in the distance as well. Since they had to pack lightly, they only had a light meal, instead of dinner once more. Neil and Chris sat down by the river and listened to the peaceful sound of the running water and watched the fish in the water swim by.

‘Too bad we don’t have our fishing rods with us. It seems like there are enough of them here!’ Neil said.

‘Too bad indeed. Remember that time we went fishing with dad on that small lake somewhere near Blackwood?’ Chris asked.

‘How could I ever forget? Little you tumbling in there because you were too focused on catching a frog instead of a fish! What were you thinking?’ Chris laughed and shrugged: ‘I was interested in it! I had never seen a frog before and wanted to hold one, but I didn’t expect to topple out of the boat!’ They laughed and Neil playfully punched Chris on his shoulder.

‘Oh, the times I had to help you out of situations like that...’

‘Don’t forget how many times I got you out of bad situations too, like that time you got yourself stuck in a tree. I told you to leave the baseball there, but little stubborn Neil decided it was a great idea to climb the tree, only to look down and not dare to get back down.’

‘I was only eight! It looked like I was on a castle tower!’ Chris laughed and Neil picked up a flat stone he had found.

‘What about a little game?’ Neil asked and he threw the little stone into the water. It skipped for seven times before toppling over and disappearing under the surface of the water.

‘Seven. Let’s see if you can beat that!’ Chris looked around for a stone and found one after a short while. He threw the stone at the water and managed to skip it eight times.

‘Easy,’ Chris said casually. Neil didn’t leave it and tried again, only to skip the stone seven times again.

‘Damn it...’ Neil mumbled. Chris wanted to take his turn again when suddenly a stone flew between the two and skipped over the river to the other side in only a couple of skips. Neil and Chris turned around surprised to see shot had thrown the stone.

‘Want to see a real game of skipping?’ Shot asked. Neil and Chris looked at each other and shrugged.

‘Bulk, Tech! Let’s play some skip! Let’s show these city boys how it’s done!’ As the three members of the Carbon 7 played, it became clear Neil and Chris clearly had a lot to learn about skipping stones. They played to

versions of the game: In one of them they had to get the stone to the other side and make it go as far as possible while at least hitting the water once. In the other they counted the amount of skips they could get. To achieve this, they would stand on a rock in the middle of the river and throw the stones against the current, as to benefit from the small waves and to have a longer track for the stone. The furthest throw was made by Bulk and the most by Shot. Tech was second in both of the games and seemed pleased to at least have beaten them both once. Neil and Chris admired their ability to skip rocks so well and asked them to teach them. While Bulk went back to taking care of the horses, Tech and Shot explained the techniques to Neil and Chris. Neil couldn't help but notice that the two hadn't argued about winning or losing. They had actually supported each other, showing they were good sports. Neil liked to see the two getting along and I couldn't help to feel somewhat proud of the two. They hadn't been annoying quite as much as they were before after Neil told them to be nicer to each other. He wasn't sure if it was because of that, but he liked to think so. After fiddling around a bit and Neil and Chris improving on their rock skipping skills, the four of them joined Bulk to have lunch. They talked about stupid things they had done back when they were only little like Neil and Chris had done. Shot for example used to have a slingshot he used to play around with. Once, while shooting stones at a wall for practice, he accidentally managed to shoot straight through someone's window. The man who owned the house was outraged and followed him all around Wealdstone, theirs and Michael's hometown. It reminded Neil about the fact that Michael was still gone. He was worried that Michael might be in danger. If anything would happen to him, Neil couldn't forgive himself. He was the one that caused Michael to flee, only because he thought Michael wanted his father dead. Looking back at it, Neil started to see how ridiculous that thought was, but also understood why he thought it. He was scared his father would not make it which caused him to be extra protective. Michael had made such a weird move that the only reason could have been that to him back then. Only when Veronica helped him realize it might have a different reason, Neil started to doubt his own theory. It just seemed so weird to him that Michael just didn't want to tell him why he did what he did.

'What do you think, Neil?' Tech asked, causing Neil to get out of his train of thought.

'I'm sorry, I wasn't paying attention. Could you repeat it please?'

'Depends on how far ago you lost track of my story.' Neil looked at him with a sorry face and felt guilty for not listening to Tech.

‘I’m so sorry,’ Neil said, not wanting Tech to feel ignored.

‘Don’t worry. I know you have a lot on your shoulders right now. Is there anything you want to talk about maybe?’

‘Well, I’m just worried about Michael..’

‘Michael will be fine, trust me.’ Tech looked him in the eyes and assured him that Michael was going to return safe.

‘Alright, I’ll trust you on this one,’ Neil said.

‘You want to hear the story again?’ Tech asked and Neil nodded yes, relieving him of the stress that Tech might feel unheard.

After telling more stories and eating their lunch, they had packed up and continued on their way to Westhaven. The men who guarded them for the first half of the way had turned around and were no longer visible, meaning they were on their own for the rest of the journey. They decided to follow the path, since you could see them ride in the field from the road anyway, since it was an open area. It would only make them look suspicious and the big problem was that if they were discovered, they had no way of knowing if it were people from the Lutherland-gang or regular by-passers. Also, they couldn't hide if something went wrong, since they were in the middle of an open field. They would probably meet quite some people on the way there too, since Westhaven was a big city for their time. They would have to go on instinct and feel out if people were acting suspicious and strange. They all kept an eye out on anyone passing by. After a while they approached a farm with a big barn house and a smaller one. The farm had large wheat fields on the left and the right of the road going to the main house. As the wind blew over the wheat, it almost seemed like there were waves of wheat going with the wind. It fascinated Neil as they rode in the direction of the farm. It had an almost hypnotic effect on him as he couldn't look away from it, when suddenly Bulk screamed and fell off his horse. Neil turned around in his saddle, trying to understand what happened. After a fraction of a second, he heard gunfire.

'Everybody, jump in the wheat fields!' Shot yelled. Immediately Neil jumped off his horse into the wheat fields and kept low. He turned around in the wheat and still saw Bulk lay there. Next to Neil was Tech.

'Tech! Help me get Bulk!' They stayed and got out of the fields to quickly grab Bulk by the legs and pull him into the wheat fields. While doing so, Tech got shot in his leg, causing him to fall backwards back into the wheat fields. Neil quickly pulled Bulk into the wheat fields and helped him up.

'Can you run?' Neil asked him.

'Yes, go help Tech!' Bulk said. Neil turned around and got to Tech. Neil could hear a bullet passing by and hitting the ground, followed shortly after by the sound of gunfire. He ducked and got to Tech. He put his arm around Tech and lifted him up. Tech groaned from the pain in his leg, but managed to stay up.

'Where are Chris and Shot!?' Neil yelled.

'We're on the other side of the road! We're okay! Make your way to the farm and take cover there!' Shot said and so they did what he said. Tech was having a hard time moving forward, despite Neil's help. They couldn't place them on Bulk's shoulders either, because Bulk himself had an injury in his

shoulder and Tech would be visible above the wheat. As they made their way towards the farm, they could hear more gunshots than before. They got out of the wheat fields and hid behind an old shed. They could see Shot and Chris on the other side of the road behind some haybales. Neil grabbed the rifle of his shoulder and loaded the gun. As he looked at Chris and Shot, he saw them make their way to him and the two injured. Chris was behind Shot, who fired at the man with the rifle in the barn house. With the revolver he used, he still managed to hit the man in the barn right in the head, making the man tumble down out of the barn, breaking through a wooden wagon. Neil was shocked, not only because he just saw a man get hit in the head, but mostly the immense precision of Shot's aim.

'Why did you...,' Neil began, but Shot interrupted him; 'Because it could have been us. There are more men in that barn, so we are not done yet. Stay behind me until I tell you to do something else. Chris, you stay with Tech and Bulk here until I say it's safe to move them into this shed.' Chris nodded and Neil stood behind Shot who opened the door to the shed. Neil could see a glister in the dark. Before he could react, Shot had already closed the door and fired straight through a crack in the door, shortly followed by the sound of glass breaking. Shot opened the door again and looked around.

'All clear. Chris, get Bulk and Tech in here while I take down the remaining men with Neil,' Shot said. Chris did what was asked of him, while Neil followed Shot to the windows on the opposite site of the shed.

'Where are they?' Neil asked.

'Like I said, they are in the barn house. The doors are open, so they most likely are hiding behind them. Maybe there is one or two more where the man that started the shooting was, so we have to be careful.'

'What's the plan?' Neil asked.

'We make our way around the barn. I take the right side and you take the left. Take out anyone you find along the way and be careful. I'll see you at the back of the barn.' Neil nodded and wanted to get out of the shed, when Chris held him back:

'Neil, wait!' Chris walked up to him and gave him a silver coin.

'What's this?' He asked.

'It's an angel's coin. Veronica gave it to me, but I want you to have it. I know you don't believe in such things, but I believe this coin keeps you safe in case something happens.' Neil looked at the coin in his hand; on the side that faced him had wings on it, which seemed to be made out of clouds. He turned it around and saw a gate, seemingly made out of fire. Neil figured this resembled heaven and hell and put it in his bag. He thanked Chris and got

out of the shed. Neil stayed low and made his way to the haybales where Chris and Shot had been hiding. He hid behind them and peeked at the left side of the barn and made eye-contact with someone at the left side of the barn. Neil ducked and heard a bullet being fired and flying over his head. He got up and shot back at the man who yelled and dropped his gun. Neil ran towards the man and knocked him out with the back of his gun. He slowly made his way to the back of the barn, when someone turned around the corner, aiming his gun at Neil. He heard a gunshot and ducked, fearing that this would be it. After a second, he realized it wasn't the man who fired at him, but it was Shot firing at the man. The fox in front of him fell down, bleeding from his head. Neil looked in horror and scrambled up, feeling ill but relieved by the thought it could have been himself. He took a moment to catch his breath and looked away from the body.

'Weak stomach?' Shot asked while stepping over the body. Neil ignored his question and straightened his back again.

'Thanks,' Neil said.

'No problem. Are you okay?' Shot said.

'I guess. So, what's next?'

'We go in via the right; there is a back door there. We take the remaining men inside the barn down and get back to the others.' Neil nodded and they made their way to the side Shot came from. Shot kicked open the door and went inside. Guns were fired almost immediately and Neil went in after Shot. As expected, there were two foxes at the barndoors focusing on Shot. Neil made use of the situation and shot one of them in the leg and hand, causing him to fall over and drop his gun. The other guy got shot in the chest and dropped his gun. Shot quickly grabbed both guns and made sure they couldn't get to them.

'Keep the man you shot alive. I want answers.' Shot said and Neil made his way to the man. As he wanted to pull up the fox, the fox pulled a knife and tried to stab him, but Neil quickly grabbed him by his wrist and disarmed the man. He pushed the man on his chest, put the fox' arms on his back and put his knee on them. The man yelled in pain because of his hand, but Neil gave him no attention. He heard gunfire above him and figured Shot had taken out someone else. After a while Shot came downstairs; 'All clear. You go get the others and hopefully the horses. I'll question that man.' Neil nodded and got off the fox' back. He moaned in relieve for his hand but let out a quick yelp once Shot turned him on his back and grabbed him by his arms to pull him up. Neil didn't want to see what he was going to do to him and got out of the barn via the big barndoor. In front of him was the broken

wagon were the man from the top of the barn had fallen onto. Neil quickly made his way around it, not wanting to know what he looked like in there and got to the shed. He first knocked and called out Chris, so that he wouldn't be surprised by Neil and end up shooting him. Chris opened the door and immediately gave Neil a hug. Neil was surprised, but let him do his thing.

'Thank God you're still alive!' Chris said while letting go of him.

'Don't thank God, it was Shot who saved me. Without him I wouldn't be here.' Chris laughed and looked behind Neil: 'Where is he?'

'He is figuring out how they knew we were here, if they knew. We should get the horses and get Bulk and Tech on there.' Neil looked over to them and saw Chris had treated their wounds with cloth. They walked out the shed and got back to the wheat field. To their surprise, all the horses were still waiting there, nervously.

'Well, I didn't even expect that of our own horses, but it turns out they are even better trained than I previously thought..,' Neil said. They got the horses and brought them back to the shed. They helped Bulk and Tech on their horses and went to the barn, when Shot came walking out.

'It seems like this was only an outpost. We were unlucky to walk into them. Luckily we made it out alive, unlike them.' Shot said and he got on his horse. Neil was amazed at what this tiny fox could do and also a bit terrified at how easy he handled dead bodies.

'We have to go. Follow me,' Shot said and they left the farm.

As the group was approaching Westhaven, Neil started to get more nervous by the second. Stuff was about to get even more serious than at the farm. He also worried about Chris; if he was already worried about Neil so much at the farm, Neil wasn't sure if he would be able to handle Westhaven. On the other hand, maybe this was as bad as it was going to get. When in Westhaven, they should have John, Lixian and Markus on their team too. As they rode into the city, Neil could see it was a port city located next to a wide river. The harbor was busy and loaded with ships for transport of goods and boats for fishing. Neil pulled his hat down a bit and rode to Shot.

'So, what's the plan?'

'We're going to the lighthouse hotel. There should be rooms reserved there like I said earlier. Once there, we just rest and wait for the others.' Neil nodded and they continued on their way.

After about 5 minutes they had reached the hotel they would be staying at for the night, so they got off their horses, hitched them and entered the hotel. The hotel had a bar downstairs which was filled with wolves and foxes. Some of them were drinking and some of them were playing gambling games like poker or blackjack. Tech walked to the bartender, while the rest of the group sat down at a table. Neil sat down and let out a sigh of relief; it had been quite the day and the following days probably weren't going to be any easier. Shot had ordered a whiskey for all of them and sat down at the table. He gave Neil and Chris a key to their room upstairs, which Neil took and put in his jacket.

'This has been quite a day...', Neil mumbled. The others at the table nodded as Shot sat down. The whiskey was very welcome to all of them and was gone in a matter of seconds. They got a few more and decided that the day had been long enough. They all went to their rooms. Neil and Chris shared a room and had to move around the beds, since double bed in the room could also be used as two individual beds when pushed away from each other. The room contained the two beds, a desk with a chair, two nightstands and a closet. After moving the beds Neil sat down behind the desk and got a pencil and a small book out of his bag. Neil wrote down what had happened that day and made some drawings with it. Neil always liked to write and draw and decided a couple of years ago that at the beginning of the year he would buy himself a new notebook and write and draw what he experienced throughout the year. When he put the book away in his bag, he felt the coin Chris had given him before the fight at the barn.

‘Chris?’ Neil said while grabbing the coin and inspecting it.

‘Yes Neil?’

‘What exactly is this coin and where did Veronica get it?’

‘Veronica told me it’s an Angel’s coin. She said she got it from her father when she was young.’

‘But what does it do?’

‘It’s a means to bargain, if I recall correctly. If you come close to or actually die, it’s a means of bargaining to get back to earth. However, this would probably only work if you were to go to hell, since I personally think God has enough of the coins,’ Chris said with a grin on his face.

‘Then why did you give it to me? Do you think I’ll end up in hell?’ Neil said while turning around and pulling up an eyebrow to Chris. Chris visibly changed color under his white fur and heavily shook his head;

‘No, no, no! That’s absolutely not what I think! I just thought that if something were to happen to you, it would have more use to you than me!’ Neil grinned and turned around.

‘Well, seeing as you have never done anything remotely bad, you indeed don’t need this at all.’ He flipped the coin and looked at it. The coin landed with the wings facing Neil.

‘Why do you recon Veronica gave it to you?’ Neil asked.

‘I don’t know. She told me that she wasn’t meant to have to coin. When I asked her why she gave it to me, she told me that she “had her reasons” and that she felt like “that was how it is supposed to be” in typical Veronica fashion,’ Chris said with a mocking tone at the end.

‘That does sound a lot like Veronica for as far as we know her.’ Neil put the coin back in the bag, when someone knocked on the door. Neil got up and took his knife in his right hand and held it behind his back in case it was a follower of Damien, while opening the door carefully with his right hand. As he opened the door, he was met by John’s stern face;

‘Evening,’ John said and Neil and Chris greeted him as well while Neil put away his knife and let him in. John sat down at the desk and Neil sat down next to Chris, who had gotten up and sat on the side of the bed in his underwear, since he was already prepared to go to sleep before John came.

‘How’s your journey been mister Mercia?’

‘Please call me Neil,’ Neil said at the same time Chris asked him to call him Chris. John grinned and nodded.

‘Well? How’s it been?’

‘Just fine, until earlier today. We got attacked at a barn and managed to fight our way through. Unfortunately, both bulk and Tech got hurt. Chris

tended to their wounds, but we don't have much medical experience. John frowned and stroked his chin.

'Neither do we, so we might have a problem on our hands.' He looked at Chris and pointed at his shoulder.

'Who treated that wound?'

'Uhm, Michael did..,' Chris said. Neil silently cursed himself for scaring away Michael, but John seemed to notice his reaction.

'That brings me to my next question; where is Michael?' John explicitly looked at Neil, knowing very well he had at least something to do with Michael disappearing.

'Chris and I discovered he had led us away from Westhaven. Instead of going there directly, he led us to you and the others. Know that I look back at it, it seems like the logical thing to do, but yesterday I thought otherwise and scared him away accidentally... It might be better that way, because if the three men who stopped me hadn't, Michael might have gotten hurt.' Neil turned his head away with his ears flat. He laid his tail on his lap and started fiddling with it, ashamed of the outburst he had against Michael back at the bar. John looked at him judgingly and crossed his arms.

'Oh I'm sure! You did a good one on me, my knee still hurts you know...,' Neil looked at him with a confused look on his face.

'What do you mean?' Neil asked, head tilted slightly.

'Right, you don't remember much of what happens during a Howler effect of course: The three men holding you down where me, Markus and Lixian. You kicked me in the knee in an attempt to free yourself.' Neil cowered and let out a painful "sorry", hoping John wouldn't give him what he deserved. Instead, John laughed it off: 'It's okay. I think the shame is enough of a punishment.'

'Do you know where Michael went?' Chris asked.

'Yes, but we haven't managed to find him.'

'Hold up,' Neil intervened.

'If you were heading in the same direction anyway, why didn't you guys just ride with us?'

'To make sure you would all behave..,' John sternly said. Neil turned his head away once again, even more ashamed than before. Normally, it would be hard to see if Neil blushed since he had black fur, but he was pretty sure he was so red right now that it would be impossible to miss.

'He will return thought, sooner or later. Michael is not one to just leave us to our faith. We need him and he needs us,' John stated. Chris nodded and laid down on the bed. Neil moved to his own bed, not saying a word and

preventing looking at John or Chris. He could swear he heard John laughing behind him, but he chose to ignore it and made himself ready for bed.

‘I’ll see you guys tomorrow. We will plan what we are going to do then and see what we can find out about Michael. Have a good night!’

‘Good night!’ Chris said, while Neil could only let an ashamed and somewhat annoyed “hmmph” escape his mouth. John left the room and silently closed the door behind him.

‘Hey Neil,’ Chris softly said. Neil turned around and looked at him and once again looked into the bright blue eyes of the white wolf.

‘Don’t worry about it, he will be back. We’re going to make it through just fine, believe me.’ Neil felt a bit better and smiled.

‘Thanks,’ Neil said, feeling more relaxed. Chris simply smiled and turned around to sleep. Neil did the same and not long after, drifted away.

Neil woke up when somebody knocked on the door. He stretched and rubbed in his eyes; 'Come in!' The door opened and Lixian peaked his head into the room.

'Huh...' Lixian's eyebrows went up a little as he opened the door further.

'It's quite a bit smaller in here than I expected.'

'What do you mean?' Neil asked, still a bit sleepy.

'Well, our rooms are quite a bit bigger. I expected John to give you guys more space than this.'

'I can only guess why...' Chris mumbled, also waking up. Neil looked at Chris questioningly, to which Chris responded by knocking on his knee.

'Right...' Neil mumbled as he realized that was probably the cause. He looked over to Lixian, who leaned against the doorpost, grinning. Neil gave him an annoyed look and got up to put his clothes on.

'I'll see you guys down at our table. We'll have breakfast and discuss our plan.' Lixian closed left the room and closed the door behind him. As Neil had dressed up, he turned around and noticed Chris was stay lying in bed, sleepily looking his way.

'Is something wrong?' Neil asked. It seemed like he had pulled Chris out of a deep thought, judging by the fact he looked at him surprised.

'No, no... Just tired... I'll come in a minute. You go.'

'Are you sure nothing's wrong?'

'Yeah. I'm just a bit worried for today, that's all.'

'Will be fine, don't worry. I'll see you downstairs and we will discuss the plan. I'm sure there's nothing to worry about.' Neil smiled at him and Chris smiled back at him. He left the room and went downstairs to join the other six who we're already awake. He sat down at the table and got himself coffee from the glass carafe. As he took a sip, Chris came downstairs as well and sat down next to him, also grabbing coffee. Neil felt like Chris was behaving weird. He never really drank coffee nor be one to stay in bed longer then anyone he had ever known.

'Are you sure you're okay?' Neil quietly asked him, letting the others continue their conversations. Chris looked at him somewhat annoyed and said; 'No,' quite harsh. Neil wasn't sure what was going on with him, but he felt like he had done something wrong that had made Chris mad at him.

'Did I do anything wrong?' Neil tried.

'Just leave me to it Neil. I'll be fine. Like I said: I'm just tired. That's all.' Neil didn't completely believe him, but he decided to do as he said and leave him be. He didn't want any more unnecessary conflicts caused by him thinking for others. Instead, he focused on the food. He was starving because

they didn't eat the night before. As he made a sandwich and started eating it, John had decided that would be the right moment to discuss the plan:

'Now that we're all here, first of all, good morning.' Around the table everyone was eating and let out a muffled good morning in return.

'We are going to have to prepare for tomorrow. We have figured out that the gemstone of mister Mercia is among the stolen goods that will be sold at an illegal auction that will be held tomorrow. We have to gather more information on where and when the auction will be. Markus and I will be on that case. As soon as we have more information on the location and time, Tech will figure out if we can set any traps or lock the place up. Bulk is injured pretty bad and if we don't find someone to heal the wound, it could get infected. We tried getting help at the local doctor, but he won't be on location for the coming week and the "replacement" doesn't know how to treat bullet wounds.' John rubbed his chin while looking at Bulk worried.

'That leaves only one option,' he continued; 'Lixian, and the two Mercia brothers will have to find Michael. We've got a lead as to where he might be, which Lixian will explain later.' Neil was somewhat relieved but nervous at the same time about the fact they were going to search for Michael. He was hoping Michael wouldn't be too mad about Neil's behavior, but he feared the worst. If they couldn't get him back, Bulk might be in serious trouble.

'Alright, when do we go?' Neil asked.

'As soon as you have grabbed your stuff.' Neil nodded and went upstairs with Chris to get their stuff. As they wanted to leave their room to look Lixian, he was already at the doorpost.

'Ready?' Lixian asked. Neil and Chris both nodded and Lixian waved to follow him.

'We're going to get the horses and head to the port. I've heard a new male wolf with mixed fur color has arrived there. Word goes he is helping people who don't have anything to spare with getting them a job.' Lixian explained.

'That does sound a lot like Michael. Where did you get his information?' Neil asked.

'People talk a lot, especially when they're drunk.'

'He did make a name for himself in such a short time,' Chris commented.

'Indeed, but Michael is most known for that. Without him, Damien might still be at your father's place,' Lixian said. They had walked to the horses and mounted them. Neil noticed the horses were well cared for, probably by Bulk. Neil smiled at the thought that even if Bulk was wounded he would take care of others first. As they got on their horses, they followed Lixian to the port. On their way to the port, Neil got to see the city a bit better. It all

seemed pretty new and well taken care off. Another thing he noticed was that there were a lot of foreigners in the city, which was abnormal for the time he lived in. It was clear people didn't want them in their city though, because they gave them sour looks and sometimes even spit at them. Neil hated the fact that people mistreated them, but he couldn't say anything. He could get in trouble for it, which normally wasn't something Neil was afraid of, but he couldn't afford to spend the time right now. As they approached the port, they got off their horses and hitched them to a post.

'Alright, what's the plan?' Neil asked.

'We all go looking for Michael. We should look around and see if we can get any information out of anyone around here. When you hear the church bells indicate 1 o'clock, we get back here.' Neil and Chris agreed and they all went to a different landing stage. Neil saw a gray wolf cleaning a yacht and walked over to the man.

'Excuse me mister, may I ask a question?' The man dropped the wet rag he used to clean the boat in a bucket and looked at Neil with annoyance.

'I'm not interested in your deals.'

'I'm not looking to strike a deal sir. I am just looking for a job and hoped you might know somebody who can help me find one.'

'Ha! You really think I'd fall for that? You're dressed up quite rich for someone looking for a job. I won't let you lure me or someone else into a deal that is going to empty our pockets. Now get away from me and let me clean my yacht in peace.' Neil was feeling a little insulted, but kind of understood the man. It did give him an idea how to get to Michael. He looked at his pocket watch and saw it was 11 o'clock, which gave him enough time to get back to the hotel to switch clothes. They had taken their old clothing with them, which got damaged on the train four days ago. That would also mean it would smell stale because of the dried blood and sweat that had left their bodies that day. He could use that and his hat to appear like a roughed-up farmer of some kind.

It took him half an hour to get to the hotel and back with the clothing. On his way back, he noticed it was working pretty well. People looked at him with disgust or pity. He got onto a different landing stage than previously. He walked up to a fox loading provisions onto a ship. The fox noticed him and slowly put down a box with provisions and looked at Neil questioningly. 'Are you okay sir?' The fox asked. Neil roughed up his voice a bit by coughing a couple times and talked to the man; 'No, absolutely not. A couple of bandits have destroyed my farm and shot me in the shoulder a couple days back. I can't find a job anywhere and am starving.' The fox scratched the back of his head and sat down on the box. 'I might know someone who can help you. You see, I lost my job because my boss died of tuberculosis. I was on the point of starvation when a wolf helped me out. He got me this job and it actually pays pretty well.'

'Bingo!' Neil thought. He was almost 100% sure it was Michael he was talking about.

'Where can I find him?' Neil asked, sounding hopeful.

'He'll be here around 12 o'clock. All you have to do is wait.'

'Thank you so much! Can I help you with your work in return?'

'That's not necessary. I'm sitting on the last box for now. After that I'll have to wait for him too.' Neil smiled and thanked him again.

After about thirty minutes, Neil noticed a wolf walking on the landing stage towards him. As the wolf approached him, Neil noticed it was indeed Michael. He waited for Michael to pass him by; this would make sure Michael couldn't run away in case he saw him and was still scared. When Michael had passed him, Neil stood up, put off his hat and tapped Michael on the shoulder. Michael turned around and immediately saw stress appear on his face.

'Michael, please calm down,' Neil said while making a calming gesture. Instead of calming down, Michael became angry; 'Calm down!? You first accuse me of attempted murder and the next moment you're trying to kill me!' Neil's ears went flat on his head and cringed.

'Is something wrong?' the fox asked, walking off the boat.

'It's personal,' Neil said; 'Would you mind giving us a moment?' The fox nodded and went back onto the boat. Neil turned his attention back to Michael, who still looked at him very angrily.

'Michael, I'm sorry. I judged to quickly with too little information. I just don't understand why we took a detour.'

'Does "Carbon 7" ring a bell?' Michael asked with a sarcastic undertone.

'Why didn't you just tell me that? That would have spared all the trouble!'

‘I cannot answer that.’ Neil wanted to question him further, but realized that would only escalate things again.

‘We need you back.’ Neil explained. Michael gave him a stern look and crossed his arms. Neil wasn’t sure what to do with it.

‘Please, come back. Don’t make me beg you.’ Michael sighed and gave Neil a hand; ‘Alright, but promise me we won’t bring this subject up again in the coming days.’

‘Agreed.’ Neil was happy and said sorry once more for what happened. Michael waved it away and they walked of the landing stage.

‘There you go. It’s going to take a while to heal, but you’ll be fine.’ Michael said. Bulk thanked Michael for treating his gun wound and smiled. They were in Neil and Chris’ room with Bulk sitting on the bed and Neil and Chris looking how Michael did his work.

‘Hey Michael,’ Chris began; ‘How’d you get here in Westhaven?’

‘By horse, obviously.’ Michael said with a grin on his face. ‘I simply got the map and rode this way. In a bar I overheard the local doctor left and that people were getting sick and couldn’t be treated. I decided to help them as much as I could. Then Neil found me. Maybe the better question is how did you guys figure out I was here?’ Michael pulled up an eyebrow and looked at Neil. Neil put his hands in front of him as a gesture that he didn’t figure out. He pointed at John, Lixian and Markus, who were busy discussing something. Michael grinned; ‘Ah, I get it. Impossible to know how, but yet they managed to find out.’

‘Something like that,’ Neil said, grinning as well. His mind was drifting a bit, thinking about the fact that they were going to find Damien and probably get into a deadly fight. He got pulled away from his thoughts by Chris tapping him on the shoulder; ‘Are you okay?’ Chris looked and sounded worried.

‘I’m fine, don’t worry about it.’ Neil said. ‘Alright then. Come on, John wants to talk with us.’ They walked out of the room and went to John’s room. Before Neil knocked on the door, he heard ‘Come in,’ from John on the inside of the room. He opened the door, confused to how John knew. They gathered around the desk John was sitting behind with a map unrolled in front of him. It was a map of WestHaven and had all kinds of marks on it,

‘We figured out the auction will be on a showboat, leaving tomorrow at 4 PM. We have to get on that boat, armed and well without getting noticed. This means we are going to need suits and a way to get weapons onto the boat. We cannot get tickets anymore, so we have to find another way. Does anyone have an idea how we are going to get ourselves on the boat?’

‘I can pickpocket people standing in line,’ Shot said.

‘That will do,’ John said.

‘Wow hold on,’ Chris began; ‘You can’t just rob them!’ John sighed.

‘Is it never good with you two?’ He looked at the two brothers.

‘Hey, I didn’t say anything,’ Neil said putting his hands up in defense.

‘Really Neil? You’re okay with that?’ Chris looked at him unbelievably.

‘Chris, those people their illegal entertainment doesn’t mean as much to me as the life of our father. In these desperate times you need desperate solutions. I don’t like the idea of stealing, but if that is what saves our father, I’m willing to make an exception,’ Neil explained. Chris nodded and John proceeded.

‘Good. The next thing is getting us suits, weapons and ammunition. Let’s start with the suits. We will walk over to the clothing store and get ourselves what we need. After that we’ll go to the weapon shop and make sure we have small but effective weapons. Does that sound good to everyone?’ Everyone agreed and they went off to the clothing store.