Your Sons and Your Daughters Are Beyond Your Command

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Your Sons and Your Daughters Are Beyond Your Command

by hanktalkin

Summary

The DeGroot Family’s lies run deeper than Demo ever thought, and when he finds out, he sets out on a road trip to put things right. Soldier tags along for the ride.

"And you never were going to tell me?" Tavish demanded. He was not the sort of son who yelled at his mother. He was not the sort of man who got in his mother's face, no matter how angry he was, yet now he couldn't keep the shaking from his clenched hands nor the lump from his throat. "You were just going to keep lying right up until the grave?"

"You watch your tongue, Tavish Finnegan," Mum warned him. "I won't be called a liar in me own home."

She was perched in her chair, back ramrod straight. Usually Tavish admired her unflappability, her stone indifference in the face of calamity, but now her untroubled frown simply felt cold. Callous. Empty of any of the compassionate qualities he'd come to associate with his mother.

"That's a yes then," he seethed. "You were just never going to tell me that there are other DeGroots out there. That I had siblings this whole time."

"They're nae DeGroots, Tavish," she stated, sipping her tea. "They never came back."

"Came back? You never *took* them back." He found he could barely speak. "You know what? I'm done arguing this. I'm going out."

"Dunnae you turn your back on me Tavish, I dinnae raise you like that-"

But he was already out the door. Gravel crunched under his shoes until it was the only thing inside his head, louder than even the blood rushing in his ears. He ripped open the door of his Pinto Ford, fell heatedly in front of the steering wheel, and slammed the door closed behind him. Not too long later, the passenger's side opened as well.

Jane, having been straight-faced and silent through the family argument, had followed Tavish out when it became clear he wasn't coming back. Now he sat shotgun, watching without judgement as Tavish glared in front of him.

"Where we going?" he asked.

"Dunno," Tavish admitted. "Haven't figured that out yet." He reached over and turned the ignition.

They drove in silence for nearly half an hour, and all the while the same words went around in his head: *younger brother, older sister.* Somewhere out there he had a younger brother and an older sister, and they were just as ignorant of his existence as he had been of theirs until a few hours ago. What kind of lives were they living out there? Did they have hobbies, families? Would he and they have anything in common?

"Younger brother, older sister," he repeated quietly.

"What was that, private?"

Apparently not quietly enough. Tavish rubbed his face. "Just thinking about what Mum said. That I had a brother 'n a sister once upon a time. And if things had worked out differently… apparently Da 'n Mum didn't think they were worth having around."

The sickly injustice he'd been ignoring came back with a vengeance, snapping as he flexed his fingers.

"You're mad at them," Jane noted.

"Bloody right I'm mad! Doesn't even begin to cover it."

"You never have been before," Jane said. "Even though they basically did the same thing to you. The wholly unnecessary abandonment thing."

If he weren't driving, he would have pressed his forehead against the steering wheel, his sigh easing tiredly out of his chest. He cast the Soldier a brief look before frowning listlessly out the windshield. "Guess it's just easier for me to get mad on someone else's behalf."

But never for himself. When it came to his parents, in all his thirty-five years of life he'd never managed to stand up to them, forever trapped in a state of gratitude for rescuing him from a significantly worse situation. A situation they had put him in. It'd all seemed redundant after all, to make a stink when they'd made it up to him had taken him back in.

That wasn't the whole truth though, he'd just found. Not even close. Maybe they'd done their best for Tavish, but had never even tried for anyone else, and Tavish felt the disgust he'd aimed at his mother rise in him once again. They could have *done* something. Tavish…

Tavish could still do something. The Pinto made a sharp left turn.

"I know where we're going," he told Jane with resolve.

"Where?"

"Airport. I got my checkbook in the glove compartment. You got your shovel?

Jane patted the thin lump in the back of his uniform. "Always."

"Good. Everything else we can buy when we get there."

Tavish had a 'spare' passport in the glove compartment as well, a parting gift from Pauling. He'd asked her to fabricate Jane one as well, and when she hesitated, he'd reminded her the exact role she'd played in their devastating breakup and that of *course* they'd forgiven her but maybe since they were all such good mates now she'd be willing to help them out?

It was good to have people like Pauling owing you one. Owing you one and then some, as far as Tavish was concerned; he couldn't put a price on the years that that deception had cost him and Jane.

"Passport, checkbook, clothes on our backs," Jane said as he flipped through the items. "We're flying to Scotland?"

"Aye."

"What about your mum?"

"I'll call her nurse, ask her to start coming in daily."

"Your mum hates Abigail," Jane pointed out.

Tavish watched the desert speed by as they drew closer to Santa Fe. "Good," he said.

The first thing he did after touching down in Edinburgh was buy a coat. Without even leaving the airport he'd found a chill on him, as though his very soul was drafty at the affront of coming home. The rest of their travel necessities could be bought somewhere where they didn't cost an arm and a leg, so Jane and Tavish skipped shopping for now and rented a car for the drive up.

"That it?" Jane asked, jerking his chin to the looming manor perched at the top of the hill.

After hours in the driver's seat, and a none too restful nap on the plane, Tavish found it a relief to finally kill the engine below the building he had once called home. "Aye," he said. "That's the place." For some reason he could still feel the car's tremor in his hands.

This may shock you, but the Crypt Grammar School for Orphans was not a pleasant place for children. The Crypt, as it was called by everyone except the matrons that demanded the respect of its full eponym, had not earned its name for nothing, as the orphanage was built on the remains of an old catacomb system buried deep into the hill. The rumors about what lay below were grim and unending, the sort that—if you were under the age of ten—made you pull the covers close to your chest at night and swear you could hear something thumping underneath you. The Crypt's crypt was barely a century old, devoid of any historical value, so no one had ever bothered to clean it out. Down in those tunnels was where Tavish had seen his first dead body.

"You sure you want to do this now?" he heard Jane ask. He hadn't realized he'd closed his eye. The tremors had moved to his chest now. "We could get a motel room. Or! We could walk around your crappy Not-America hometown."

Despite himself, Tavish let out a faint laugh. "No, no I'm fine, just needed a moment. No motels. I don't want to spend a second stalling longer than I need to, not when I've already wasted so much time.

"Alright," Jane tilted his head. "If you're sure."

"I'd still like to show you Ullapool though," Tavish amended since Jane had mentioned it. "House I grew up in, where I went to primary school. Things with actual *good* memories about them." Tavish glared up at the Crypt.

"Some other time?" Jane asked.

"Some other time," Tavish agreed.

The woman who greeted them had been Old Matron Halleigh when Tavish was a child, so it stood to reason that now she was *Really* Old Matron Halleigh. Her eyes were as beady as ever, darting about between her petitioners as Tavish explained why they'd come.

"I really hope you'll be able to help me," Tavish said, playing the part of the despondent family member. "Some relations o' mine had the misfortune of passing through here a long time ago. I'm trying to locate them."

"I'm sorry sir," Halleigh said, in much the same voice as she used to say *no seconds you brat.* "But all our records are sealed. It's the law."

Jane helpfully barked, "just tell the man what he wants to know and no one has to get hurt!"

"Er, what my friend means to say is," Tavish tried to sooth her as she jumped, obviously not having identified Jane as American (or barmy) up until this moment. That combined with the fact that Jane never stopped wearing his Soldier's regalia didn't do him any favors for appearing innocuous. "Family is *very* important to me. And I appreciate what you do here, I really do."

To prove it, he brought his checkbook. When Halleigh read the sum he handed her, he thought her heart might give out right there.

"A donation to the School," he explained, only barely refraining from calling it 'the Crypt' at the last second. "I hope that shows how committed I am to your cause."

The matron put a hand over her mouth. "…I suppose I can take a look. For ah, for family's sake o' course."

"O' course," Tavish smiled.

As Halleigh retreated further into the depths of the Crypt and they were allowed free roam of the visitor's center, Jane noted, "she didn't recognize you."

"Probably a good thing 'bout that," Tavish said. He leaned into the mess hall and grimaced at the ceiling. "Ach, definitely a good thing. Looks like they still haven't gotten the scorch marks out. What more concerns me is the fact that any man with a decent bribe could probably come here and get *my* information too."

"Hm," Jane considered. "We should clear the evidence then. Want to blow the place up when we're done?"

"That could be fun," Tavish considered. "Wait." He shook his head. " *No,* no we can't do that! Blowing up an orphanage is absolutely *not* a thing we can do. You sweet talk me with explosions I get distracted."

Jane grinned. "Worked in Reno."

"Ach, don't remind me."

After a few moments of silence, Jane asked, "think she'll find them?"

"Ullapool's small, and bloody homogenized. Can't be too many black orphans that came through during the few years time frame I gave her. If she comes back with three files, we're golden."

"Younger brother, older sister," Jane remembered. "Hey! That makes you a middle child, just like me."

Of all the things Jane had said to him—orphanage destruction, old lady threatening— *this* was the thing that threw Tavish for a loop. He blinked at the Soldier, almost not believing what he'd just heard.

"You're a middle child?"

Jane's enthusiasm faded in an instant. "No. Of course not! I have told you I was raised on the Great Plains by a family of eagles who had been exiled from Detroit for tax evasion!"

"You *have* told me that, aye," Tavish said. "I don't think I've ever heard you say anything else."

Jane pressed his lips together. By his oncoming distress, Tavish thought that it probably wasn't even a lie—at least not an intentional one.

He put a hand against Jane's forearm. "You feelin' alright, lad?"

Jane looked out the window. "Maybe. I…I really don't know why I just said that?"

"This somethin' you want to talk about now or later?"

"Later," Jane said quickly. "I need to…think."

Thankfully he was given plenty of time to think as Matron Halleigh delivered the promised documents, and Tavish was left to sort through them for anything useful. A lot of misdemeanors and keeping fees, but none of it chronological enough that he could skip to present day. Tavish was left alone to pour the files, picking over every scrap of paper, shivering in the room he'd never been allowed to go in as a kid since the matrons didn't want orphans scaring the guests. Instead was forced to stay in the stupid drafty halls, in the icy school rooms, waiting, just *waiting* to get the switch if they saw what he was making.

Jesus, he hated this place. How could they put kids here? How could anyone think children could survive on a freezing hilltop perched over an old tomb? It wasn't *fair*, all this. Even now there was probably some bare-foot little orphan watching him around a corner, wondering at the adult that had wandered in and was just as free to leave again. More kids, ones that just kept coming, who might spend their whole childhood in this hellhole.

He hadn't realized he'd been crying until Jane wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

"It was…" He cleared his throat. "I didn't really believe it when Da and Mum came for me. They seemed too nice. Too perfect. And they didn't just want to adopt me like the first set, but they were my *true* parents. Do you know what that's like? It's something you only read about

in kid's books, something you secretly wish at night and pretend you don't: that you don't belong here, that any minute now your real family will swoop in and whisk you away."

Tavish began to trace a story in the papers before him, scratching with his finger from beginning to end.

"But…my brother and sister didn't get that. Sophie, she got adopted after a few years but… Colin never did. He went through the whole system, all the way to eighteen in this shitehole, and when that was over they tossed him out."

"...I'm sorry Tavish."

Tavish looked down at his mess of notes. "It's so bloody cold in here."

"Maybe we should try to do this someplace else. Someplace that isn't...here." Jane squeezed his shoulder. "Want to go back to the rental?"

"Let's."

"Are we still planning on burning all their records?" Jane asked as Tavish cleared the tears from his eye and returned the papers to their folders.

"Nah." Tavish held up the files, the barest bit of vindictive humor in his voice. "We'll just take 'em with. After all, I think I technically paid for these."

"So," Jane asked. "Colin lives here?"

It certainly wasn't an estate. The cottage was built into a perilous looking incline in the hill, the kind where if you didn't watch your step while getting the morning paper you'd find yourself woken up the old fashioned way: dropped ten meters into the drink. The flowers in the front boxes were wilting, as though someone had invested quite a lot of enthusiasm into the project at one point, but then let the passion die.

"You don't have a lot of options when coming out of the Crypt," Tavish explained. "I'd say I was surprised he stayed so close to Ullapool after all that, but he probably didn't have the means to move very far."

Tavish wondered about him. His brother. What a strange thought that was. Here he was less than a hundred meters away, probably moving about inside those walls Tavish so keenly staring at, yet Tavish couldn't bring himself to exit the car. It simply didn't feel real. What was Colin like? If the one thing they for sure didn't have in common was a love of bomb making, what would they even talk about?

"…Do you want to do Sophie first?" Jane asked, noticing his hesitation.

"Unfortunately, she's going to be a lot harder to find," Tavish admitted, tearing his eye away from the peeling red door. "Her adoptive parents took her back to Canada with them."

"Canadians kidnapped your sister?" Jane asked, aghast. He slammed his fist into his palm. "The gall! Don't worry Tavish, we *will* get her back, even if we have to pummel every syrup drinking Mountie in our way to do so!"

"They didn't kidnap her, Jane," Tavish assured him. "Her family just lives in Winnipeg. If anything, it's all the phonebooks we're going to have to sort through that are *actually* going to get in the way."

Jane looked moderately disappointed.

"…I suppose we shouldn't put it off any longer." Tavish extracted himself from the car, losing the comfort of the leather seat that had lovingly embraced him.

He knocked on the red wood. A man answered.

"Colin Smith?" Tavish said through the door that was only half open, a face peering back at him from within.

"Aye," Colin said, narrowing his eyes into the sharp daylight. "Who's askin'?"

"Oh! Uh…" Tavish found his tongue thick in his mouth, so wrapped up in trying to find some sort of familiarity in the face before him. That was a normal thing to wonder about, right? People always had half a boot and a half to say about family resemblances. "My name's Tavish DeGroot and-"

"DeGroot?" Colin grunted. "Don't you lot own that shitty old castle up in the highland?"

"I wouldn't call the Keep *shitty* -" Tavish said defensively, but then thought better of it. He was starting to get a bad feeling about all of this. "Never mind. You attended the Crypt Grammar School for Orphans, aye?"

"How did you know that?" Colin snapped.

"'Cause I did too," Tavish said. "I have good reason to believe we might be brothers."

Colin's eyes raked him up and down, taking in Tavish's new coat, the rental behind him, Jane who was hanging a few feet back. The door still hadn't opened any more but Tavish could see his brother a bit better now, a green sweater popped with holes, a thumb worrying at the sleeve in a nervous habit.

"You said you were a DeGroot," Colin stated.

"I am."

Colin waited a moment. "Piss off," he said, and started to close the door.

"Wait!" Tavish said, barely getting in before it sealed up completely. "Please, I really just want to talk."

If Colin wasn't in a bad mood before, he certainly was now. "I'm not interested in some half-arsed reunion, so you can just take you and your fancy name-"

Another voice called from within the house, too deep behind drywall and shutters to make out anything besides intent.

"No one!" Collin called back. To Tavish, he added lowly, "I don't want anything to do with you lot."

"But-" Tavish wasn't sure what was going to follow the *but*, and Colin didn't let him find out.

"I'm done with that," he spat. "I did my time, I have my own life so just...just leave me alone."

With that, the door closed, and Tavish didn't try to stop it this time. His gut had been replaced with a bottomless black pit, one that yawned with eventuality, a creeping resignation that he was already several decades too late. Never in his life had he wanted a redo button so badly, to figure out what he had said that was so terrible, to un-flub this mess.

"Let's go, private," Jane prompted him, at his side with barely a sound. Tavish followed him wordlessly from the cliff's edge.

"You could try to talk to him again," Jane offered, attempting to be positive as they ate lunch near the docks. "Maybe it would have been better to call?"

Under normal circumstances, Tavish would have been ecstatic to be sitting here with him, breathing in the air of his hometown as they watched the sea together, but now he could only nibble his food with disinterest.

"Can't interpret 'I don't want anything to do with you' any other way, really," Tavish belied. He picked at his meal, a bit of fried fish wrapped in paper, and watched the waves morosely.

"…I'm sorry Tavish," Jane said after a while.

"It's fine. I can't even blame him really. If I was in his shoes, I probably wouldn't want to see me either." True, but it didn't make Tavish feel any better.

"We can still go to Sophie."

Tavish had difficulty swallowing the bit of fish in his throat. It was far greasier than he remembered. "That's true."

"How do we find her?" Jane asked. "Next flight to Canada, God have mercy on our souls?"

Tavish sighed, feeling annoyingly sobered. "What we *should* do, technically, is go back to Santa Fe and grab the Pinto. Driving up to the border and back would only be a fraction the cost of that extra flight." Not that they couldn't spare the coin, but some lessons in frugality died hard, and Tavish had been starting to regret blowing a whole load of money on a spontaneous trip to Scotland. "It was probably a bad idea to come here in the first place. Or,

at the very least I should've come with a *plan*, and not just hopped on the first flight out of the States."

"You wanted to see them," Jane justified.

Tavish smiled. It was nice when Jane defended him from himself. Foolhardy and doomed to fail, but nice.

"Speaking of things we *should* do," Tavish added, face falling again. "We ought to pop back to the mansion. Pack properly. Make sure Mum has everything she needs."

"But you don't want to," Jane observed.

Tavish grimaced, sipping from his to-go coffee. "Not in the slightest."

"Then we won't."

"Jane…"

"If you don't want to then we won't," Jane said firmly. "You will get to see your mum for the next however many years when we get back. You're allowed to not want to deal with her right now."

Right or wrong, he could always count on Jane to give him an out. "Thank you, Jane."

"No thanks necessary! We will do what we must, whether that is an extremely boring road trip across the greater continental United States, or strangling thirty-seven Canadian Mounted Police in order to reach our goal! Mark my words Tavish, we *will* find your sister." He slapped Tavish heartily on the back. "Sisters can be good. Not all of them try to drown you. Some of them like butterflies, and are good at making hard candy!"

Although the intensity was familiar, something else in Jane's expression wasn't. Tavish lowered his coffee. "Jane…are you feeling alright? 'Bout all o' this?"

"What's that supposed to mean, soldier?" Jane grunted.

"Means you've been actin' odd ever since we found out about my family." Tavish avoided stressing the *my* in that statement.

Jane turned, retracting his arm, looking away and back up into the village. He didn't deny it.

"Jane do you…" Tavish bit his lip. The question hurt to even suggest. "Do you want to tap out for this one? I know there are things you don't want to dig up, and we might just have to if we go down this road."

It was a testament to exactly how conflicted Jane was that he didn't immediately reply with a negative. Instead shuffled his hands, and continued to stare at the hills that watched over them both.

"I…" Jane took a deep breath. "I want to be here for you while you go through this. And if that means that I have to deal with my own shit, then so be it."

"Alright. Just wanted to make sure." Tavish reached out and linked their fingers together. "And if anything happens on your end, you let me know, aye? I want to be there for you as much as you want to be there for me."

"Roger that," Jane saluted with a small smile. "Now! Let's get this show on the road!"

The "show" was actually delayed half a day in Santa Fe while getting Tavish's car back. Apparently they hadn't parked in the designated lot for extended trips, and it took a lot of haggling just to skip all the paperwork and get back on the road. Sure they could have just bought another one, but Tavish had some rather sensitive demoman-ing equipment that he'd rather not have airport security stumbling across. Yet another thing he should have sorted out at home, but he'd committed to not going back to the mansion, so he grit his teeth and paid the bribes. Even with that, it was night by the time they managed to finally get on the I-25.

At least Tavish had managed to get in a good plane nap this time. He was refreshed enough to take the first shift.

Jane was in charge of the map. "Are there moose in Winnipeg?" he speculated, inspecting the miniscule dot with scrutiny.

"Maybe? Dunno, never been."

"We should have a plan in case we run into one."

"Always good to have a plan," Tavish agreed.

"You take the legs, I'll take the horns?"

Tavish scoffed. "So I can be kicked to death like a farmer with a hoof to the head? Why do you get the glory?"

"Because my hands are powerful and good at snapping! If you try to break the horns off you'll wreck them."

This argument carried them for three states.

It wasn't until they were deep into the I-80 that Jane started to fidget. The maps had gone from a clear-cut square of America to a verified blanket, unfolding and unfolding until it took up Jane's entire half of the Pinto. He kept opening and closing his mouth like he wanted to say something, but they were nearly in Omaha before he finally decided to speak up.

"Hey Tav," he grumbled, voice unaccustomed to sheepishness. "Do you think we could stop here?"

Tavish looked at where he was pointing on the map. "Why there?"

"I…I don't know really," Jane admitted. "But I think it is important that we do."

They'd been planning to take a straight shot up through the Dakotas, but Jane's destination was in rural Wisconsin, at least a day out of the way and another day back. Something told Tavish this wouldn't just be for a pit stop, though.

"If that's what you need," he said.

Hancock, Wisconsin was absolutely nothing, and considering where Tavish had grown up that was saying something. They'd been here for two days already and Jane must have looked at the town's few attractions five times over, sometimes just staring at the scant buildings for hours at a time. Tavish had accompanied him for the first day, trying to help him find whatever he was looking for, but it soon became clear that the Soldier didn't know either, and Tavish's presence didn't help.

Still, there was no way he was going to pressure Jane to leave. Not when it seemed like this was genuinely the key to some long buried past.

He tried not to get impatient. Sophie had waited three decades; she could wait a little more if this was what Jane needed. Besides, hadn't he determined that the reason things had gone so poorly with Colin was because he'd rushed into it too quickly? Maybe this was a blessing in disguise, and he could take this time to practice.

"*Are you Sophie Corbin?* " he mumbled aloud while leaning on the Pinto. "*I've got some great news for you!* Ach, no that's terrible. She'll throw me out on the spot."

What was one supposed to say, even? There didn't seem to be any way to sugar coat what the DeGroots had done to their children, had been doing for generations. How many other unknown relations did he have out there? Strangers whose talents simply weren't what their house had wanted?

He rubbed his face and went to find Jane.

There weren't many places to look. The Soldier stood motionless in front of the local junkyard, face unreadable. Tavish asked, "did you used to live here?"

"No, this is a dump," Jane replied without a glance his way.

"I meant the town, lad," Tavish said.

Jane only grimaced, which was enough of an answer. "I used to steal from here. I once found a soda can at the bottom of a creek and figured out how to make something from it, but then the cans ran out and I had to find scrap other places."

Tavish thought the story might continue, but Jane said no more. It was a confirmation of something at least. Tavish put a hand on his shoulder. "I'll go find us something to eat."

When he was walking back to the junkyard, two sub sandwiches from the diner in hand, there was a woman leaning against his Pinto.

"Can I help you, lass?" he offered mildly. His upbringing demanded an attempt at cordiality, but his instincts told him something was about to spell trouble.

She was older, undeserving of the *lass* moniker but Tavish had always applied those liberally. Her silver hair was pulled up tight, and she had one heavy boot resting against his bumper.

"Prolly not," she drawled. "Just curious. Where yous all headed?"

"Passing through," he replied shortly. He was acutely aware he was squeezing the sub a little too tightly in his fist.

"Passing through with thirty pounds of semtax in the back of your car?"

His eye narrowed. She'd been fast to dispense with the pretenses. "I don't appreciate people looking through my private property."

She shrugged. The movement glinted just enough sunlight off her to reveal the bowie knife strapped to her thigh. "Get better locks then. I hear the 76601N Eagles are pretty good. What matters is *I* don't appreciate people coming in on my turf. If you think you can poach here no problem, you and your buddy got another thing coming."

The word *poach* stuck out like a sore thumb of nonsensicality in Tavish's mind. "We ain't here to shoot squirrels 'n burn fox holes, lassie," he said.

"Don't play dumb." She stood up, and the Pinto creaked. "I know some kitted out mercs when I see them, and I'll tell yous what I tell everyone else that comes through and tries to undercut me: everything from Portage to the Rapids is *my* place of business. And it's some slim fucking pickings, so 'scuse me if I'm not willing to share."

"Wait." It finally clicked in Tavish's head. "That whole turf thing was literal?" He let out a bark of surprised laughter, which didn't do him any favors, but at least he knew how to deal with this sort. "Ach you're just a mercenary like us, aren't you? Jesus Christ, thought we were going to have a shootout in the middle of Main Street!"

"We still might," she gritted. Probably didn't enjoy being laughed at.

"Ach no, my partner and I aren't any trouble," he assured her. "I promise you, we're honestly just passing through. And our business here is personal, not professional."

"You expect me to buy that?"

"'S the truth," he shrugged. "T'be honest, I didn't even know there was mercenary work to be found up here."

She glared. Alright, maybe that was a little insulting, but at least she didn't look murderous anymore. Though if she was telling the truth about there being jobs around then maybe snagging a few wouldn't be such a bad idea… *Nope!* he thought, slapping that notion away. That was the voice of his mum still lurking in his mind, who was going to put him on the exact wrong side of this merc.

"This is all a misunderstanding," he assured again. "We won't do anything to step on your toes."

It finally looked like she might be stepping down.

Which was when Jane ran forward, screaming, and tackled her.

They both went sprawling into the street, and Tavish could barely register what he was seeing as Jane roared profanities and began to beat the shit out of her. The mercenary let out a snarl of surprise, any shock burning up quickly as instincts kicked in. By the time Tavish had started moving toward the tussling pair, she'd already unsheathed her knife.

He tried to pull Jane off her. The knife, aimed at Jane, found itself blocked by Tavish's shoulder.

"Gah!"

He yowl escaped from Tavish's throat, a high tolerance for pain making it more from shock than anguish. It buried deep, and the woman found it wrenched from her grasp as Tavish reared backward, taking Jane and weapon with him. He slammed into the Pinto with another wheeze of distress as the agony, his mind going as red as the car's paint job. The knife slipped out from the impact. As he tried to blink through the agony, he caught a glimpse of the woman pushing herself off the ground.

"Tavish!" Jane struggled to help him upright, supporting the Demoman between himself and the car.

"Fuck," Tavish groaned, reaching to press a palm over the wound. "What the bloody hell was that about?"

Jane's helmet flicked to the mercenary staggering to her feet, and Tavish became acutely aware they didn't have much time to talk before she was coming at them. Jane gripped Tavish's shirt. "Tavish. You have to tell me. Is she real?"

Tavish looked to her, then to the uncertainty in the Soldier's eyes. He nodded, squeezing so tight blood rushed through his fingers. "Aye, she's real."

"Good." And Jane opened the Pinto door, grabbed the shotgun stuffed under the passenger seat, and cocked it.

"No!" Tavish shouted, snatching the stock and forcing it skyward. "What in the seven hells are you *doing*?"

"I killed her once I'll do it again!" Jane hollered. "The dead will stay dead, maggot! I will not abide any shambled-toed brain-eaters on *my* planet!"

"You promised you'd stop killing little old ladies," Tavish reminded him.

"This one deserves it!" He shook Tavish free, and aimed at the woman who hadn't done the smart thing and ran. "Peggy Francine Armitage, you are not welcome in my world!"

"You *know* her?" Tavish demanded.

"Of course I do," Jane growled. "That's my fucking sister."

Peggy looked down at the barrel aimed at her chest, then back up, an entire spider web of connections coming together on her face like a loose stitch pulled tight. "Jane," she said, realization coming to rest on that one word. Whether it was horror or disbelief, Tavish couldn't tell.

For one breath, Jane's chest filled in and out. Then it was two. Then three. "I killed you," he said.

"Didn't take," she shrugged.

Jane said nothing.

"Anyone mind filling *me* in?" Tavish said, not sure where he should be in this standoff. No doubt by all the shuttered windows and the fact that the showdown was happening on one of the town's only roads meant that someone had called the local law enforcement already, but that didn't mean they could actually *do* anything before someone got shot. Or maybe they weren't even coming. Maybe they knew better than to mess with Peggy and her business.

Jane's hands flexed around the magazine. "She killed Pa. I killed her back."

"How many times I gotta tell you I didn't kill him," she snapped. "That ever gunna make it through your thick skull?"

Fractionally, Jane's trigger finger slackened. "Pa's alive?"

"No, but he did that to himself." She turned to the side and spit. "Kicked it twenty years ago, rotting in a cell. His heart was probably tired of pumping all that vinegar for such an evil old bastard."

"How dare you!" Jane snapped to attention again, gun raised. "You take that back this instant or as God and Abraham Lincoln as my witnesses I will finish what I started."

"You still don't want to admit a damn thing, do you?" she accused, getting closer to the gun pointed at her chest. "*I didn't kill him.* I hit him in the head and ran, and when we came back to the house he'd turned *you* into meat soup. Then they took him away." She scoffed, and there was something bitter in the way she blew up a lock of her graying hair. "Years of telling people, but *you're* the one who finally pinned him for it."

To Tavish's immense relief, Jane's gun finally pointed at the asphalt. "…You don't know that. You weren't there. The sheriff was there, but you weren't."

"I was there," she refuted. "I was the one who put you in the car."

It was a hell of a thing if true. Tavish knew that—even if Jane did have a history of misremembering—it was his duty to side with Jane and make sure outside parties with less than benevolent motives weren't trying to trick him. But Tavish didn't know Jane's side of the

story, not enough to try and help him sort out the truth, and he suspected that was because Jane didn't have a side.

He placed a hand on the Soldier's shoulder and addressed Peggy. "It looks, again, like we've had a bit of a misunderstanding here." He tried to make his smile as appeasing as possible. The Armitage siblings stared at him. "Why don't we all sit down, talk this out, and don't stab each other for the time being?"

Jane took in a sharp breath.

"This whole trip is about family, aye?" Tavish reminded him, low enough that Peggy couldn't hear. "And making more of it, not less."

Eyeing his sister, Jane said, "I guess."

Tavish raised an eyebrow at Peggy. Gravel stuck in her clothes from being shoved into the street, and her bun had come undone, but she still shrugged. "Sure. Personally, I got a hell of a lot of questions that need answering."

"You were right about killing me," Peggy said over her coffee.

No one in the diner would come within ten feet of them. You'd think they had the plague instead of simply engaging in a bit of invigorating family reconciliation in the town square. In fact, now that they'd given their orders, Tavish looked around to find the smarter customers had amscrayed all together; all that was left was a sleepy looking elderly woman who likely didn't have her hearing aid on, and was too enthralled with her crossword to look up. Even the waitress had disappeared, power walking behind the swing doors as fast as socially acceptable.

"Was in a coma for about three months," Peggy went on. "Everyone thought I wasn't going to make it. I ruined a lot of bets when I beat 'em out."

"Should've known it wasn't going to be that easy," Jane muttered, staring into the black abyss of his untouched cup.

"What about you?" she asked. "No one found hide 'r hair of you after that. It was like you disappeared into the wind."

"Went to fight." He still didn't look up. "In the war."

"How'd you manage that?"

Most of their conversation had gone like that, and if Tavish hadn't spent four years rooming a bunch of moody hired killers, he might have been growing hot under the collar. However, even with his experience with tense living situations, it certainly wasn't a comfortable thing to be in the middle of. He was about to cut in when, to his surprise, Jane actually responded.

"Killed a man on the train. Or maybe he attacked me, I don't know." Jane scratched the side of his neck. "Point is I took his wallet and his clothes, and I bought a plane ticket to Poland."

Tavish blinked. He hadn't heard that part of the story, at least not in full, and was surprised he was so willing to drop the more sensitive details in front of the sister he supposedly hated.

Jane caught his eye, and turned from the unasked question. "It's been a long time since I've tried to…remember any of this."

Tavish noticed that Peggy didn't look altogether surprised. She grunted. "Well. Took guts, I'll give you that. Still stupid as all hell, though."

"Yeah, heard you the first hundred times," Jane grumbled. It might have been funny, under different circumstances.

"At risk of starting things up again," Tavish said to Peggy, "you're ah…oddly alright with this? It honestly seemed like you were more pissed at us when you thought we were here to poach your contracts than the fact that Jane tried to kill you."

"Like I said, didn't take," she shrugged. "Hard to hold grudges over something that didn't happen." At this, she stared pointedly at Jane.

The helmet held her gaze for a moment, then lowered back to the coffee. "Yeah. Whatever. Bygones be bygones, kumbaya 'n all that crap."

"And *I'll* forgive you for stabbing me," Tavish added magnanimously.

"I didn't apologize."

"I still forgive you."

"If you forgive me, I want my knife back."

"Extending forgiveness isn't the same as extending knives," he told her in a tone of voice that made it clear there wouldn't be any more argument on it.

Peggy's face wrinkled with palpable injustice, and it was the first time Tavish had seen the echoes of Jane in his sister—that was that same expression he made when things didn't go his way.

But the moment of acknowledgement was short lived, as Jane cut through the chatter's tempo with, "where's Elle?"

Peggy took a bolstering drink of her coffee. "Dead."

Jane stared at her blankly.

"Always men like Pa in the world. Elle went up and married one. Killed her, in the end." Peggy's voice had gone flat, which was an accomplishment considering her usual affection. It betrayed nothing: not anger, not loss. "Ma took her kids after he went on the run."

"They caught 'im though, right?" Tavish asked.

Her cup was empty now, but she still held it close to her face as she stared out the window. "Nope. Funny thing, he never made it to trial: had a real bad accident right before they were about to catch up to him." She pressed the chipped ceramic against her upper lip. "Coroner said whatever happened to him must have been real painful. Excruciating even. Would hate to go through something like that."

Jane stood up sharply. "I am going out." Tavish rose with him, but Jane waved him off. "No I…Alone. I need some air."

Tavish didn't like that. As much because Jane had followed *him* when he'd needed it recently, as the fact that the Soldier tended to push people away when he decided he was going to start closing in on himself. Still, it'd been a direct request. He let Jane go.

From the window lined with dusted-rose curtains, Tavish followed him for as long as he could, watching Jane's mouth move silently as he paced in random directions, eventually disappearing behind the junkyard.

"Well shit," Peggy said. "Didn't think this was how my day was gunna go."

"You 'n me both, lassie."

"So what are you like…Scottish?"

"Aye?" Tavish said, raising an eyebrow.

"Just weird," Peggy admitted. "We don't exactly get many strangers, let alone foreign ones. How'd you end following her to smack dab in the middle of nowhere?" She jerked her thumb out the window.

"It's a long story," Tavish said. "Though it's *he*, by the way."

Tavish sat there, waiting for her to start something over it. Eventually she grunted, breaking the eye contact they'd been sharing and instead glancing out the same window.

The waitress returned and refilled their cups, probably having calculated the exact number of minutes she was allowed to hide in the kitchen without making her customers more volatile. "Thanks Emily," Peggy said as she poured.

"No trouble," Emily said so tightly that someone must have been standing behind her and pulling on her ears. "Can I get yous guys anything?" Her smile clenched, showing every single tooth in her head. "*Pie?* "

"You don't have to worry about them, Em," Peggy motioned in Tavish's direction. "We got our business sorted."

"…That's great to hear." Emily's tone indicated it was not great to hear.

"I'll have a slice of pie, actually," Tavish said helpfully.

When their mugs were full and Tavish had his pie in front of him, (hey, deserved something after he'd lost his sandwiches in the scuffle), Peggy asked, "so how about that long story?"

Tavish looked out the window. No sign of Jane. He sighed. "Alright. Since we got a while."

When the diner closed for the evening, Jane still hadn't returned. It was by Peggy's direction that they located him, pacing up and down a creek bank as his boots wore erosion in the dirt.

"I cannot find the house!" he told them sharply.

"The house?" Tavish asked.

Jane looked to Peggy. "You said Ma took the kids. Elle's kids."

"…You wanna see them?" Peggy watched him carefully.

Instead of replying Jane frowned at the trail of broken foliage under his feet. "I can't find the house anymore."

Peggy nodded.

They loaded up into her pickup truck and headed west down one of the dozens of indistinct dirt roads leading into the surrounding farmland. Jane was quiet on the way out, and though Tavish tried to engage him, he found that whatever river of memories Jane was experiencing was too deep to go wading in after. Instead they watched through the cab's windows as dusk rolled down the plains.

Yellow lights burned from within the farmhouse. Jane got out of the truck, but he stared at the ranch house for three minutes before Tavish could prompt him to move.

"Let me do the talking, alright?" Peggy said.

The warm, bubbling light from within widened into a rectangle as the door drew inwards. The kid marred by its outline couldn't have been older than sixteen, his hair unkempt and his face a mess of post-pubescent pimples.

"Uh…" he said, but once his eyes skipped past Jane and Tavish to Peggy, he added, "oh, hey Margaret. I thought you weren't getting back until tomorrow."

"Had some luck with traffic," Peggy said. "Can we come in?" When the kid glanced at her companions again, she explained, "don't mind them, they're just some people I know from work."

"Oh. Okay." The door swung in all the way.

Tavish couldn't keep his eyes off Jane, who couldn't keep his eyes off the house's skeleton, the bones of wood holding it all up, gaze sliding across rafters and arches exposed to the inside. Each path they took always seemed to end up back on Jane's nephew. There was a girl inside too, homework spread out over the coffee table, scribbling something and not looking

up as the living room became cramped. Tavish couldn't tell if she or her brother was the older one.

No one knew what to do after that. They were all waiting on a Jane who didn't notice at all, sunk into a trance by the space around him. Only Peggy remained unaffected by the spell that had draped over the farmhouse, dropping with a heavy sigh into a massive green armchair. "Buck, you still got some'a that lemonade left over?"

"Oh," the boy jumped. "Uh yeah, we do. I'll get yous guys some."

But his exit was the thing that finally snapped Jane out of it. He looked around the room. "Where's….?"

"Sunroom," Peggy said. She'd leaned back until her eyelids had drifted shut, but there was something in her tone that boded ill. Like she was watching them even with eyes closed. "But you may not wanna see her."

"Why not?" Tavish asked.

"Just…" She frowned. "I warned you, alright?"

With Jane already halfway down the hall, Tavish couldn't press more, and he jogged to keep up with the Soldier's pace. There weren't any bulbs in the hall, and there was only the grey moonlight from a door cracked open to keep them from tripping on the rug coating the uneven floorboards. Beyond the door was a room of windows, all blackened as Jane froze before them.

Nearly colliding with Jane's back, Tavish steadied himself, and looked over his shoulder. In the corner there was a rocking chair, and in that chair was a woman, knitting away with indifference.

Tavish prompted Jane inside with a gentle push to the shoulder blades. Despite the restraint, he still stumbled, coming to a halt in front of his mother as she went back and forth, back and forth. Something was wrong though. After decades of accommodating his own mum, Tavish's first thought was that the lady in the chair was blind; but as Jane approached her, she didn't react like she heard them at all either.

"Ma?" Jane asked softly.

The woman raised her head and looked straight through him.

Jane didn't ask again, just breathed heavily, watching the eyes that never seemed to land on his. Eventually she lowered her head, and went back to her knitting.

With a jolt, Jane spun around and tried to push past Tavish into the hall. "I shouldn't have come here," he muttered, though it wasn't to Tavish. "Shouldn't have come back. It wasn't even real."

"Whoa, hey now," Tavish said, throwing up an arm to impede his exit. "This is real, Jane. It's one of the real ones."

Jane shook his head. "No, no I made it up. Stupid daydreaming. Should have just…"

Instead of trying to stop him entirely, Tavish opted to instead slow his progress to the living room and hope he wouldn't bolt as soon as they got there. When they arrived at the hall's end, Peggy grimaced at their reappearance.

"I warned you," she said.

Buck, six lemonade glasses out on the table before him, didn't notice their state, too busy arranging the coasters. Tavish had almost convinced Jane to start breathing normally when someone barked, "Jane!"

The Soldier instantly stiffened.

But Buck hadn't been talking to him. "Get your nose outta there, dummy," he said, shoving his sister in the side of the head. "Can't you see we got company?"

Jane, the small one, the one bent over the table with glasses resting atop her freckled cheekbones, finally lifted her head. "Oh. Hey there."

Soldier was out the door in an instant.

"Bloody hell," Tavish hissed, heading after him.

But as soon as he made it into the cool of the encroaching night, fireflies darting in and out of the black velvet that had swallowed his partner, he realized he had no idea where Jane had gone.

"Jane!" he called out, hands cupped to his mouth. "Jane! God *damn* it lad."

He checked around the cars and the entire circumference of the house, but this far from civilization the darkness was absolute. Tavish paced in the damp grass and swore.

When Peggy emerged after him, he admitted furiously, "I don't know where he's gone. *Jesus* I never should have let him convince me on a damn detour. 'Cause I suspected, you know? Knew something was up as soon as he started talking about family. I thought it might be good for him to try and find where he came from." Tavish rubbed his face with both hands. "Shite. Should've known. Can't just go around digging up family bollox without getting dragged in along with it."

"Better an open wound than one that's infected and stitched," Peggy said.

"Ach, you sound like Medic," Tavish spat. "When you let everything fester for decades, the only thing you're going to dredge up is salt and bitter feelings. Grudges calcifying like a bloody kidney stone. None of this was worth it. Why did I think this would be worth it?" The last he demanded of the shadows, wishing one of them could tell him why he'd been so damn hopeful.

Peggy said nothing. After awhile walking in circles and getting his shoes wet, Tavish realized she wasn't even watching him anymore.

"I know where Jane would'a went," she said, staring sideways at something beyond what her town could contain.

"What?" Tavish asked.

She stepped down off the porch and started to walk. Tavish could do nothing but follow.

They made their way through acres of farmland, cresting up a ride where you could just see a small lake in the distance. Between the chunks of tidy and tilled fields there were pockets of forest, areas where the trees grew like great nests even when the miles of plant life around them fell to the harvest. A treehouse hung in the branches of a climbing maple.

"…Your da build that?" For some reason Tavish found he couldn't bring his voice above a whisper. Something about the fluttering leaves in the night wind demanded quiet.

"Yeah." Peggy's voice was equally dulled. "Jane kept asking and asking, wouldn't shut up about having a fucking sniper tower. So Pa finally gave in. Might'a been the only thing he ever made for any of us. But he built it for Jane." Her words twitched in some joke Tavish wouldn't get.

There was someone in the treehouse. The winds whispered this like a secret.

"…I think I have to handle this one," Peggy said. Her chin never stopped pointing skyward, to the dark blot against the heavens.

"Alright," Tavish said. He felt the truth weigh heavy on him: this was one thing he couldn't help Jane with, no matter how much he wanted to. Peggy ascended the first board nailed into the maples' trunk, and Tavish was left to watch from the forest below.

The treehouse smelled like how Jane remembered it, like deep rain, like the elements. It could have been right now or thirty years ago, he wouldn't have known, not without the dependability of his own body to keep him grounded. His arms didn't fit around his legs the way they used to, but that didn't keep him from pulling them in close, burying his forehead against his knees.

When the boards outside began to groan, Jane figured who it would be without lifting his head. Technically, it could have been Tavish, whose calls were still following him from the farmhouse and rattling around inside his head, but there were places where old rules outpaced probable outcomes. He knew it would be Peggy before she'd even swung her laced-up hunting boot inside. She didn't waste time with pauses, with consideration. She sat beside him, and the walls of the tree house creaked again.

There was a half-foot of space between them. There was another rule, that. They didn't touch each other, maybe couldn't. Never had there been a time when he'd made contact with his sister that wasn't for violence's sake, and he doubted either of them would even know how.

"I wasn't very nice to Elle," he said. His voice felt small. Smaller than even the last time he'd been in here.

"Neither was I, really." Peggy admitted. "I don't think anyone was ever nice to Elle."

"I didn't think about her much," Jane said. "Didn't think about any of you. Couldn't remember a thing until I came back."

"Hm."

She pulled out a carton of Lucky Strikes from her front pocket, a jacket of brown corduroy thick with them. A lighter appeared from the same place. The trail of her first smoke strangled in the confined air for a second, before she looked sideways at him. She held out the box.

He took one.

"I would have thought," he said as he held the burning cigarette between his fingers, "that the kids would have looked like her."

"Buck looks like his dad, but no one's going to say that." Peggy paused, something sour on her lips that wasn't the cigarette, as though she didn't want to say it either. "Jane looks like Ma though. Or maybe you."

"…Why?" Jane said.

Peggy looked back at him, face not moving, rain pattering down and seeping through the cracks in old wood.

"Why would she do that. Elle. Why did she…?"

"She missed you," Peggy shrugged. "Or maybe she thought you'd come home one day, fuck if I know. She liked everyone anyway, even though we were shit to her. Liked the whole world even it killed her."

Jane watched her. He'd taken off his helmet so he could press his forehead against his knees but now he desperately wanted it back, as if not being able to see Peggy would make it all go away. Unwind the past few days, make him forget what he'd learned, what he'd remembered. If he couldn't remember, it hadn't really happened, right?

"What about you?" he asked. "Did you ever think I would come back?"

"Me? Nah." She blew out smoke. "You took those three months out of me and disappeared, gone to the fucking hills. I honestly thought you wouldn't last a year."

"Ha! I am made in the fires of *war*, Peggy Francine. I didn't have *time* to die! In these long decades I have been stripped of my weakness through copious gunshots wounds, self-inflicted blast damage, and voluntary torture until I have reached the point of invulnerability. I have been compressed under heat and pressure until I am sharp, hardened like a…

"Diamond?"

"Yes! Those things!"

Peggy adjusted, searching for a more comfortable position until she leaned back on her elbow. "Good to see you're still fucking nuts."

Jane snorted, but didn't reply.

She frowned as she watched the end of her light burn down. "God, we're all fucked in the head, aren't we? Ma and Pa, now there's a cocktail for shit kids. Elle somehow got out without a scratch, but it's a miracle two 'a us survived as long as we did, seeing what they left us with."

Jane looked at his knees again. "…How long's Ma been like that?"

"Three years. Only got this bad in the past year though." A moment passed while Peggy looked past him, frowning out what served as a window in the tiny little box dozens of feet off the ground. "I think we're going to have to send her to a home. Soon as the kids graduate. She's their legal guardian after all." She closed her eyes. "*Fuck*."

"She wouldn't want that."

"I *know* she wouldn't want it Jane, but hell, it ain't even fair to make the kids take care of her as long as they have already. I'm never around so I can't do it, and they…" She opened her eyes. "They deserve better. They're going to college, you know."

"Both of them?"

"Yeah. Smart kids. Who fucking knows where they got that," Peggy said. "Buck's real into architecture. Jane doesn't know what she wants, but when she finds it, she's going to drive it to Nashville and back."

"They're nice to each other," Jane said suddenly.

Peggy lifted an eyebrow at him. "Most family is."

Right. *They* were fucked up, like she'd already said. Him and her, a never-ending battle that didn't seem to have a start either.

"Why were we like that?" he asked, not really expecting an answer. "Why weren't we normal?"

"Don't know," she admitted. "Best I can figure, we fought each other because we were the only other person around worth fighting."

"Why did you try to drown me?"

She looked at him. Unlike every other question, every other demand for truth he'd fielded her way-

(so, so many questions, because now that the floodgates were open he wanted to *know*-)

unlike then, no flicker of recognition crossed her face.

"The hell you talking about?"

"When we were little." He grit his teeth, still tasting water, still tasting the powdered soap that flowed downstream. "Before Elle was born. We were washing clothes in the crick and you tried to drown me. You held me under the water and I couldn't breathe but then you just-"

Stopped. She'd stopped short of killing him, and he still didn't know why.

They looked at each. They looked, waiting for the other to flinch, for some sort of understanding to be reached while the rain pattered down.

"I don't know," she said eventually. "Prolly 'cause you were being a shithead. I honestly don't remember."

"You don't remember why?"

"Don't remember ever trying to kill you," she admitted. "Never on purpose. I guess it must've happened but…"

He snorted. "Figures."

"You would've been pretty young."

"You forgot because it was laundry day. I remember because I was going to die." There was blood on the inside of his cheek. He hadn't realized he'd been chewing it. He stared at Peggy, lounging on the floor as she smoked one handed, and demanded, "you said you took me to the car. That day with- That day they took Pa away."

"Yeah?"

"Why."

For the first time, she didn't look at him. Not gazing past, not staring at something far away, but averting her eyes as the pair of them sat there. The silence hung, like the smoke from the pair of cigarettes, intertwining.

Softly, Peggy said, "I didn't hate you. Not even after you were gone. Hate the things you did and the shit you said, but I never hated you Jane."

The smoke was too thick. It hurt Jane's eyes. It hurt them so bad he had to curl his arms over his head again.

It was a long time before he could talk once more. Even then, it was muffled, buried in his knees.

"Was that a good thing you did when you kill- when you hit Pa with that chair?" Jane asked. "Was him dying good?"

"Might be the only good thing I've ever done," Peggy said with certainty.

He lifted his head and wiped at his face. It was another long stretch of time before he said, "I think I have to go."

"That's fine."

"I don't know if I can come back."

"…"

"Is that not fine? Should I be…should I be strong enough to do that?" and he felt so small for having to ask it.

Peggy's smoke was gone, but she didn't throw it away, not yet. "…I'll be honest. I was lying when I said I didn't hold a grudge over you. Most days I hoped you were dead out there, wherever you'd gone, and I didn't miss the shit you put us all through one bit. But other times. Other time I didn't. Felt bad for hoping those things."

"You…you said you didn't hate me."

"Hating and wanting dead ain't the same. Hated Pa. All the fucking time, but I didn't want him dead enough. Should've wanted him dead *more* if I'm being honest. In the end if I'd just *swung* a little harder…"

Jane stared at her with glassy eyes, eyes that weren't wet, not wet at all.

She sighed. "Things might have been better. You wouldn't have gotten hurt as bad as you did. You wouldn't have disappeared and gotten…" She glanced at him.

"…No," Jane said. It startled her. "If that is the only good thing you think that you've ever done, then it will be. I was better gone. And I'm…happy now. I fought. I earned my stripes. I have people who love me." He swallowed. "And this place…you all were also better without me, like I was better without you. I can't stay."

Something crossed her face. It wasn't amusement, not really, but maybe amenability. Acceptance.

"Okay," she said.

"I still want to help, though. Help with Elle's kids at the very least." He wrung his hands.

"Your niece and nephew," Peggy reminded him.

"…Yeah."

"Well that's something I won't turn down." She looked to the sorry excuse for the door, the jagged hole in the wood that led to the waiting ladder. "Ready to go?"

"I think so. I think I have to be."

It was a long time before Peggy brought Jane down again. An hour at least, but Tavish felt like he had been standing in the rustling forest for ten, slowly being consumed by the impatient foliage. Immediately he could tell that something had changed between them. It was in Peggy's straightened spine, in the way Jane didn't seem to be hiding the fact that he was wiping his eyes. Tavish hadn't seen Jane cry in years.

"You doin' good lad?" he offered quietly as he came to Jane's side.

"…Affirmative," Jane replied. "I think it's about time we moved out, though."

"Really?" Tavish glanced at Peggy, who hadn't been surprised by the statement. "You don't want to stop back at the house?"

"No," Jane said. "I really don't."

"…Alright then."

"C'mon," Peggy said. "I can give yous a ride back into town."

This time, the trip was spent in the bed of the pickup truck, cold wind rushing past their ears. It felt necessary, like staying awake was suddenly the most important thing they could do, and they both craned their necks to watch the stars speed by on the moonless night. Tavish didn't hear Jane and Peggy's parting words after rolling into town, only saw that afterwards, Jane fished out the last of his good cigars from the glove box, and lit it shaking in the shadow of the junkyard sign.

"Hey," he asked her as the two of them waited for Jane's return. "Would you happen to want all those bombs you saw in the trunk?"

"Would I… *what?* "

"I forgot to take 'em out, and I figured it'd be a bad idea to try crossing the border with them in the back," he shrugged. "I mean, you're a mercenary, right?"

"Yeah? But what the hell would I do with a bunch of bombs?"

Tavish blinked at her. When it was clear she wasn't joking and was expecting some sort of answer, he said, "I guess I don't understand the question?"

In the end, he did negotiate the explosives off his hands, though Peggy was the most reluctant customer he'd ever sold his product to, considering he was giving away perfectly good bombs practically for free. When Jane finally came back, there was nothing stopping them from moving on to Winnipeg.

"Guess this is it, huh?" Peggy said.

"Guess so," Jane replied.

Tavish waited, but when neither was more forthcoming, he said, "nice to meet you, Peggy."

"It's still a nice meeting even when I carved a hunk out of your shoulder?" She raised an eyebrow.

Tavish rolled the shoulder in question, long stitched up by the emergency first aid kit. "Believe or not, I've had worse. Speaking of." He reached into his coat pocket, and pulled out the blade he'd wrapped in a bit of paper, flipping it until the hilt was pointed at Peggy.

She took it with a wry smile. "…Have a fun trip."

With that, she was back in her truck and driving away. Jane and Tavish packed into the Pinto, and resumed their trip in the opposite direction.

They didn't talk until the border was nearly in their sights.

"I don't think I hate her," Jane offered, after hours of silence and one drafty hotel room. "Anymore."

"I'm glad for you," Tavish said, with a creased brow and a nod to let him know he was honest.

"I'm sorry we made this about me," Jane added softly.

"Nah, don't apologize," Tavish said. "It was what you needed to do. Besides I…I think I needed to see that things could be fixed. No matter how awful they look."

"You still got one more sibling to find," Jane reminded him.

"Aye. Let's not strike out on this one, aye?"

"You're not going to believe this," Tavish said, sitting next to Jane on the hard, indoor bench.

After a little poking around and a lot more bribes, they managed to find Sophie's alma mater within a few days of arriving in Winnipeg. Everyone that knew her personally had only good things to say, and as he talked to various professors to find where she might have gone after graduation, he couldn't help but let those words fan the flames of hope in his chest again. He tried to keep a hold on that though. Just because she seemed like an all around good woman —and an educated lass, no less!—didn't mean she'd want some random brother she'd never met before popping into her life.

"Believe what?" Jane asked, as he ceased examining his street food poutine for 'canuck mind altering substances'.

"Couldn't find her phone number, but I do have an address. Take a look." Tavish handed him the note.

"Springerville, Arizona," Jane read off.

"Aye. Works for an accounting firm there. After all that searching, and she's been in our backyard this whole time." Tavish pulled off his beanie and rain nails against his scalp. "Mind

you, still a four hour drive between there and the mansion but…"

"But you could see her," Jane finished. "If you wanted to."

"If *she* wants to see *me*," Tavish clarified.

"She'll want to," Jane said.

"Well there's only one way to find out. Ready to go?"

Jane frowned. "We have yet to find a moose to best in single combat!" he protested. "I do not plan on setting foot in this pinko, ice-skate wearing country again unless I have to, so we better make it count!"

"Are you sure you don't want to come back?" Tavish said, raising an eyebrow. "Seems to me like you're rather enjoying the cuisine."

Jane angrily shoved another fry in his mouth. "This means nothing."

"Mmhm. Why don't we start for Arizona, and on the way you can decide if we want to plan another trip where we terrorize the local wildlife."

"I see what you're doing, DeGroot!" Jane huffed. "Trying to instill a thirst for travel in my mind. First it's camping in Canada, then next it's semi-annual romantic getaways in Scotland!"

"And wouldn't that just be terrible," Tavish grinned. "Get your coat, we got a long drive ahead of us."

Another forty hours later, and Jane asked him, "you ready for this?"

"I think so." Tavish breathed in through his nose and let it out to the count of five. "Prepared myself for the most extreme scenarios, good and bad." He glanced over at Jane. "Thank you for helping me through all of this. I couldn't have done it without you."

"Probably not."

They turned down a cul de sac, grasses brown on all sides except where the shrubs provided the smallest bit of greenery. The Pinto pulled into an unpaved driveway and came to a stop.

Another breath in *one two three for five*, out *one two three for five*. He could do this. He would.

A small white doorbell was set into its plastic box, installed perhaps a bit haphazardly into the brick. His thumb pressed down on it, slowly, until it reached some unknown threshold from which he couldn't take the action back. The brazen *ding-dong* summoned a, *coming!* from within the house, and Tavish's heart lurched into his throat.

"Hi there," that same voice said as the door swung open. "What can I do for-?"

In Ullapool, when he'd been so worried about what he would talk about with Colin, what he would say, he had searched desperately in his brother's face for a thread of commonality. For familial likeness. He didn't have to search now. The resemblance to the woman in front of him was so clear it was uncanny, cheekbones, jaw shape, nose, all of it, like looking in a mirror.

She had realized it too, cutting off mid sentence as she stared wide-eyed at the man before her. The towel she'd been using to dry her hair now lay slack against her shoulders, forgotten.

"Sophie Corbin?" he managed to squeeze out of his dry lungs.

"Uh-huh." Her hand was halfway lifted, as though it couldn't quite decide if it wanted to press fingers to her mouth or not.

"My name's Tavish DeGroot." The speech he'd prepared had trouble making it out of his throat, as though it desperately wanted to stay in the pit of his stomach where it belonged. "A few days ago, I learned that I had a biological sister that was put up for adoption before I was born. And…I have good reason to believe you might be her."

He'd meant to put more words in between there, draw the comparison to the Crypt and explain that he really hadn't known she was out there until just now, but he could see it in her eyes that she didn't need convincing.

"Oh. Oh my god," Sophie replied.

"Ha. Aye." Tavish's chuckle was filled with far too many jitters to be normal, but it still felt fitting. "My thoughts on this whole thing too."

"Well…well okay I don't know what to say I…Do you want to come in?" She immediately moved out of the way. "This is…oh my god I have so many questions."

And here she was stepping aside, welcoming him into her life, one arm propping open the plain oak door. If he wasn't so terrified, it might have been the happiest moment of his life.

"I'd love to," he managed to stammer. He glanced over his shoulder. "Do you…do you mind if my friend comes with? He's been, er, providing me emotional support through this whole thing."

Sophie didn't even bat an eye. "Of course! Please, come right on in."

Jane was bounding over in an instant at Tavish's motion, appearing at his side. "Amazing! It is like looking at twins! Except one of the twins has been in a horrible accident! That involved reading!"

"He means me," Tavish explained dourly.

"I assumed." Her laugh was also a little jittery, but Tavish didn't mind. "Oh I'm sorry, I didn't expect people, everything's really messy…"

It was, horrendously so, but Tavish assured her, "it's fine. Honestly our fault coming unannounced, we would have called but…"

"Aw jeez it's a miracle you found me at all! I've lived in three different countries in the past thirty years," she said. "How'd you track me down?"

They had managed to move all three of them into the cluttered sitting room, deprived of its name by the mounds of stuff resting on the provided chairs. He noticed books, clothes, hundreds of those organizational binders that gave the impression their owner didn't realize you were supposed to actually put stuff in them in order to make them do their job. Where there wasn't stuff there were plants, feelers creeping along the ceiling, untrimmed and allowed free reign. Jane had already located the household cat.

It felt alive. Lived in. A whole 'nother person who'd been a few hours drive away from him this entire time, and it nearly blew him away with its self-contented reality.

"It's a bit of a story," Tavish said as he took it all in. "Mind if we sit?"

"Yes, please do," she cleared off the couch with a sweep of her arm and dumped the paperwork into an already precarious tower. "Let me just uh…you two want anything to drink?"

"That'd be lovely, thank you," Tavish smiled.

Jane grunted his affirmation, squatting so he could rub the cat behind the ears.

Sophie talked all the while she made them tea. It was amazing how much she could say in such a small amount of time, words and thoughts chasing each other all at once—it could have put the Scout to shame.

"And it's just…" she was saying as her hands found cups in places he never would have thought to check. "You always think about it, you know? About finding some long lost family, or your real folks, and I…" She sniffed. "Aw jeez. Sorry, I'm a crier."

When she turned back, there were indeed heavy tears bubbling up along her face, unable to escape the thick smile lines around her eyes. He smiled back, and couldn't help the pressure building behind his own eye.

"Don't worry about it a bit, lass."

When the kettle was on and the cat was comfortably in Jane's lap, Sophie asked, "so you said you just found out? That you had a sister?"

"Aye. Mum let it slip while we were having an argument."

"Oh," she said softly. "So…you weren't put up."

"No I was." Tavish cringed. "I was just…taken back in."

This was the part he had been dreading. After that he had to launch into the whole shebang: the DeGroot family tradition, explaining what the fuck a demoman even was to a woman who didn't care, who only knew that it was a thing she lacked. The despicable, monstrous unfairness of it all.

This time, when tears began to run down her cheeks, it wasn't from joy.

"I'm sorry." She wiped aggressively at her face. "I don't mean to get like this in front of company but this is just so up and down. First to find out I have a secret brother, and then next to hear my biological mother doesn't want anything to do with me?"

Tavish was lost. There was honestly no way to make it look better than the way it was. Cautiously, not sure if he even should when they'd known each other for an hour at most, he put a hand on her back. "I'm sorry Sophie."

"I… *fuck*, pardon my French." She cut off sharply, her breath inhaled through a swollen throat. "I'm sorry, I've been having a real bad week."

"Ach, *I'm* sorry," he told her. "Especially since I dumped everything else on you all at once. It's a lot to take in."

She looked up at him with shining eyes. "She doesn't want to meet me? Not even a little bit?"

He considered lying, but after a minor hesitation, he said, "no. I'm sorry." Then, because it was a thing you were allowed to say only to your siblings he added, "you probably wouldn't want to know her anyway."

That left her quiet for a moment. The hand on her back made to move away, but at the last second she asked, "Tavish?"

"Aye?"

"I know this might be weird since we just met but…can I hug you?"

The pressure in his lone ocular finally burst, a small stream down his cheek. "Aye, you can hug me."

It was strong. Warm. A good hug. He squeezed back as tightly as he could, and Sophie didn't seem to mind.

As they sat, the kettle began to scream, and Sophie's fractured earnestness returned again. "Aw jeez, let me-"

"I'll handle it," Jane told her. He hadn't moved during their whole conversation, mostly due to the purring feline in his lap. "You two continue your sibling bonding."

"You remember how to do it lad?" Tavish asked.

"Yes *Tavish*, I remember how to *make the tea*." He grumbled, disappearing into the kitchen and leaving a very disgruntled cat in his wake.

It took a little while for Sophie to get her bearings. Tavish kept up with comforting back pats, and eventually she was calm enough to sit and stare at her hands. A clattering and a soft curse from the kitchen got her to lift her head and chuckle.

"He's a funny one," she said. "How do you two know each other?"

"We're old work friends," he said, true if simplified. "We've been through a lot together, good times and some bloody terrible times. But he's my best mate, and he goes where I go."

"…That sounds really nice," Sophie said, and her expression matched it. "I'm really happy for you." She shuffled, her with her red eyes and he unsure what to say next, until they were saved by Jane's return.

"Tea! Hot! Disgusting!" he announced as he set a cup in front of each of them. Despite his declaration, that included himself. "How you Scots can drink it I will never understand."

"Actually, I pretty much consider myself Canadian," Sophie said. "I have dual citizenship, sure, but I haven't been to Scotland in over twenty years."

Jane opened his mouth. Tavish, knowing exactly what was about to come out of it, shot him a warning glare. Jane closed his mouth.

Sophie hadn't even noticed. "Man. I'm thinking now. All that stuff about being a demoman, travelling to all these places just because you wanted to reconnect…your life sounds exciting. You must think me so boring."

"I bloody well do not," Tavish said. "Couldn't be further from the truth! You're the single most interesting person I've ever met."

"What about me, maggot?" Jane demanded.

"You're interesting in a bad way."

"Ha!" He pointed a finger at Sophie. "You hear that lady? I'm the most interesting person he knows in a bad way!"

"I want to know everything," Tavish said, turning his attention back to her. "I barely know a thing about my sister, and I want to change that. So Sophie Corbin, with thirty years to fill in, what have you been up to?"

She laughed a little dazedly. "Where do I start?"

"Anywhere you like."

The steering wheel felt good in Tavish's hand. Warm from sitting in the sun all day, but not scalding, and his grip on it was no longer tight enough to hurt.

"You seem different," Jane said on the drive back home, returning to the mansion properly for the first time in over a week.

"I feel different," Tavish admitted.

"…Better different?"

"Aye."

He didn't know what he'd do when he'd get home, how he'd weather Mum's wrath at leaving her with the nurse for a week. But he was sure he'd manage. He had Sophie's number, and they'd agreed to meet up somewhere in the middle of their homes next Wednesday.

"I think we're both a bit different after all that," he told Jane. Glancing his way, he said, "Jane Armitage, then?"

Jane visibly winced. "No. I…I'm not that anymore. It's got too much all tangled in it. Pa. Peggy." He stared out the passenger window. "Medic's the one that started calling me Doe, but it's just one of those…uh...anonymous names. Opposite problem. Too *little* tangled up in it."

"Not a fan of any names it sounds like," Tavish hummed.

"…I always liked your last name."

"That so?"

"Yup." Jane was looking straight ahead. "Got twice as many capital letters. Show's gumption!"

And although he brought his attention back to the road, Tavish still caught the quickest glimmer of Jane's smile from the corner of his eye.

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