nonagun

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by cloudycats

Summary

Vash escorts Knives and Vash on their way home. (manga/98/Stampede crossover)

Vash shoots his brother, which is the sort of decision that's unfortunately becoming typical these decades.

Even more unfortunately, Vash shoots his brother *while expecting his brother to block*.

Nai staggers with a howl and an uncharacteristic amount of cursing, red spreading over his thigh where the bullet grazed him. Vash freezes, wide-eyed, gun still trained on Nai but finger hovering a good three centimeters from the trigger.

"Nai?"

Nai presses his hands over the cut. "Once wasn't enough?" he screams.

Vash doesn't have the mental bandwidth right now to try to parse that. "Why didn't you stop the bullet?"

"Why didn't I *what*?"

"You know," says Vash a little helplessly, lowering the gun, "with a knife." He keeps bandages and sewing supplies and disinfectant on him, but no painkillers. Even weak painkillers are kind of pricey since most medicine gets rationed to professionals, especially outside of the largest cities. Maybe he should start carrying them anyway, though. He can take some from Home if he asks nicely.

He can't really… Nai is still cursing, expression twisted into a grimace, hands clenched white over the injury, and Vash can't think very well in the face of Nai's pain. He didn't think the bullet would land.

Nai gathers enough focus to glare as if Vash suggested that he block a bullet with cornbread or a dead worm or something. "What? What are you saying? Are you insane?"

Vash stares at him for a second longer, taking in the expression of baffled offense that Nai hasn't sported since he gagged on a piece of caramel and Vash suggested that the reason he doesn't need to eat is because his taste buds and entire digestive system are broken. Then he drags his attention away and glances around the dunes to check that Nai doesn't have backup hiding in the wings.

If they exist, Vash doesn't spot them, so he accepts the risk, holsters the gun, and jogs over to Nai.

Nai's more than half a head taller than him. When did that happen. Why did that happen.

"Let me see that," he says, reaching for Nai. Nai wrenches his leg away out of what's clearly petty spite, teeth actually bared, and then wobbles and falls, catching himself on a knee. Vash purses his lips. "Nai, come on."

"What did you do to your hair?"

Vash blinks. “Nai,” he says again, exasperated.

“Knives.”

Sure, yeah. *Don’t remind me.*

Nai finally lets him look at his thigh. The injury’s what Vash expected. He crouches, widens the rip in Nai’s jumpsuit with a quick apology, folding the bloodied cloth away from the wound, then swings his bag around to let it thump to the sand beside them and unzips the outer pocket he keeps a first aid kit in. Nai watches him, palm going back to put pressure on.

There’s a whole lot about this situation that’s pushing Vash off-kilter. Nai’s being weirdly civil, for one. No personal attacks on Vash’s character yet, when they usually occupy every other line in the conversation.

He’s also wearing a jumpsuit even though he hates tight clothing enough that he pulled a knife the second time Rem tried to introduce them to underwear, and he has a full travel bag despite not needing supplies. There’s a gun hidden up his sleeve, the mere idea of which is enough to teach Vash how the uncanny valley works. Physically he looks older than he should, features a little harsher, but at the same time he also looks...

…*dumber* seems mean to think.

Less plotty? Less careful? Less like he’s constantly calculating his opponent’s next moves in 5D chess with multiverse time travel? Maybe he just seems sleep-deprived, which is of course an unfamiliar sight to Vash because Nai can’t sleep in the first place.

And he’s looking at Vash as if Vash isn’t entirely what he expects to see, either.

What did you do to your hair? What did you do to *yours*, Nai?

(The plant across from him *feels* like Nai, which is why Vash isn’t more concerned by the glaring discrepancies in his behavior and, y’know, physical bodily structure.

Plants can’t disguise or alter their fingerprints, which applies especially hard to Nai. He can’t perceive signals from other plants, either, without stabbing a knife into them first as a conduit. In all of these years, he has not done that a third time so far as Vash has heard. He has never in his life willfully harmed a plant.

Vash tries not to wonder, though, about how sensitive Nai’s perception might really be, and about the many, many other life forms he cuts up on a semi-regular basis, and about how much or how little he might mind it if all he has ever let himself understand of humans is their pain and fear and dying.

He and Vash were born from the same root. What did Vash *miss*, in those twenty months on Ship Five that have spanned the length of their shared lives?)

Nai lets Vash bandage him, looking like he’s perpetually a hairsbreadth from criticizing Vash’s technique. As if he’s got even a fraction of the field medicine experience that Vash has.

More than a century since they last came close enough to touch each other, and Vash gets it over with as soon as he physically can because if he doesn't then he's terrified he might acknowledge that he wants to remain with Nai. Whatever else Nai is these days – and he sure is a lot of things – he's still Vash's only twin brother. They were never meant to spend their lives apart.

Well, too bad for them both.

Vash sticks the gauze down and then stuffs the kit back into his bag. "What're you doing out here?" he asks, brisk, emphatically not looking Nai's way, emphatically not thinking about his fingers where the touch of Nai's skin hasn't faded. "There shouldn't be red plants nearby, and you have a cult to run."

"How do you know about that?"

Vash stops moving. Then he turns his face to stare up at Nai, projecting *what kind of braindead idiot do you think I am* with more intent than he's ever used for anything.

Nai glowers at him. "How long?"

Vash stares harder. "Try the last century."

"...Are you serious?"

What, does Vash not look it?

"I haven't had them for that long. They haven't existed for that long."

Vash rises, slinging the bag over his shoulder. "Nai," he says carefully. "What is this? What are you doing here?" How did he get into the middle of the desert nearly several months' travel from his home turf without an escort?

No toma around so far as Vash can tell – not to mention that Vash doesn't even know if Nai bothered to learn how to ride – and Nai can't drive a motor vehicle himself any more than Vash can. (Vash *can* drive, to be sure. But it's… inadvisable, in a marginally different manner than he's heard it is for Nai. He knows enough about car operation and structure to keep one running, just preferably not from behind the wheel.) He could have arrived here by foot like Vash did, but the nearest village is days away at a steady pace, and only slightly fewer days away if he ran most of the distance instead of walking, and Nai goes a little homicidally mad if he spends so long with only mindless exercise to occupy him.

Nai pushes himself carefully to his feet, then advances. Vash skids a step back on reflex, but his legs are apparently offensively shorter now. Nai rushes to clear the last bit of space between them and takes the prosthetic hand in his.

Vash stiffens, reaches for his gun without drawing it, and half-heartedly tries to wriggle out of Nai's hold. But Nai isn't doing much yet, just inspecting the joints and seemingly comparing the shape of the prosthetic to his own mirroring limb. His left hand is the closest thing in existence these days to what Vash's would look like if Nai didn't take it off, after all.

“Who did this?” Nai asks with barely banked anger.

Vash will not name Brad to him. “A friend.”

Nai’s head jerks up. His brow is still knit with pain, but fury has joined in as well. Vash’s grip closes around the gun.

“*Vash*!” he snaps, in that way he does where he makes it seem like Vash’s name is the only word in any language that has ever been and will ever be worth speaking. There we go, that’s the brother Vash knows better. “Look at what they did to you! You’ll still protect them? Even after this? I have to do all of the work for you.” Vash twitches. “It looks like you don’t even *eat* unless I’m around to remind you. How did you get this short?”

…On the one hand, he could be *that* offended by the quality or mere existence of the prosthetic. On the other, an even less likely explanation might exist. “Hey,” Vash manages, “do you remember how I lost this arm? You do, right?”

Nai sneers. “How could I? I wasn’t there when you *let* them do this to you, or I would have killed them all before they could dare.”

…This isn’t Nai.

It’s always a treat, how utterly and instantaneously any reminder of Knives’ existence ruins his day. Vash freezes in his tracks in the middle of the stairs as, from around the corner up ahead, an unseen Knives crows, “I *knew* it!”

Vash hasn’t heard him so insufferably smug in… how many years now?

No one’s screaming or shooting. Vash can’t feel the faint sense of doom he gets when something’s brain waves go dark in his vicinity. But, if Knives is taking that tone, it’s only a matter of time, despite Vash not having any idea what could interest him about a little cliffside copper mining town.

Then a soft, unfamiliar voice says, “It’s because she saw him first when she walked into the room she found us in. He’s not… actually the older twin… you’re not listening, are you.”

Vash has shifted half a step out of touch with reality. Knives can’t possibly sound that gleeful and open while talking to a human. He might nearly be *happy*. Is Vash sure he’s Knives? Maybe that’s someone with a similar voice and intonation -

A pair of figures steps into view, one of whom expectedly makes Vash feel like a man dying of thirst who just got a glass of iced water thrown in his face. Knives is grinning, vicious and delighted like his own joy is a surprise to him each time it sneaks through, and Vash should probably check on the other guy too but in that instant he only has eyes for Knives.

In a single motion, though, both of them jerk to a stop, the smaller one nearly tripping over his feet at the suddenness, and whip their heads around to look at Vash. A part of Vash stands where they are, seeing himself and his stricken recognition from the outside, and it feels normal enough that in the moment he hardly registers it.

The taller one is Knives, all right. With, bizarrely, a concealed gun under his sleeve.

And the other, staring up at Vash, is -

“You *replaced* me!” Vash squawks, though the surprise doesn’t stop him from resting a hand on his gun.

Every single detail is wrong, but the generalities line up too well. Heavy silver revolver, red duster (with a Project SEEDS emblem of all things), uncommonly vivid blue eyes behind round-lensed orange sunglasses, spiky blond hair, *missing left arm*.

Oh, God. Did Knives chop off the guy’s limb to make him match Vash?

Knives’ facial muscles invent a new and complicated series of workouts.

Undercut, though, doesn’t look especially nervous about his proximity to a mass murderer. He zeroes in on Vash’s arm, too, as soon as he can peel his attention from Vash’s gun. He holds his stance confidently, and when he turns to Knives he looks him in the eye. “Knives,” he says quietly, “he’s not your brother.”

Excuse him?

“Don’t need you to tell me that,” says Knives, and Vash barely refrains from gawking. He actually replaced Vash! “I didn’t *chop off a human’s arm* to *replace* you. What kind of idea is that? What is wrong with you?”

“*Knives*,” Vash says. “What is this?”

Knives grinds his teeth in lieu of responding. Undercut looks between the two of them, then brightens in the fakest attempt at cheer Vash has witnessed outside of a mirror. “About that! We’re not actually sure. Sorry to intrude on you, I don’t think either of us is supposed to *be* here – ”

“Hey, Vash,” Knives grits out, “why do I *keep* cutting off your arm?”

Vash narrows his eyes at him. Meanwhile, Undercut keeps smiling vapidly.

Some of Knives’ scowl ebbs, the frown taking on a more thoughtful edge as he watches Vash. “You are different.” He glances at Undercut, whose smile might have been painted on for how steady it remains.

“Knives,” says Vash again. His hand hasn’t budged from the revolver.

Undercut answers this time, too. “Parallel dimensions!” he says, and, while Vash is blinking at him and trying to make something of those words in this context, he adds, “We think. Hi,

this is Millions Knives, but he's not *your* twin – are you twins?"

Vash says after a loaded pause, "If he's Knives…."

Undercut laughs a little, ducking his head. He's very good at making himself look small, and Vash doubts all of it is reflex. "I'm Vash the Stampede." Stampede? "Not his twin, either, but I am Vash." He waves.

Amendment, in that case: he can be Stampede unless he objects to it. He likely won't after he introduced himself with it, but the name does give the impression more of an outlaw title than anything else.

And Knives can be…

"Nice Knives," Vash murmurs.

Both of them stare at him. Knives clearly can't decide whether to take offense or not.

"If that's true, there should be a way to differentiate," Vash says reasonably. He's not sure it is true because why would it be, but the other option is that Knives developed partial amnesia and then molded some unsuspecting soul into a replacement Vash. He knows which explanation he prefers. "You left your Vash with both arms. You're Nice Knives."

"I dunno that that's a good idea," says Stampede, casually even as he comes from an endless parade of fear and helplessness that stretches so far back he doesn't know that he could remember how to breathe without it if it suddenly ended. There's still enough distance between him and Vash that it doesn't feel like Vash's own. "He's going to murder someone, and then you couldn't call him that anymore."

"No, he's not," Vash replies, settling into a smile, too, though his features just aren't the right shapes to let him duplicate the fluffy baby animal impression Stampede can pull off. "Or I'm going to kill him. Alright, Nice Knives?"

He's never bluffed harder in his life.

"Uh," says Stampede, wide-eyed. Oh, good, even he believes himself.

Nice Knives grins mirthlessly. "Vash," he says, wielding the name like a blade. Vash is counting on him not having any actual blades, though, when he keeps on him a gun that Vash will bet he understands very well how to use, uncanny as the thought is. Vash's chances have to be significantly better in a gunfight than they are in a knife fight. "I'll take it back. I definitely get why I keep cutting off your arm."

"Nice Knives," Stampede mutters, a little skeptically. Is his Knives genuinely nice? …Can't be, when Stampede looks so painfully resigned in the blink-and-miss-it lapses between his fronts. He's not even angry like Vash usually tries to be. It's just layers and layers of exhaustion built up like sediment over the immovable fossils at the bottom.

Twins. What can you do?

Stampede sweeps between the other two with a nervous laugh, facing Nice Knives, spreading his left arm while keeping the right near enough to his thigh to draw the gun quickly if necessary. Nice Knives' lip curls. "No politics at the dinner table, please! Or maiming, or death threats. It's how we've been getting along," he adds over his shoulder to Vash. He has the same mole under his eye and everything. Though Nice Knives doesn't. Weird, now that he's noticed it. "Looks like we're all a bit different, but we're not as different as that. Same idea across all of us, generally. It's a little funny 's long as you don't think about it too hard. Bet you didn't expect this was how your day was gonna end up going."

"Better this way than just finding out out of the blue that there are two Kniveses running around on the planet." If Vash heard about it in a way that didn't include the fact that one of the Kniveses has supervision, he would not have responded calmly.

Stampede laughs and doesn't even try to disguise the hollowness of it. "That'd be a nightmare, yeah."

Nice Knives shoves past Stampede, who makes a startled, disgruntled noise but doesn't retaliate. "No politics," he drawls, "and both of you can knock it off with the violence already." He's faintly limping and gritting his teeth whenever his right foot comes down on a step.

He slows for an instant just after Vash straightens. A faint thread of familiarity brushes between them without quite connecting. There's no mistaking it: he's a plant, and he's *Knives*.

He isn't Vash's twin, but he is Vash's brother, just as Stampede must be. Vash's sisters are theirs, too.

The moment passes, and Nice Knives moves past Vash with only a short glance his way.

Vash says, "I won't start anything if you don't."

"No," says Nice Knives as he heads up the stairs, not looking back, "you'll follow me until I fix all of our problems for us. That's how my Vash has been from the beginning."

Stampede shot Knives at first sight when they ran across each other in the desert. Knives hadn't even realized yet what or who he was looking at – the face absolutely wasn't one he knew, the edges that would have been recognizable filled out and softened.

The Project SEEDS patch on the duster caught his eye, but by that point Stampede had already drawn and fired in one fluid motion.

He isn't faster with a gun than Knives is. It's only that Knives paused to assess the situation whereas Stampede skipped to the next step before he could think to catch up, like a tomas

bolting before it knows if the sand beneath its feet was shaken loose by a grand worm or a strong breeze.

Glasses, meanwhile, reacted more like he would expect Vash to, though the similarities began to dampen after a minute. Vash isn't as emotionally decisive. He isn't as *loud*, either. Glasses' existence takes up more room than it ought to. His body can't fully contain his mind. No plant's can, but Glasses is overbearing about it.

In three different worlds, the only true consistencies are these: that humanity exposed their monstrousness, spurring Knives into toppling them from their unearned throne, and that they did so late enough that Rem sank her fangs into Vash before Knives could save him.

Though Rem might honestly have meant well, he doesn't care. Ignorance doesn't absolve her of fault. Her philosophy is poison, and she acted to spread it, blind or not to the harm she was causing.

At least three times, she has stolen a Vash from a Knives. Somewhere out there must be a dimension where she was never born, where she died younger, where Alex lived so she never applied to work on a SEEDS ship, where Knives shot her in her room and doctored the camera logs, where Vash understands what Knives needs him to, and Knives will likely never find any of them. He only has these dimensions that a fluke of reality brought him into contact with, his failure reflected threefold across them.

"Are you trying to go back home?" Glasses asks.

"He says he might have a way to do it," Knives answers. Stampede, who's wandered off a short ways to examine the wanted posters section of a public billboard, briefly glances back at them with a smile. "But who knows how reliable he is."

He's almost certainly got a decent price on his head where he comes from. Knives can't begin to guess at what he could have done to earn it, but humans possess an instinctive, animal fear of higher beings and also wouldn't recognize gratitude or salvation if it froze a monster to death in cryosleep for them. So. He's not shocked, either.

Maybe they discovered Stampede is a plant and are trying to bottle him in a jar with the rest of their people. It might serve him right.

Knives continues, "Apparently he needs to have contact with one of our sisters."

Talking to Glasses is just as bizarre as talking to Stampede is, and he can tell they each feel the same way about him. Twenty years since he spoke to Vash, twenty years since Vash shot him and ran screaming from the consequences of his own actions, and now here they stand together, refractions of what could have been, only a lingering awkwardness to mark the minefield of topics they're tacitly navigating around. A century of history not erased, but redirected.

Glasses tilts his head faintly, side-eyeing Knives behind the lenses. "Thirteen days. That's how far the nearest plant is from here on foot. That alright with you both?"

Stampede, inspection concluded, trots back to them while Knives replies, “What’s the alternative if it’s not?”

Glasses mulls it over. “I’d work something out.”

“Hopefully you won’t need to,” says Stampede. Practically all of their sisters are genetically identical cuttings from the same root, and Vash and Knives are nearly identical twins, but none of them are the same *person* the way Glasses and Stampede are both Vash. They all but occupy the same space. Though it’s not disconcerting, some part of Knives thinks it should be. “To tell the truth, I can’t promise I can get us back to where we came from, but I’ll do my best.”

Knives narrows his eyes. “What exactly are you planning to do?”

“Aha. Guess we’ll find out!”

He’s going to try to send two full-grown plants into separate dimensions, and his method is *I guess we’ll find out*. The confidence he inspires is impossible to state.

“I’ve never tried it before,” he adds, conciliatory, as if that’s supposed to help.

Not much Knives can do about it, though, as much as it rubs him the wrong way to need to rely on any version of Vash for anything. He doesn’t have input into how Stampede uses his plant heritage, and, whatever ability Stampede intends to draw on, Knives doesn’t seem to share it. He can’t think of anything that would let him send matter to another dimension, at any rate. Unless Hell counts. “You’d better not get us killed.”

“If there’s a chance of that happening, I won’t go through with it,” Stampede replies.

Both of them look to Glasses, because if Stampede can’t get them back then it’s his dimension they’re remaining in until they find a working method.

Glasses says easily, “Well, I’m not going to force you.” Even though he learned approximately five minutes ago that the idea of having two Kniveses to worry about is apparently actually his greatest fear. If Nice Knives didn’t have Stampede along for the ride, Vash would not be holding together so well.

Pathetic. Knives has two Vashes ganging up on him, one of whom threatened to murder him – which *grates*, by the way, that there’s a Vash who still won’t kill humans but says he will try to kill *Knives* for threatening the pests – and the other who literally shot him already, and no one feels him complaining about it.

“I’ll keep an eye on him,” Stampede says.

Knives has too much pride to roll his eyes. “Where is your twin? Do you have any idea?”

“None whatsoever,” Glasses lies smoothly and terribly. “Why? I won’t let you meet him.”

“Well, that’s not fair,” says Knives, indicating the two whole Vashes he didn’t protest the meeting of. He’d like to see either of them try to stop him from leaving if he meant it.

“Knives,” says Stampede with the face of a betrayed puppy. Knives valiantly takes the higher ground and does not kick him to complete the comparison. “Come on, this isn’t your planet. Neither one of us should be here, and we especially shouldn’t interfere.”

“Let’s pretend there’s an old codger hobbling around with a cane and a bag full of money right here, and over there is a gunman who needs to pay the bills,” Knives deadpans. “Say that to me again.”

Stampede winces. Glasses interjects, “You’re forgetting that I’m here.”

Stampede tries, “Your Vash still…” After a struggle, he settles on, “…misses you.” The word comes out the barest bit choked, but he recovers so quickly and utterly that anyone besides Knives and Glasses could have missed it. “You can’t stick around long enough to get involved.”

Knives snorts. If Vash does miss him, maybe he shouldn’t have left. Knives went to the effort of designing him an excellent present, and Vash took it and used it against his own family and ran away with it and left Knives bleeding on the ground. “Do you miss your Nai?” he asks, uneven fingernails digging into his palm.

Stampede shrugs. “…I haven’t talked to him in a hundred years.”

A hundred -

Glasses’ grief at the idea of a century alone latches on to Knives’ and outright forms a feedback loop. Knives isn’t sure how he manages not to stagger beneath the tidal force. His jaw clenches, and he catches a hold of the connection and fractures it sharply enough to give them both whiplash as their own separate senses of horror, amplified by the contact, snap back into them.

He kneads the side of his forehead where Glasses might as well have stabbed a needle into his skull from the inside, grimacing, while Glasses flinches, blue eyes wide and still caught frozen in that moment.

“Keep it *down*,” Knives snaps, scrunching his eyes shut and trying to shove the pain away by sheer force of will. “Why do you yell so much?” Though he supposes that, on the bright side, it’s distracting him from the steady searing burn in his leg from the bullet graze that he’s been tolerating because there’s nothing more he can do for it, and it’s distracting him from the aching pit those words tore into him that left him a spun-glass shell, hollowed. *I haven’t talked to him in a hundred years.*

He needs Vash. He *needs* Vash in that moment, his own Vash, his idiot little brother, and Vash can talk to him or sleep against him or aim a gun at him or any awful thing he wants as long as he’s here – but he’s not, of course he’s not, even as these two occupy the absent space. Running, still, a coward forever shattering beneath the unbearable weight of his utterly misplaced culpability.

But it won’t be forever. He won’t let it be. He won’t let Vash make it be.

Knives will find him again, even if he has to kill every human on the planet so that only one set of footprints remains in the sand for him to follow. Which he was going to do regardless, but he can adjust the order of events if Vash forces him to.

He hears Stampede flail. “I’m sorry! I mean, it’s not – I shouldn’t have said that, I’m sorry, I had no idea it’s been less time for you. Are you – ? Let’s talk about anything else. We’ll get home fine, I’ll make sure it works, Vash don’t worry about anything, I have, uh, lemonade?” Knives slits an eye open to Stampede pulling a foil packet of presumably lemonade out of his bag, shoving it in Glasses’ direction, realizing he shouldn’t expect Glasses to eat the powder dry, and pouring the contents into a canteen before proffering it again. The bottle is going to taste of terrible drink mix for weeks. “Here. Have all of it.”

Glasses accepts it numbly. Knives says, “Do I not get any?”

Stampede startles. “I – do you *like* lemonade?”

“There’s a mix that doesn’t taste like worm sick.”

“You’ve tried different brands?” Stampede breathes.

Knives abruptly decides he doesn’t want to know. The pain spikes, and he closes his eye again and presses harder on his temple. It doesn’t help. “Forget it.”

“No, I should – ”

“Forget it,” Knives snaps, and Stampede stalls in the middle of reaching for another canteen. Water’s valuable, and there he goes trying to taint more of his limited stock for the sake of nonsense.

“Alright.”

Glasses, settling back into himself, sniffs the canteen and takes a few perfunctory sips. There he goes, refusing to drink a single droplet more of someone else’s water than he needs to for politeness’ sake. If Knives leaves, these two will initiate a never-ending game of martyrdom hot potato. He clings to the belief that, in some dimension out there, a newborn him accidentally got his hands on a firearm and shot Rem on day one.

“Nice Knives?” says Glasses.

“Glasses?” says Knives.

Stampede, likewise wearing glasses, makes a confused noise that sounds almost like a cat’s trill. He seems to realize he’s doing it midway through and tries badly to pretend he’s clearing his throat instead.

Glasses nearly chokes at hearing a sound like that produced by his semi-clone’s voicebox, and he and Knives say in unison, “What was *that*?”

Stampede’s covered his face. He mumbles, muffled, “’course you don’t do that.”

What even. Knives' head hurts too much for this. He mutters, "You're Stampede."

"Yep," Glasses says and then pauses. When Stampede doesn't protest the moniker, he moves towards Knives instead. Knives opens his eyes just in time to go still as Glasses rests a hand over the one he's trying to murder the headache with.

After a second, Glasses starts looking mildly guilty. "Sorry. I can't do anything for this, but it should start fading soon. I don't think it'll last past half an hour."

"I see you're just as useful as always," says Knives while Glasses steps away.

"Yeah," Glasses agrees like the doormat Vash becomes only when it'll make him inconvenient for Knives.

"You don't have a headache at all?"

"I'm alright, yeah." Glasses passes the canteen back to Stampede and says, "Speaking of: kept meaning to ask, did something happen to your leg?"

"I *wonder*," Knives says, side-eying the culprit, who raises a hand.

"I might've shot him earlier," Stampede says, only a little meekly.

"Ah." Glasses' gaze flits to Stampede's gun, then back to Knives. "Well, he'll live."

Knives gapes at him. What, that's it? Even Stampede seems taken aback.

"I guess you don't want to talk about it, what you said," Glasses says to Stampede, plowing right along. Nobody wants to talk about it. Glasses doesn't, despite the offer. Knives absolutely does not.

"I don't really care if I do or not. It's all the same. I can if you want me to, but – " A sweeping gesture to encompass Glasses' reaction. "It's up to you."

Glasses makes no move to take him up on it, but the morbid curiosity that sometimes also leads Knives to keep a human alive for a few seconds longer just to see what new depths they can plumb spurs him on. "What have you been *doing* over a hundred years?" Nai almost certainly has real plans in the works, but Vash left to his own devices mostly just whines and cries and tries to play with the humans.

Stampede takes a long, long second to think about it, which is as promising as expected. "… I'm not sure, to be honest."

"Whining and crying and trying to play with the humans?"

Stampede smiles tightly. "Something like that, I guess."

"That sounds nice," says Glasses mildly, pointedly.

Stampede brightens. "Does, doesn't it?"

“*Was* it nice?” Knives asks, much more meanly than Glasses.

Another shrug. “Yeah.”

“That’s convincing.”

“I won’t lie, it would have been better if Nai stopped….” He visibly tries and fails to find the words he needs to fill the rest of the sentence.

“Keep going,” says Knives.

Stampede works his jaw. “…No. I’m not going to give you ideas.”

A bit late for that, baby brother. “Let me try something. You’re an outlaw, Stampede, aren’t you? I can’t imagine what you could have done to make the humans so upset at you, with the way you act around them, so it’s not you that they took issue with. The way I see it, you have two possibilities. One, the humans figured out that you’re not one of them the way you so badly wish you could be, or, two – ”

“Knives,” says Stampede, plunging rapidly towards the blank, constricting terror that consumed him as he took the shot in the desert. After all of this time living with the humans, seeing what they can do to plants and to each other, it’s somehow still his twin’s reflection who frightens him the most. Knives has never given him any reason to be wary. He’s only ever protected Vash from the humans who have.

It’s Nai who Stampede is responding to, not Knives, but Vash looked at Knives with that same trapped panic the last time they saw each other even though Knives would burn the world down before hurting him. Knives, unlike Nai, has never maimed his twin.

Still. For a brief flash of an instant, Knives imagines Nai standing in his place back in the desert, watching Nai’s twin pull the trigger against him before either of them had the chance to say a word. If that was Knives’ Vash after all, then, maybe, if it was the only way to make Vash see reason – if it’s the only way to make Vash see reason – if the alternative is another *eighty years* alone without probably so much as a lone attempt at compromise or reconciliation -

“ – they mixed up someone else with you – ”

– doesn’t Vash deserve it after he hurt Knives first –

Pressure smothers his words and Stampede’s nascent protest, too. It’s the equivalent of yelling over them, and it’s deafening enough that even any humans in the area will take notice if it sustains itself for much longer.

Knives rounds on Glasses as the pain in his skull flares, but in the few seconds of silence Glasses bought for himself he says, “It won’t work for you if you try. I don’t think Stampede’s changed a single part of his philosophy since his twin started doing – *that*, and your Vash probably isn’t too different from us. You’d be hurting other people and him for no reason.”

No *reason*? “There can’t be *nothing* that gets through to you!”

“That one specific method sure didn’t get through to him,” says Glasses with a nod at Stampede, who’s angled himself subtly towards the nearest ledge as if at any point he might parkour off of it onto the roof below. Knives grabs Stampede’s hood even though he doubts Stampede intends anything, snarling away the sense that it should be *his* Vash he’s pulling back to him, and Stampede stops fidgeting on his feet.

“Let go,” he whispers.

Point made, Knives does.

He needs to remember that neither one of these is Vash, no matter how much Glasses looks like him and no matter how easily Stampede slipped into the cracks left behind by Vash’s absence during the little time they spent together before finding Glasses. Any words he uses on them are wasted. They won’t reach the person he means them for.

He’s been patient. He’s been so patient. But even as he saves Vash again and again from what humans would do to them, Vash doesn’t understand. He can’t understand, not with Rem entrenched so thoroughly that Knives would need to break him into pieces to pry her out. Both of these Vashes wear the same color, the same glaring red, and, with how the similarities have lined up, Knives’ own twin might mirror them by now. Even after Knives wipes all other traces of her from the planet, he won’t be able to kill the only remnant of her that matters.

The entire point of her existence was to be a thorn in Knives’ side even now that she’s long gone and ash. She couldn’t so much as die without making the universe worse for it.

…He needs to get back to finding his twin. These two aren’t the one who matters.

“Which way is it for the dependent?”

Glasses points. “But it’s not a straight shot – or I guess you can make it one,” he says as Knives stomps off, “what’s a quicksand bog covered in arsenic to Millions Knives.”

“*Quicksand*?” Knives hears Stampede blurt behind him. “There’s water on the surface?”

Oh, of course. The situation could always be *worse*.

“How long’s it been since you ran across each other?”

“About three hours,” says Vash, keeping his voice down. Knives has gone ahead, traipsing grimly along the poorly defined road while the other two trail a distance back, but sound carries in the open.

Vash lets other people tag along sometimes for various reasons, but on less than a handful of occasions has he joined up with more than one other person at a time who understands how to travel on foot. Both Knives and Glasses clearly have experience, though, and Vash isn't sure how to feel about not needing to watch out at all for a traveling companion.

They're even going so far as to slow down from their usual paces to let *him* keep up without difficulty. Glasses hasn't mentioned the accommodation, but Knives went on at length about Vash's comparative midget status when it was just the two of them. Vash would've stepped on his foot if not for the lingering guilt about the apparently unnecessary and excessive bullet, and if not for the fact that he's not a masochist: Knives probably wouldn't ever have dropped it if Vash inflicted yet another basically minor injury.

Glasses blinks down at him. "And you got along fine the entire time?"

"Well," says Vash, gesturing *more or less*. "We talked about some stuff that didn't matter." Also Vash shot him and then felt too bad to needle him over anything major afterwards. What antagonism there was came from Knives' side, and once he calmed down significantly, which admittedly took a while (Vash understands that bullet grazes hurt like getting set on fire and then having the injury site packed with broken glass, but Knives still didn't need to yowl about it for quite that long), he stopped pushing them towards stickier topics. "He's prickly, but he's not…. Compared to Nai, everything's manageable. Hey, we didn't interrupt you, did we? Was there something you needed to get done in town?"

"Just lunch," says Glasses. "I was going to head out this way after. You guys didn't interrupt anything. I mean, I would've waited until closer to sunset."

Vash hums. "He got upset."

Glasses did, too. Less visibly, but not remotely subtly either. None of that was Vash's intention.

"Nice Knives," Glasses murmurs, a curl of bleak amusement. "I think my twin would've stabbed someone by now."

So Nice Knives might be an anomaly when it comes to innate knife production ability. Nai probably would have pulled a blade, too, much as Vash hates considering it, but… "Who?"

Glasses startles. "Huh?"

"We haven't really seen lots of other people since…."

"Oh," says Glasses. He taps his chest with a thumb. "Me. He would've stabbed me."

Vash stumbles mid-step, and Glasses hauls him steady by the shoulder. "*No*," Vash says.

Glasses stares at him for another second. The last time Glasses saw his Knives, they parted on the absolute worst terms imaginable. It was horrible, Vash was horrible, Knives was horrible, Vash is one half of a binary star system with decaying orbits and one half of a lightning-struck tree that's forgotten the shape of itself from before the storm and one half of,

let’s be honest, a trainwreck and the jagged edge where Knives cut him out of his life has never stopped drawing blood when he brushes against it and he wants more than he’ll ever want anything to put Knives in the ground and never find a reason to remember his name again. He’ll never kill Knives and Knives will never kill him, no matter how desperately either of them tries and no matter how much of themselves they pour into the attempts, but someday they’ll tear each other apart all the same because it’s the only safe way they understand anymore how to love each other. They’re the page image for the porcupine dilemma. Vash has the hair to prove it.

Glasses grins, ticking off the instruction manual step by step for which muscles to use and how much force to apply in what direction with each – Vash feels the action as if it’s his own – and tilts his face towards the sky. “Wow, the weather’s *great* today, isn’t it!”

No Man’s Land’s two types of daylight weather forecast are *normal* (death by exposure within half an hour if you don’t have water) and *inclement weather* (death by exposure within half an hour if you don’t have shelter). If they were humans they’d already have toppled over from heat stroke for following Knives out into the open desert at this hour.

“Uh huh,” says Vash faintly. “Sure. …Yeah.”

Great for Glasses that he has the energy. Vash’s feelings about Nai these days rest at a baseline of leaden exhaustion, and he’s too drained to construct much else from them.

“Sorry,” says Glasses, dropping his fist into his palm, “I forgot to ask. Are you alright? I was kind of loud in town.”

What is Vash supposed to do with that. Glasses’ Nai stabs him. Glasses expects to get stabbed by his Nai. Did Glasses mean it when he threatened to kill Knives. “Nai is louder.” It’s hard to get deafened by your own voice, besides.

Glasses cocks his head. “Just in general or when he’s trying to be?”

“In general whenever he talks. He’s sort of hearing-impaired.”

“How did that – ”

“Born with it,” Vash answers before Glasses can finish, and Glasses’ frown clears. “D’you know where Knives is? Yours, I mean.” Apologies to the other Vash, but Vash couldn’t live with himself if he just dropped the topic.

Glasses considers him, then shrugs. “Somewhere, probably.” Softer: “I… he leaves breadcrumbs. I mean, they’re corpses” – of course they are – “but *he* thinks they’re breadcrumbs, and I’m…. Hey, I know we don’t match up one-to-one, but does the name Revnant Vasquez ring a bell for you?”

“I haven’t heard it before.”

Glasses doesn’t look disappointed by the dead end, at least. “Hm. And Bill Con – ?” He cuts himself off as Vash startles.

“The SEEDS researcher?”

“Yeah! That’s what he was over here,” Glasses agrees, sounding somewhat too fond for someone reminiscing about Conrad. *Was*. He raises an eyebrow as Vash forms a pile of all of his own notably less warm feelings and throws his jacket over them to hide them. Glasses is him, but he’s also not him, and he can do without Vash’s alternate information contaminating the stream. “I figured he died in the Fall, but he might not have, and Revnant Vasquez might be his son” – Doctor *Conrad* with a *child*, and Vash stuffs the jacket and complicated feelings pile into a darker corner to hide the flinch – “and Knives is heading towards where he lives….”

“Which is where?” Vash manages.

“July City,” says Glasses. Vash *blanches*. “Uh.”

“I guess it’s. Different. Here,” says Vash. How does he put this. “Um. The Conrad I know works for Nai – I dunno how he’s extended his life this long – July City’s their space. I don’t go there. But it seems like it’s different for you.”

“…What do you mean July is *their space*.”

“Nai is…” Vash waves helplessly. “…the mayor, essentially. His people’re collectively the mayor.” For someone who despises humans, he surrounds himself with considerably more of them than Vash does or can. Vash tries not to think about that too much. He doesn’t actually enjoy upsetting himself. “The city does have an actual government and no one living there really knows about him, but he runs it at every level. I think he thinks about it like an ant farm. Everything I’ve heard about the living standards sounds really good.”

“Oh, my god,” says Glasses.

“I wouldn’t go to July if I were in your place. You know your Knives best, though.”

“We’re coming back to that if you’re alright with it, but. Yeah. I have to follow him no matter where he goes. I’m the only one who can stop him, and if he’s there to threaten Vasquez I have to at least *try* to save him.”

“I understand.” Can’t imagine it ending anywhere close to well, but of course he understands. He hesitates. “It’s probably pointless to say this, I know, but be careful.”

Glasses laughs. “Yeah, thanks. Strange seeing yourself from the outside, huh?”

From the outside and filtered through his own perspective, not Nai’s.

Glasses hums an agreement. “If you can get yourself and him home, I’m guessing you could also come back here if you wanted to.”

The thought did occur to him, though not as a serious possibility. He can’t leave Nai alone for so long. “Maybe. Not even sure yet if it’ll work, though.” He pauses. “You’re telling me not to try.”

“I think that’d be for the best,” says Glasses, smiling to take any edge off of the eviction.

Somehow, it was much easier to shrug off the probable consequences of Glasses’ current course of action before Glasses told him to stay away so he wouldn’t witness the aftermath. Neither of them has illusions about this ending well. The only question is precisely how badly it’ll be, and Glasses wants to be the only person to know the answer.

“You shouldn’t go,” Vash says again.

“Who else will?”

What your twin does on the other side of the world isn’t your sin to atone for – but the hypocrisy of those words would choke him if he tries to give voice to them. It’s not *Glasses*’ fault what Knives gets up to, but it is Vash’s fault what atrocities Nai commits, and those can’t both be true in the same world.

When they reach a small town days later, the other two steer him clear of the usual suspect locations for shoot-outs, which Knives sneers at them for but doesn’t protest. It is like traveling with Vash again.

They wouldn’t have remained for longer than a few minutes, in and out along the main road with only one detour to see about options for refilling water. Except that Stampede cries over the well by the water pump – Knives holds on to his glasses until he finishes – and once he’s wiped his face dry and gotten his supplies sorted out Glasses grabs them all to coo together over a wan, barely toe-sized cactus growing doggedly in the shade at the base of a wall.

“It can’t stay in this spot,” says Knives as Stampede starts crying again and blubbering sweet nothings to presumably the first wild flora he’s seen in his life. “It hasn’t been getting enough sun.”

He’s about to go kill the building’s occupants and set a very, very controlled blaze, but the other two catch on before the thought so much as fully forms. Glasses hurries inside to give notice and preferably acquire a shovel while Stampede reveals that he’s ludicrously attached to the sunglasses and will physically fight Knives if he moves more than a foot away with the things in his possession. The situation doesn’t devolve to that point only because Stampede stops being even remotely subtle about broadcasting his intentions.

Knives is a saint for putting up with this for eighty years.

He tries the shades on, though, mostly to make Stampede twitch. They’re less orange to peer through than he expected.

Maybe this is the way to make Vash stop being a coward. Steal something he likes, and he’ll finally return just to try to get it back. What happened to Glasses’ and Stampede’s arms,

anyway?

Stampede snatches the things back once Glasses returns with no shovel and an irritatingly skeptical and suspicious owner who insists on watching to make sure the three strangers who just entered town, two of whom carry visible weapons and wear the same color scheme like they're in a gang and one of whom, the kitten-shaped one, has just stopped crying, don't do something weird to the wall while digging up the little cactus to replant.

Naturally, none of them would need to be here if the human just took the initiative about the cactus in the first place, but when Knives says as much with the human in question in earshot Stampede hurries in to defuse an argument that doesn't even exist yet. "Better it's done by someone with experience. It's easy to damage the roots if you're not careful, and they might not know where else to plant it."

"People have different skill sets, Nice Knives," Glasses chimes in, preempting Knives from pointing out that humanity as a species is worthless if collectively they won't help a single cactus. Not can't, which would be excusable, but *won't*.

"Excuse me, I had no idea they couldn't learn better ones," says Knives, though his heart isn't in it. Arguing over the petty little points neither of them will budge on has proven itself a waste of breath over and over across the years. All three of them are running through an old, tired script while skipping the cues they can't be bothered to act through anymore.

Glasses digs up the flora while Knives arranges the new hole it'll live in. Stampede hovers between them, mostly staying out of the way but occasionally getting overcome by the urge to very softly poke the cactus.

The whole thing wouldn't take long, except that midway through the process gunfire bursts into life somewhere in the town.

The human predictably hightails it indoors while Glasses and Stampede drop their levity like a gecko shedding a caught tail. They share a look, Glasses' eyebrows knitting together. Stampede says, "I'll deal with it."

"They began it without you and they can end it without you," Knives says. Stampede's already rushed off, but Knives knows he heard before he could get far enough away.

"You're not going to stop him?" asks Glasses.

Knives, cactus hole dug, spreads his sand-smeared hands. "When have I ever?"

"Oh," says Glasses thoughtfully, "yeah, Knives always steps in *after* things have calmed down to kill everyone involved for taking up my time."

Knives says nothing.

"Don't do that, please," says Glasses, perfectly amiable.

Knives wishes he wouldn't put on that face around him. The only times Vash is honest between them anymore are when he's screaming at Knives.

Knives nods at the cactus. “You done over there?”

Glasses is not. He’s been digging largely one-handed. Knives presumes that, even with a glove on, there’s a difference for the prosthetic between repeatedly jabbing it straight into the ground versus the omnipresent sand that unavoidably sneaks into everything after any amount of time spent outdoors.

With a sigh, Glasses resumes work. Knives stands, leans against the wall, scrapes his hands relatively clean on the wood and each other, and crosses his arms to watch.

Glasses stutters suddenly mid-movement, a fractional pause before he resumes. Hm. Well, it’s as good a time as any to try to confirm what Knives has suspected for a while. “Something happening with Stampede?”

Glasses waves him off. “He’s fine.”

So they do have something going on. Knives would probably get to be the same way if he encounters Glasses’ twin.

“He told you to say that.”

“It’s also true,” says Glasses.

Another shot rings across the town, and Knives lifts his head. “Who’s that aimed at?”

Glasses looks him dead in the eye. “A bird.”

“If you won’t tell me, I have legs.”

A staccato burst of gunfire. Glasses hisses a curse under his breath. “Hey, Nice Knives, can you – ?” he asks, skittering back from the half-dug hole and pointing at it. “I can’t get it done fast enough.”

“Hm,” Knives muses, adding a second tally to the number of humans who deserve to die promptly: that was a different firearm from before. “No.”

Glasses swears again and returns to digging, this time with both hands. He seems occupied and safe enough, so Knives steps around him to follow the sibling who’s more likely to be actively leaping in front of gunfire at the moment.

“He’ll get hurt if you go,” Glasses snaps.

Knives raises an eyebrow and doesn’t stop walking. “Because he’ll try to protect the humans from each other *and* from me. Serves him right.”

Glasses tsks, then, preamble concluded, lunges for Knives.

Abandoning the (flora-type) plant he’s actively helping in favor of humans who aren’t even physically present, stopping Knives from aiding the plant who humans are currently in the process of harming just because Knives likes to fix his problems by doing the intelligent

thing of permanently removing the causes… of all the things about Vash he's missed, this is emphatically not one of them.

Even expecting the move, they're too close to each other for Knives to dodge. He twists to land mostly on his back before he hits the ground hard beneath Glasses' weight and his own.

Glasses tries to pin him. A snarl that's just as much shrill, helpless laughter bubbles its way out of Knives as he wrestles him away.

They're not children anymore. Even so, Vash hasn't matured. He's never left that hill in the greenhouse, and he takes every chance to drag Knives back with him, forever rolling down the same slope in a kicking, clawing ball because he couldn't forgive Knives the terrible crime of saving a butterfly he asked for Knives to rescue. "Grow *up*!" Knives yells.

He somehow elbows Glasses in the side of the neck. Glasses chokes, winded, and Knives takes the chance to knee him in the sternum and throw him off.

Glasses hits the wall, crumples, and tries to recover. He doesn't manage it in time to stop Knives from grabbing his hair, shoving his face into the sand, and locking his natural arm behind his back.

He thrashes. Knives pulls harder on his shoulder.

The joint is a hairsbreadth from dislocating when Glasses finally cuts his losses and stops struggling. Knives loosens his grip on Glasses' head, and Glasses hurries to turn his face to the side so he can breathe again.

Quick, deep breaths, and his pulse beats in Knives' ears until it's all Knives can hear. He's no less scared of Knives than Stampede is, isn't he? He's only better at pretending to ignore the fear.

What is *wrong* with Vash that he can't live a single life where he's scared of the right things?

"What have *you* been doing?" Knives demands. Stampede has spent a ludicrous, impossible amount of time running away from Nai. Knives' twin has spent an unreasonable but slightly less nightmarish amount of time doing the same. But Glasses doesn't seem as much the type to flee in an untempered panic for years on end.

Glasses breathes. He doesn't speak and doesn't move, though his eyes roll to catch Knives in his periphery.

"Silent treatment?"

Apparently so.

A simmering, old rage boils over again. His grip on Glasses' arm tightens enough that the skin will swell once he lets go, but Glasses bears the pain without a sound. Knives says, "Tell him to get away from there."

Glasses huffs.

“This isn’t even your problem! If humans want to harass each other where you can’t even see them, that’s just natural selection at that point. Don’t get in the way of it.”

A thunderous *crash* booms from somewhere across town, and Knives’ hold loosens as he jerks his head up to catch the hints of a rising dust cloud over the roofs. “What – ”

Glasses flips them. Tries to, at any rate – Knives wriggles out of the maneuver at the last second, but that’s after Glasses has already shoved him off of him.

Knives snaps, “Vashes!”

Glasses freezes, staring, and Knives does too once his ears catch up to his mouth. Knives blinks. “Okay, look, there are three of you and your stupid nickname shares the same vowel – ”

Glasses snorts, which graduates into a strained laugh when Knives doesn’t make a move to continue the fight. “It’s me, the collective Vash.”

“You’re not funny.”

“You’re the one who picked the nickname, don’t complain about it now. I just got used to answering to it and everything.” He settles back on his haunches and takes his namesake off to inspect the lenses. He makes a face, blows some of the sand off, then replaces them and glances to the cactus. “Seriously, help me out with this. Stampede’s running east and we should probably hurry up here if you want to meet back up with him at any point before the plant factory.”

“What’s going on with him?”

“It’s resolved, more or less.” Glasses cocks his head. “I know what I said. You’re fine! You can shoot out a tire, they’re close enough to walk back.”

Knives stares at him.

Glasses gives him a thumbs-up. Knives does not fall for the urge to bite it. “He’s fine. Or, he will be in a second.” A shrug. “I’ll fill you in when we’re far enough away. Remember that it’s not your world. If there’re any humans in existence who are yours to judge, they’re *not* the ones surviving on this planet.”

Right after he encouraged Stampede to get involved in his place. “Is there any version of you who’s not a hypocrite?”

“Not by your standards, maybe.”

What happened was this: Stampede staged a jailbreak for the only person in the slammer before collapsing the sheriff's station and robbing every gun and baton and handcuff he could find from the sheriff and his extended family. The sheriff's niece is a spoiled little monster, the initial gunshots came from her firing poorly aimed potshots at random passersby, this practice, among others, is apparently a habit for her, and when Stampede tried to reason with her and successfully avoided her retaliatory gunfire the sheriff got involved on her behalf with a somewhat larger gun.

Misanthropy oozes out of Nice Knives in nearly tangible quantities. "What, not a single person killed them already? How long have they been doing that for?"

"I know this may be hard to believe," Vash says, trying very badly for consoling and missing the mark by iles, "but most people don't like violence and murder, let alone as a first resort. Still, they probably would have gotten around to acting eventually. The niece is still a teenager, and two people have gotten hurt before, but they both made full recoveries."

"So someone needs to die before they'll do anything."

The single script he and Knives keep rehearsing, but shifted off-center. It's still exhausting to run through, obviously, even with the alterations, but it's faintly interesting to note the differences. Vash doesn't think Nice Knives' beef with humanity is exactly the same as Knives'. Whatever his reasons, he hates humans marginally *more* than Knives does, which is fascinating like a house fire is fascinating.

"I've never once tried to claim they were perfect."

Nice Knives grimaces but lets it go, apparently settling along with Vash into the old habit of not keeping up the argument once it hits a wall. It took both of them a while to fall back into it. Too much bad blood to let it all go so easily – Vash assumes he reminds Nice Knives of his own twin more than Stampede does, and Nice Knives isn't Knives but he sure does trip all of the same buttons in Vash's mind.

He doesn't know that he can believe it, but he hopes nonetheless that, assuming time passes in similar ways across dimensions, Nice Knives' twin is enjoying his reprieve. A few days without Vash's own Knives in the same world as him would be…

…would be.

Vash would survive it.

So would any of the people Knives would otherwise have senselessly butchered.

They catch up with Stampede around evening. He's set up camp in the shadow of a mesa, which honestly just means he's plopped down his bag and his newly acquired assortment of weaponry (he asked Vash for permission to pawn it off, to which Vash gave a bewildered go-ahead; in retrospect, Stampede probably hasn't got many avenues for making money) and is sitting on a rock beside them working through a book of math puzzles that are… a little difficult for any product that would actually be able to sell… oh! From the ship? Is there a ship where he comes from?

In response, Vash gets a few impressions of people he has warm and fuzzy feelings about who always treat their plants perfectly nowadays, a plain little room untouched by time, a sanctuary whenever the desert outside stretches too far and too open and too much.

As they draw near, Stampede stuffs the book and pencil into a pocket of his bag and leans forward. “We’re all alive!” He glances at the rock beneath him, brow furrowing as he realizes it’s not wide enough for three people to sit on, and then he scoots down onto the sand.

“I’ve got a question for you,” says Nice Knives, sitting cross-legged and dunking his own bag beside him. He points at Stampede's spoils. “If you grabbed all of that for whatever reason, why didn’t you grab the vehicle while you were at it? Weren’t they chasing you down with one?”

Stampede blinks. “Well, I… sure, I guess I could’ve, but I couldn’t drive it after.”

“…Are you saying you *can’t drive*?”

“I get bored and I crash,” Vash volunteers for solidarity’s sake.

“I drive like I run,” says Stampede. “Cars don’t like that too much, though. And, uh, Nai drives like he walks. So he goes *through* obstacles. I assumed it was the same for you, but it doesn’t sound like I was right.”

Nice Knives gapes at him, then whirls on Vash and demands, “Can your twin drive?”

Vash points a thumb at Stampede. “Same issue. He refuses to turn the steering wheel.”

“What,” says Nice Knives.

“So you can drive?” Stampede asks tentatively.

“It’s not hard! Can you or can’t you operate a space shuttle? It’s definitely a whole lot easier than that.”

“I mean, that’s different,” Stampede answers for them both.

“You’re telling me there are four independents on this planet and *three* of us can’t be trusted behind a wheel?”

“I can be trusted!” says Vash. “Briefly.”

“*How*,” Nice Knives mouths.

Stampede laughs softly. “Sorry, I guess we’re still going the rest of the way on foot. I might’ve stolen it if I’d known you could drive, but… actually no, I wouldn’t have. Why did I apologize? I’m taking it back.”

Knives with a gun and a car and more hand-to-hand experience than Vash, and possibly somewhat different reasons for hating humans, and who’s more grounded, if that’s the word for it. Existing closer to the same plane as humanity. He eats and drinks and breathes and

bleeds and doesn't bloom into inorganic sharpness as easily as if he was born into that shape, with his body little more than a polite veneer over the fractals of interlocking blades concealing the core of him. Even though Knives *wasn't* born into that shape at all.

Something morphed in him, in the Fall or… before. His food and water requirements dropped over the course of years, if never quite to the point that he stopped needing them entirely, and he shook Vash awake one morning to show him blades grown from between his knuckles. He was happier than Vash had ever seen him, the sheer clarity of his delight and relief and excitement an utterly new development. *I'll keep us safe! Vash, Vash, I can protect us, look, I can -*

If Vash goes a little farther, gets a little luckier, could he find a Knives who….

Rem? What happened? Did you have an accident?

…Remember what?

That wouldn't be his Knives, though. He'll always and only ever have the one twin. If he dwells on what could have been, he'll never move forwards.

"Okay, but I have to see this now," says Nice Knives.

"I'm not gonna steal a car just so you can watch us wreck it," says Stampede.

"What if *I* - "

"Nope, no grand theft auto from you," says Vash. "How's everyone doing on food?"

Fine, obviously. Stampede is habitually low on supplies of every kind and survives on what would be worse than starvation rations for a human, but there's nothing to be done about that except for Vash and Nice Knives to share what they have with him. No one asks where Nice Knives gets the money to buy his possessions from.

None of them sleep very well, after, just as they haven't for the past week of traveling together.

Stampede looks like he's snug, but just about any movement from Nice Knives has him blinking awake to check before drifting back off. Nice Knives sleeps soundly, but his dreams all feel terrible, whatever they're about. Vash, meanwhile, sleeps through to morning and has perfectly tolerable dreams, except that he lies awake for an hour or so longer than the others, thinking about rocks and brothers and things that would be wrong to do.

Although Vash has less than no idea how he'll settle his own domestic dispute if Knives turns out to be waiting for him in July, he could – technically – resolve that dilemma for another independent plant. The other Vash wouldn't bear responsibility. For him, it'd be as blameless and unpreventable as… but that's the thing. Nothing is really unpreventable, or blameless. Even windstorms and earthquakes and sudden spaceship navigation errors have causes that can be forecasted.

Vash doesn’t get up from the bedroll. He doesn’t move. But he thinks: about inevitability, and selfishness, and other nights like this one. There’s no replacing a twin if they break. There’s no correcting some mistakes once made. Other people’s choices aren’t his to take away, unless they’re Knives’ because his decisions are just as much Vash’s.

If Stampede’s plan pulls through, it won’t be much longer before the number of independents on the planet shrinks again to two. Back to Vash on his own, following the baited lure his brother’s set for him.

Nice Knives’ Vash will work things out - unlike Vash’s and Stampede’s, his twin both can't materialize knives at will and hasn't reached the point of maiming him, so he might even have the best hope for it. And Vash, too, will work things out. He has to believe that. There's no other option if he doesn't.

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