hummingbirds

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by cloudycats

Summary

“Have you heard of Millions Knives?” doesn't usually get a response, but “Have you heard of God?” sure does.

Vash runs. It's never far enough.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

July City is still young when Vash first hears of God.

The God of July is a god of bounty, it's said. Of justice and reparations, too, and of blood and storms and sickness, because a god's kindness means little if he is only ever kind. All humans are born having already sinned, but those who make efforts to redeem themselves will feast at his endless table after death. His heaven is a plentiful one, an oasis with suns whose heat never burns and more water than all of humanity could ever drink and more food than they could ever eat. God provides.

The Eye of Michael is the first plant cult in the new world. The other plant cults that follow it through the years will all diverge from that same root.

In a town not far from July, a priest holds a sermon in a public meeting hall booked for the next several hours for the purpose. Foldable seats fill the room, and people fill the seats, though the back two rows remain largely empty. When Vash settles in near the door, no one spares him a second glance, but when he leaves silently halfway through, smiling sheepishly and making apologetic gestures, the people sitting closest to him watch him go with disapproval.

He buys what supplies he needs, and then he takes a courier job delivering cases of letters and small packages to Hopeland. Despite never staying in a single area for long, he's built a reputation for being reliable with this sort of work, which is sorely appreciated in a world where messengers regularly get eaten by worms or are robbed by bandits or collude with bandits or die of thirst after heading a few degrees in the wrong direction.

Letters in hand, he leaves without spending the night and doesn't come so near July again for a century and a half.

Within a generation, humanity carves out their niche in No Man's Land.

Their position is new and volatile still, but they've laid out the foundations and begun to build upon them. Settlements formed around plants, high walls to protect from sandstorms and raiders (not everyone was lucky enough to land near a plant during the Big Fall), thriving industries in repurposing spaceship materials.

Vash makes himself useful. In their initial desperation for resources, the humans exhausted so many plants that, for a while, he spends most of his waking hours following the fading echoes of his sisters' voices.

He finds dozens of stranded groups that way, humans who fell with a plant but not a communication device, and brings them into contact with the nearest spaceships. He helps with construction, as an architect for the groups that don't quite know how buildings work and as extra muscle for those that do. He negotiates peace between raiders and the villages they'd been fighting – the villages thought they had finite resources that they needed to hoard, but, once he connects them with the spaceships and they discover that humanity retained access to tens of thousands of plants, that excuse falls away.

This is the first time Vash meets humans who don't understand that he's not one of them.

He falls in love.

He loved them before he ever knew them, of course. The concept of them – naturally destructive animals capable of creating even more than what they ruin, and who as a whole always strive to *do* that, even if it's harder, even if they have to make sacrifices for it. Creatures with drive and potential enough to become anything they put their minds to.

A species of people like Rem. How could he have done anything but love them?

And then he *meets* them, really meets them – greets them as equals and kin, mingles with them, talks to them – and they're everything he imagined. There's so much depth to every single one of them.

They're also, unfortunately, terribly vulnerable.

It doesn't take much to send a life off course, he learns. Anything capable of hurting Vash does worse to them.

So he'll become their shield. He'll stand between them and the dangers they're too frail to risk against, even if those dangers are other humans. He can't bear watching them hurt each other, but *he* can survive most of what they might throw at him.

He wants to start doing right by them, and… to atone for future harm.

There's so much that he won't be able to save them from, and a good portion of it will be his fault.

Twenty-three years after the Fall, Vash knows enough about humans and enough about weapons to recognize the sound of leather creasing against a gun grip.

He whips around to look, and he spots a figure across the street leveling a pistol at him.

“What – ” He retreats, raising his hands, and doesn't have a hard time making himself look lost and startled and pathetic because he *is* lost and startled and pathetic.

Is he getting *mugged*? It happens with unusual frequency – he has the face of someone who would follow a stranger into a dark alley at night, he's been informed, which… fair, yeah, he's done that a couple of times – but in broad daylight in the middle of town? He's not the only pedestrian carrying a visible weapon, so it's not that they mean to attack more people and want to take out the main resistance first, either.

Has he wronged them somehow? But he doesn’t forget faces, and this one he doesn’t recognize.

He ducks before they pull the trigger, and the bullet bores a hole through the wall of the general store behind him. It doesn't strike anyone inside – he would have deflected it if it might have – but he freezes for a split second anyway, caught flat-footed.

Whatever the attacker's motive, they don't have enough experience with firearms to have considered the possibility of collateral damage. Why is a stranger who doesn't know how to handle a gun trying to shoot him on the street?

“Hey – ” he begins, voice high, and breaks off to scramble out of the paths of the second and third bullets.

The fourth goes wide towards a window with someone behind it, and he leaps in front of the shot to intercept it. He yelps as it bounces off of his left arm. The prosthetic doesn't damage easily, but he receives nearly a full range of sensory output from the limb; although it doesn't register pain, impacts aren't *comfortable*, either.

Alright, enough of this. He jumps an unremarkable height, pulls himself onto a shop's eaves, and clambers up another story to perch on the roof. They won't shoot a bystander by accident if they stop aiming towards street level.

“Are you a gunman or not?” the shooter yells. “Draw your weapon!”

Vash darts a glance to his gun holster as if noticing it for the first time. “It's a prop,” he shouts back. “Can't we talk this out? Whatever you've got against me, is violence really – ”

Violence is really.

Five rounds, and now they switch the gun out for a second, identical pistol. A bit of an unconventional tactic, but if they're not the quickest at reloading then Vash supposes they have to compensate somehow.

Well, they don't *have* to. They could stop firing instead. But people generally mean well, and this one really seems to dislike him, and they’ve stopped accidentally threatening bystanders, so he’ll hold off on taking action until he can hear their reasons.

“Draw! Stop *running*!”

“I really dunno who you think I am!”

The shooter, both guns spent, stops to reload very, very slowly. Their right arm from the elbow down moves oddly clumsily. The rustle when they bend their elbow doesn't match leather against skin, either. “Red coat. Blond hair. Glasses. A heavy revolver. Don't play innocent. You're *Vash*,” they spit, “former lieutenant of the Bloodhounds gang.”

What.

“The what gang?” Someone framed *him*? A courier and occasional plant engineer who hasn't been in this town for an hour? He waves his arms frantically. A lot of people are watching from windows and behind cover; he needs to clear the misunderstanding before they get the wrong idea, too. “There's a mistake here – ”

The shooter snarls and snatches the glove from their right hand, exposing a metal prosthetic gleaming dully in the sunlight. Not Space Age technology, that one; Vash curls his own artificial fingers into a loose fist, then relaxes.

“You escaped justice once, when the other Bloodhounds were captured! But I'm bringing you in,” they declare, even though they've tried to aim exclusively at Vash's vitals.

Tried, only. No harm done.

At least he finally understands the situation. He hasn't dealt with similar before, but, since the problem stems from a mistaken identity, he needs to convince them he's not a ranking member of the gang that lost them their arm. Pretty straightforward.

He remembers Rem telling them she loved them, the long fall through darkness and fire, Nai in the wreckage confessing between laughter, his own helplessness through it all, and he bursts into tears. Big, hot, gloopy tears that smear across his glasses, complemented by a snotty nose, bawling, the works. He can't distinguish more than blurs through the water across his glasses, but the shooter-colored blob stops moving.

“I dunno *anything* about that!” he wails. Dignity exists to get people hurt. “I don't know why you're trying to kill me! I haven't *been* here before! I was gonna pass through without stopping but there's an inn and I miss sleeping in a bed!”

For a solid fifteen seconds, he only hears the wind and his own sobbing.

Then an onlooker calls, “You've got the wrong guy.”

“No, but….” The shooter stands frozen. Vash sniffles loudly, takes off his glasses, and scrubs at his face with his sleeve. “I was *sure*…. You fit the description.”

“I'm Vash,” he blubbers, wiping the tinted lenses dry on his coat and fitting them back on before the suns can light up the plant markings in his eyes, “but I just carry mail. I dunno about any gang members.”

The shooter stares, slow realization dawning. “Someone *framed* you. Why?”

He shrugs.

With a touch of desperation: “How'd you get that arm? That's lost technology.”

“Found it in the desert.” Unlikely, but just barely plausible enough that he can imagine it happening to someone ridiculously lucky. Also, would they really accuse him of lying immediately after they tried to murder him? “There's a lot of remnants from the Space Age buried under the sand.”

The shooter gapes at him. They seem nice, really. He's happy they've stopped firing at him; that was stressful. “But… why would….”

He gives them another couple of seconds to reorient before he ventures, “Can I climb down now?”

“Yeah,” says the erstwhile shooter. “Yeah. Sorry.”

He lets his foot slip on his way down the wall, and he falls the rest of the distance to hit the ground on his rear. He stands stiffly, wincing but laughing off the pain. It shouldn’t even bruise. “Nah, I'm good, I'm good,” he says when the shooter looks like they might come over to help.

“I don't understand,” they say. “Who would have….”

“That makes two of us,” Vash mutters, and sniffles again. “Who did you hear it from?”

“My sister-in-law told me. She – um, she heard it from her friend, who… had to hear it from somewhere….”

Who on *earth* cares enough about Vash to so thoroughly seed a rumor that dangerous –

Vash inhales, holds his next blink for a fraction of an instant longer, then opens his eyes.

So. The grace period's ended.

One day he'll learn to stop asking questions he doesn't want to consider the answers to.

Maybe today, even! He starts by not wondering about the motive behind slandering him, because it's none of his business until someone forces it to be. A human attacked him, and a human backed off, and no one got hurt. No point was proven. It's a lovely day.

“That many people've heard it?” he says, wide-eyed. “Who're the Bloodhounds?”

“A marauder gang from years back. They hurt a lot of people all across the region before the military police arrested them.” They chew the inside of their cheek, hesitating, and then they add, “A *lot* of people.”

Vash stills, genuinely dumbstruck. He can't manage multiple aggressors if it comes to that.

Law enforcement won't buy the slander, so at the very least he shouldn't have to worry about trouble from that sector, but the much larger percentage of the population who don't have access to police records will. They already have. He can't repeat this encounter with every single revenge-seeker who might come chasing after the rumor – someone will get injured eventually.

“What do I do?” he cries.

Collect his tomas and run. This will blow over so long as no one actively maintains the story, and he has time to spare. He'll wait it out from a safe distance –

“…The sheriff's office might be willing to put you up until someone sorts this out,” the shooter offers. “It'd be safest for you. Um, I can show you if you don't know the way.”

– or that. That would work, too. It'd be the path of least resistance, if he cares about that kind of thing.

But his circumstances have changed. Humanity's had their time to shore up their walls, Vash has had his time to help them, and now his location's known. Starting from this moment, he's a danger to everyone around him.

He has no interest in discovering whatever the fallout will be if he stands his ground.

“I don't wanna make trouble for anyone,” he says, shoulders slumping. He shakes his head. “I'll just leave. It'll be easier.”

“If you're sure,” says the shooter uncertainly. “*Are* you sure?”

“Yeah.” Vash offers a wobbly smile. “Wasn't your fault, you shouldn't worry about it.”

“I… if you say so.”

They're watching him like he's an alien, which he finds he… doesn't really care for. Maybe they thought he would get angry at the situation, or at them. Should he have gotten angry at them? But he doesn't want to. They didn't do anything wrong, and he likes them.

Some of the look fades. They say quietly, carefully, “How did you make an enemy like this?”

Vash's smile becomes a little more real. Oh, he *does* love them, even if he'd rather talk about anything else. Mark that down as another reason to leave quickly. They tried to initiate a shoot-out with a gunman when they barely have any idea how to aim. He won't have more attention drawn to them; they'd never survive it.

“Deliberately,” he answers, and in that moment means it.

A well-kept tomas with no major health conditions remains a working animal for forty years. Vash's tomas starts flagging at thirty.

Over the next few days after he notices, he alternates more than usual between riding and leading her. He'd prefer to not ride at all to spare her the weight, but even an ill tomas runs faster than him over short periods, and they need to reach a vet soon. With every passing morning it becomes harder to coerce her into eating.

Luckily, tomas vets are abundant; most settlements have at least one out of necessity. Vash stops in at a small town that will not exist in fifteen years and pulls Donut across the final stretch.

“Has she been sick before?” the vet asks while they look her over.

They sound as if they already know the answer, which doesn't bode well. “The last time was early last year,” he says anyway. “There was a flu outbreak in Inepril. She caught it for a few days there, but she got better and then she was fine. She's been fine.”

The vet purses their lips. “She's not the first tomas I've seen with these symptoms. There've been others since that outbreak.”

“So you know how to treat it?”

“No,” they say. “There is no treatment for this. No one knows enough about the flu strain yet. Maybe that'll change eventually, but as of this instant she won't last the week. Some toma who caught that flu and recovered – when they go through a major stressor or get worked too hard, their health declines just like this. You're best off selling her to the butcher and using the money to buy a new bird.”

For a long, long moment, Vash can't find the words to respond with.

He understands and accepts that humans are pragmatic creatures stranded on a world that selects for that trait. He really does. They farm plants for resources until the plants break under the strain, and then they force a Last Run to exploit even the plant's death. They use toma for labor and eggs, and, when the toma grow too old and too weak and too slow, they cut the birds apart to take what value remains, meat for food and fat for candlelight and feathers for clothing and bones for simple tools. They use each other, too, and him, if in different ways and with more care.

Given the chance, they might scour the planet clean with the same efficiency. If they mean to survive, they don't have a choice. He and Nai took that from them.

But even so.

“I've had her for thirty years,” he says.

When they get worked too hard. Did he – ? For nine years, they've traveled at least a dozen iles essentially every day. He can count on one hand the number of times he's slept in the same bed for two nights in a row. He tries not to ride her or have her run without a reason for

it, and for the vast majority of the time he leads her at a walking pace while she only carries their supplies, but that's not the same as actual rest.

The vet's expression suddenly turns stricken. “Oh… you don't look….”

Vash smiles wanly. “I'm older than I look.”

“That was out of line. I'm sorry. I thought….”

Ah, they thought a twenty-year old with no experience bought an older bird for cheap and ruined her within a year. They've had a few cases similar to that come through already, it sounds like, so Vash can understand the confusion. But that was still a little cruel to the hypothetical owner.

They continue, “And you're a nomad, aren't you? Some of the others who came in with toma like this were. You hadn't heard.”

Vash laughs because there's not much else he can do. “That's not really an excuse.” Even without knowing about the issue, he probably could have caught it before it progressed so far if he'd paid more attention. There have to have been warning signs.

In the end, the vet still recommends euthanization. She isn't going to recover, and delaying the inevitable does nothing except lengthen the amount of time she spends ill.

Vash thanks them for the diagnosis, then coaxes Donut to her feet and leads her out.

He doesn't normally stay in a single place past one night, but he remains in the town for most of a week. On the final day, Donut doesn't wake at all. Come afternoon, she passes in her sleep, and Vash cries until the tears have wrung him dry, then shifts her head off of his lap and stands on legs that itch from sitting too long.

He borrows a shovel and buries Donut at the town's outskirts. It *would* be best to sell the body, but he's always been more sentimental than practical, if less so than Nai. Until that habit kills him, he has no intention of changing.

Afterwards, he doesn't linger long: he's already spent far too much time here. He donates his uneaten tomas feed to the vet, reorganizes his supplies to fit on one person's back, and walks into the desert as night falls.

A pit stop sits fairly near the town, a couple of days' travel by foot. Vash stops in at it to stock up on extra water and ask the owners if they've heard any news worth sharing lately, but he's barely stepped through the doorway before a courier sitting at a corner table leaps to their feet and says, “Vash?”

Vash has never met this person in his life. “Ah?” He hasn't closed the door behind him. He can run very quickly, and then he can temporarily steal one of the two toma tied outside to run even more quickly.

“I've got a delivery for you.”

Oh.

Oh, no.

“You do?” He looks around wild-eyed, hoping for someone else in the room so that the courier can turn out to be talking to them instead. One of the owners is coming down the stairs, but the sign outside has their name on it and it does not say Vash. Maybe they go by a nickname –

“What, you weren't expecting one?” The courier blinks before visibly deciding this doesn't count as part of their job. “Well, you've got one anyway. Did you see the toma out there?”

“I… yeah.”

“Right. The prettier one is yours.”

“…Oh. Is it.”

Every time.

Every time.

What's the point? A bribe? An apology? (Probably not an apology.) A reminder? He doesn't need more of those when he cleans his gun once a week and after every use. He doesn't need presents, either, or false charges, or hitmen, or any of the surprises that get thrown his way. He *really* doesn't need them.

“He's a good bird,” the courier offers after a beat. “And anything's better than traveling on foot, yeah? Someone spent a lot of money buying him and getting him to you.”

“Yeah.” He tries to keep his voice steady, but the word comes out a little strangled anyway.

A gun, a life, a planet, a bird. He can't refuse the charity. The last and only messenger he's turned away got sent back to him as a head in a bucket of gore. Maybe once someone gains the ability to command physics to obey, *asking* for what they want instead of simply imposing their will on reality feels like wasted effort.

Vash names the tomas Billions, which helps him feel better for all of a second before he remembers he doesn't actually enjoy pettiness. He can't manage a different name, though – thinking feels harder than it should – and the tomas will hardly object, so he lets the issue go.

He prods under the feathers, checking for surgery scars. He doesn't expect to find a transmitter, but it doesn't hurt to confirm. “You're not responsible for any of this,” he assures Billions, who ignores him.

The courier was right: Billions *is* an uncommonly pretty bird. Something about the color when his feathers catch the light makes him shine nearly metallic.

Maybe that's for the better. He looks different enough from Donut that Vash feels less like he's just replacing Donut with a younger model almost before the corpse has cooled. She

spent decades as his only constant contact; he loves humans, but they don't return the sentiment if they know him for too long. Ten years is as far as he can stretch a friendship before “I age really, really well” stops cutting it.

And Vash doesn’t do great alone.

“Ah, I need to buy tomas feed again….” He trails off as he opens the saddlebags. (Billions' tack comes as part of the delivery, too, because… well, why not. Might as well go the full ile.) “Huh! There's enough feed in here to last for a while. That was thoughtful of him.”

Chapter End Notes

title from "The Warmth" by Koda

Chapter 2

July sets a bounty on Vash. Not a large one, and they won't pay for his corpse, and he's committed no crimes (the city wants him *for questioning*, no further elaboration, which seems on the level), and the posters feature a written description of his appearance without an accompanying image.

It’s less of a bounty and more of a notice. *Send him our way if you see him, please*. The price on his head might as well not exist for all it affects him. He could ignore it. He should ignore it. He visits a general store in a town with a plant church and the shopkeeper forces money and ammunition on him. *It's a gift. I don't know from who, but I'm guessing you do. And we were told to tell you: run from the things that hurt you, not the family who loves you.*

On a related note, what an excellent time of year it is to go be nowhere near July.

He putters about in the vicinity of May City instead, keeping plants alive, taking deliveries, returning lost cats, making friends. So long as a traveler doesn't bring trouble with them, most people are happy to meet a stranger passing through, especially a helpful one with stories to share. Most people are kind when they feel safe to be.

He misses the weather forecast for a sandstorm, and a postal worker on the road lets him shelter himself and his bird in their van until the winds settle.

In a village that only exists because its residents haven’t the funds to buy vehicles to move with, someone has taken to feeding a pair of stray cats.

A family hires him to escort a parent and sick child to May City for treatment; when the kid barely old enough to dress themselves hears that Vash doesn’t live anywhere, they offer to let him share their bedroom forever.

An innkeeper tries to steal the packages he’s ferrying and smother him in his sleep. Vash checks the yard and finds bones under the sand.

You take the good with the bad.

He really wishes they wouldn’t do that sort of thing, though. He can’t be everywhere to stop all of them every single time, and watching the people he loves do their best to hurt each other never gets easier.

In May City, he goes shopping. Prices trend higher, but the same variety of markets doesn’t exist in settlements outside of the great cities, and he has several unrelated purchases to

make.

A hardware store for his sputtering radio, first. He likes keeping his things functioning, so, by extension, he likes buying the materials to repair them with. Not much clears his head as well as restitching a loose thread on the turtleneck or fixing the hinges on his glasses so that they bend as well as they did when Brad got them for him. His radio is older than half of humanity at this point, and Vash will see it live forever even if he has to replace every piece of it.

With the best part of the shopping trip complete and that experience unspoilable, he deals with the worst part.

Vash passes his frankensteinian monstrosity of a firearm to the gunsmith and then keeps his hands at his sides and steadfastly does not move to take the gun back. He’s kept the revolver in easy reach every second of every day for decades, losing hold of it only for modifications and repairs he can't manage on his own. He doesn't *like* the thing, not really, not any more than someone might appreciate a good shovel or pickaxe, but in its absence it becomes a black hole.

The smith gawks at him when he tells them he wants more weight stapled onto what’s already, over the years, become a metal brick that happens to contain a space for bullet storage. They say, “That’s going to make it too heavy to aim.”

“Not for me,” Vash replies. “Someone… sent me ammo recently, as a present or something. I dunno. Can't tell what he thinks I'm gonna need it for, but I want to not resort to it if that's an option.”

“…So you're trying to make this gun unusable?”

“Into a club,” he corrects.

The gunsmith hefts it. “I’m pretty sure it already is.”

Nothing stops Vash from acquiring a real stick and leaving the handgun to fire its bullets in peace, but a single weapon on hand is all anyone should need, and one too many already. (Not that he uses it as a weapon. It works just as well as a shield and a tool for breaking or redirecting objects at range.)

The gunsmith plainly thinks he's an idiot, which he can't argue with, but they agree to the work, and to his request to make it a priority so he can collect it by afternoon tomorrow.

It’s a very fast job. Still: until he has the gun back, a part of him will never stop calculating the fastest route back to the gunsmith’s shop.

He can’t bring himself to lose track of any of the things he has on him. Every single item he owns is either a gift or necessary for his survival. He keeps redundancies of food and water and medicine, but he otherwise carries nothing he can afford to give up.

He’ll restock on consumable supplies next, and then dinner from somewhere…

…he slows to a stop across the street from a post office.

More specifically, across from the bulletin board outside of the building.

From this distance, he can’t read most of the text on the papers plastered across the corkboard, but he recognizes from the shape of the formatting the same innocuous notice July put out that sent him running hundreds of iles west.

Oh.

He won't need long to collect his gun and Billions and put distance between himself and May.

He's nearly taken a step in that direction when a little Nai-shaped voice he doesn’t usually listen to points out that, even by Vash's atrocious standards, this is an excessive and unsustainable response. If he immediately uproots himself at every shadow of a hint of a whiff of unwanted attention, then he might as well lock himself into his cell at Home and never show his face outside again. At least that way he’d get chances to rest.

July’s notice hasn't hurt him, and May’s shouldn’t, either. The reward money could buy a large pizza. A handful of acquaintances have brought it up in conversation, followed by recommendations that he get it over with, drop by a police station, and give whatever statement the law wants from him. *Maybe,* he’s replied each time, and afterwards they let him steer them towards other topics.

He’s overreacting. Two great cities isn't that many, really, out of seven. Not even half. Barely more than one. And, whatever they suspect he has involvement in, it can't be too bad with an enticement so small. (Whatever they suspect he has involvement in, it’s big enough that July convinced May to care.)

This could just be what it seems: a slightly pushy invitation.

(The plant cultist gave him ammunition.)

He… could find the police. To hear from them what they think they’re doing. Vash hasn’t committed a crime (except deliver contraband on occasion, but he doesn’t think they can prove that); they can’t hold him for long over a suspicion. Three days or so – he’d have to make arrangements for Billions first – and in return he would get a better idea of the larger picture.

He’d rather not, though.

He can’t afford the time, and that’s assuming it would only *be* three days.

He’ll stick to the original plan and leave tomorrow as soon as he has the gun back. It would be stupid to do otherwise, especially if the notice has reached surrounding towns so it wouldn’t make a difference where he is. He needs the revolver modified, for his peace of mind if for no other reason, and Billions could use a break after carrying passengers the past few days.

Barring unforeseen variables, he can manage a single night so long as he avoids crossing paths with a citizen who actually cares – which, while theoretically so easy as to be a non-

issue, is still an entirely luck-based proposition, but what's life without a *little* smidgen of risk?

(Happy and comfortable, that's what. But he doesn't really deserve as much.)

He actually has been left a way out as well, signposted and lit neon-bright: the wanted notice has his appearance *written* instead of illustrated. He can fold away the jacket, cover his left arm, switch to a pair of sunglasses, and invalidate the entire description. It'd be easy. It'd be safe.

He would rather get shot.

He won't hide the coat Ship Three's crew gave him or the arm Brad went to the effort of crafting for him as if he's ashamed to be seen with them. He *won't*. Besides, nothing exists that can replace them. If he packs them away, he doesn't know what would remain of him. He'd still be a person, he'd still be fine and functional, but, with the traces of his history stripped from him, he might not be Vash anymore.

…It occurs to him, on a secluded bench with his mouth full of sandwich, that tying his entire identity to a jacket might seem a little maladaptive from an outside perspective.

When he removes the prosthetic for maintenance, he occasionally so vividly feels the empty space left behind that he needs to consciously remember that moving his left arm will not affect his surroundings. Phantom limb syndrome, obviously. The publicly available literature might be lacking on the biology of independent plants, but Vash refuses to believe he can have kinesthesia for a severed limb that got crushed into its component atoms and ejected from this dimension. Or whatever happened to it.

His arm doesn't exist anymore – but, under perfectly ideal conditions, he would need a little under a month to return to the location where he last had it. A tomas and a sand steamer would get him there. In seven minutes, he can reach the gunsmith's shop. In sixteen, he can reach the hostel he stabled Billions at. He sits forty days from Donut's grave and forty-eight from the shop he sold her tack to, the same in a different direction from the last place he found Home (but that's wrong because the ship moves), a month from the remains of Ship Five (also wrong, the sand sea has long since broken the carcass and spread the bones across the planet), and two and a half weeks from the third city of July.

He keeps *nothing* he can afford to lose.

He chews on his dinner. He considers.

Running is hard enough without constantly fashioning his own leashes for a pursuer to choke him with. That seems… worth addressing. Not changing, necessarily. But accounting for.

Well. If he dropped the sandwich, he wouldn't take the loss personally. He at least has that much to fall back on.

He doesn't imagine he would, at any rate.

He wouldn’t, would he?

Come on, his abandonment issues can’t run that deep.

He pulls a face, then slackens his grip. The sandwich falls to the ground with a whisper-quiet thump. Vash chews on his last bite and considers for a while longer.

Hm.

He leans down to fetch it, brushes the sand from the bread, and resumes eating. Anyway, he won’t replace his outfit.

What he *will* do is buy some totally unnecessary trinket, mass-produced with the blandest design known to man, easily replaceable even if the brand goes under because a half dozen copycats will exist at any point in time, and hold on to it without developing *any emotional attachment at all*.

It can’t be hard. He won’t let it be hard. He’s in one of the most populous cities in the world; a person can’t walk half a block without passing a shop that sells a dozen products like that. He’ll find something. He'll find anything.

(He visits a tavern, makes a group of incredibly drunk university friends who won’t remember him come morning, convinces them not to commit to a life choice that would attract the police, gets an ear pierced, and never grows to do more than tolerate the earring. Success?)

Vash loves humans unconditionally, which is why he hasn’t, say, established a financially and politically influential doomsday cult that casts him as the central figure of worship and all of humanity as sinners barely fit to even attempt to redeem themselves. (Parts of the Eye’s doctrine feel weirdly like a personal attack against him. Which is ridiculous – their God just adores very particular passages from the Bible, that’s all, that’s the reason, and also He doesn’t love them – the world doesn’t revolve around Vash, not even if he can claim partial fault for every trauma and inconvenience that has happened to a human or plant on this planet.)

Like, *yes*, he gets it, humanity falls into the same ruts and repeats the same mistakes if they don’t take active care to avoid doing so. Exhibit A: plants. A resource both necessary and finite, yet humans burn through them like candles, and a black market exists for the flesh of red plants and plants who don’t produce materials as immediately useful as water or electricity.

The latter is…

…Vash puts a stop to it. When he finds it.

Which has only ever been after the plant….

He doesn’t know how to end the exploitation. Historical examples of revolutions don’t provide analogues to dependent plants, who possess little in the way of physical agency. Plants can't advocate for themselves, and humans have a difficult time recognizing or empathizing with cruelty against organisms they don’t share a language with.

Not their fault, that, but it means independent plants can’t act openly, either. As soon as humans find out Vash belongs to a group they don’t consider sapient, he expects his words to become so much meaningless noise.

He understands how to help a person, plant or human, directly in front of him.

For the rest of it, he doesn’t have an answer.

He *gets* the rationale behind misanthropy. He really does. He's met a massively diverse range of humans over the years, and a handful of them have been genuinely horrid. If Vash wanted to, he could find no end of reasons to hate them for. But what has murder *ever* done besides make a problem worse?

Probably about as much as running has.

Chapter 3

July is the largest of seven cities, the fastest growing in population and industry and scientific advancement. It holds almost as many plants as any two of the other great cities combined and possesses by reputation one of the highest qualities of life on the planet. The satellite towns and villages that pay it homage suffer lower crime rates than those of other cities thanks to both their relative prosperity and July's military's pseudo-monopoly on violence in the region.

Vash never quite knew how to take any of that information, and then he learned that July also has a rampant human trafficking issue and the world unfortunately made sense again.

Some time back, Vash stopped in at a town that implemented regular, rolling brownouts. He was outside getting bullied by children, early enough that the streetlamps hadn’t come on, and wouldn’t have noticed if the ever-present hum of electronics hadn’t suddenly quieted in the surrounding buildings.

He finished the sentence he was in the middle of before pausing to listen. No one sounded alarmed. The town’s plant seemed fine, so far as he could tell from this distance. He couldn’t hear her, which meant she wasn’t screaming.

“That’s to help Laura,” one of the kids said when he asked. “She gets tired. It’s a lot of work to make all of the power for the whole town.”

…That was new.

That was new and startlingly welcome.

The town’s plant engineer had implemented the system, Vash learned after snooping. (Most of the townspeople didn’t want to talk to him about them, but several hundred people can’t keep a secret.) The town hadn’t had a proper engineer before this one arrived, just a makeshift team of self-taught and untaught technicians. Their plant had been teetering on the edge (which nobody wanted to talk to Vash about, either) and they hadn’t known why: their care of her had been textbook, and the town really shouldn’t have used enough power to more than mildly strain her during peak hours at worst.

Then the engineer had come. The plant’s condition had improved once they significantly eased the output burden on her, and the townspeople had started calling her *Laura* and *her*. “We’re not a plant cult,” multiple people assured Vash with varying degrees of desperation.

He believed them. They hadn't offered him a reason not to.

Laura was still an aggressively human name, though.

Let’s see. If Vash was a single plant engineer who named the plants he worked with, all but lived at the factory, had most of the settlement notably protective of his privacy, and had shown up one day out of the blue to become the resident engineer of a small town filled with strangers when he could certainly have found better prospects elsewhere, where would he go after work? Straight home? No, he wouldn’t have eaten yet, would he….

The engineer didn’t jump when Vash plopped down across from them at the hole-in-the-wall diner nearest to the plant factory, but their gaze did flick towards the door, the kitchen entrance, and the windows in turn. They looked older than he would have expected for someone who had chosen to move to a completely unfamiliar place, though everyone aged faster on No Man’s Land so they probably weren’t quite as close to seventy as they appeared. “Yes?”

“Hi!” said Vash. “Are you the plant engineer?”

“You’ve been asking around about me.”

Not to brag, but Vash had gotten very good at recognizing the traits that mark a person who thinks they’re being hunted. Most anyone would have taken issue with an armed stranger inviting himself into their space without asking, but Vash’s presence was nearly terrorizing this poor engineer.

“Yeah,” he admitted, sitting back in the chair and setting his hands flat on the edge of the table. The table angled heavily towards him – the legs weren't even – and he startled, let go so it could tip back to its resting position, and then put his hands down again a little more carefully.

Although it hadn't been intentional, the fumbling had replaced a smidgen of the engineer's wariness with confusion. “Yeah,” he said again, “I've been asking. Sorry, it's – academic interest. Your plant, she has a small gate, doesn't she?”

The engineer frowned at him. “Who are you?”

“Vash.” Murky recognition at the name, which Vash noted but didn't stop for. More than one reason existed to explain why someone might know of him. “I'm from out of town, just passing through. But I'm – ”

“A plant engineer,” they finished for him.

He blinked. “Hm?”

“Traveling plant engineer. Right?”

“You've heard of me?”

A little dubiously: “I think so. Or… your father, it might have been.”

Ah. Ha. Yep. Vash Jr., that was him. “Probably, yeah. He’s gotten more done than I have, obviously. I’m just following in his footsteps.” If they had run around in plant engineer circles for half as long as it looked, Vash could believe that they’d heard of him once or twice, even though he wasn't remarkable outside of doing exclusively freelance work and not always taking payment in money. It wasn’t a large field – the Big Fall and… following events had killed too many of them – and the passing years had chipped further away at it thanks to the difficulty of training newcomers.

“Anyway,” he said, “about your plant – if there’s an outside cause for the strength of her gate, it might be possible to repair her connection to it.”

“That would tip her towards red.”

“It could,” Vash agreed. “But it depends how you do it, and what the cause of the issue is, if there is one.” They might not allow him to try. Vash wouldn’t whine about his lifespan, but looking a couple of days past twenty for several decades meant he’d gotten used to people trying to dismiss him out of hand on some matters, even aside from the fact that just about nobody he spoke to had known him for longer than a few hours. He wouldn’t take it personally if the engineer did the same.

The engineer considered him, expression blanking to something unreadable. Better than a lot of alternatives. “Is that what you’re here for?”

“Ah… only if it’s okay with you. I’d just want to take a look! If there’s nothing I can do, then there’s nothing I can do. I don’t want to force anything that would harm her.” He paused. “That’s also all just assuming you haven’t already tried everything.”

“It sounds like you don’t think I have,” they said. Vash tried not to look too shifty and probably failed. “You can come by the factory in the morning. Can’t hurt.”

Vash grinned. “Thanks!” He scrambled to his feet, watchful now about not touching the table. “I’ll let you get back to what you were doing.” And let the owner and the five other patrons stop keeping a hand near a weapon. Just about everyone in town knew the engineer was hiding from someone, seemed like, though nobody knew from who. Even the engineer only had an inkling. Vash wondered if the name they were going by was a new one for them.

Right, then. Change of plans. He didn’t like the idea anymore of staying for longer than absolutely necessary. He’d finish his business, leave once he could, and hopefully avoid drawing attention to the engineer through simple proximity.

He wouldn’t have called sneaking into the factory after hours easy, but it didn't turn out to be difficult either. Cameras to avoid (he doubted anyone was watching the feed live, but better not to leave footage on record), a lock to pick, a pair of very squeaky gate hinges to oil, a keypad to rewire, a set of stairs to climb. Or a lift to sit, because forcing the engineer to climb so many stairs at their age would have been an accident waiting to happen, but Vash didn’t need to use it when the plant was already having trouble keeping up with the regular power demand.

Speaking of which.

“They call you by a human name,” Vash told her. “Did you know? I think it’s nice.”

She did, too, once he folded the concept into a shape she could perceive. The idea settled in her like a rock slipped into a pond. She hadn’t spoken to anyone in a while, and that didn’t concern her when she spent all of her time dreaming of communion, but she couldn’t imagine being lonely at all now that she knew she lived among people who had built a space in their thoughts for her to belong in.

Helpful little brother who had brought her a gift. Was he yet unhappy?

Vash laughed. “Of all the reputations. Don’t you have other things to gossip about?”

Her other helpful little brother was still unhappy, too, she’d heard.

Vash smiled, an empty muscle movement. “Time doesn’t pass for us like it does for them. Neither of us’ll change for a while.”

They could if they wanted. They could do anything they liked. They could move their thoughts as freely as they could their bodies. Inertia was a choice.

Vash did not flinch. “Mm.”

But she understood, perhaps. It was like the divide between plants and humans, a gulf so vast in motives and priorities that she didn’t expect to see it bridged. Though, for her family’s sakes, she hoped they would manage to find a way regardless.

“He can’t sleep,” Vash said quietly. He set his hands on the cold glass of the bulb, mirroring his sister inside, and pressed his forehead to the shield that caged her. He closed his eyes. In the dark, her mind blazed like a song, and Vash joined her there, in their shared night, as a counterpoint. “He doesn’t dream.”

Are you…?

Vash replied, *Anything you need.*

He let her match his vital signs to hers, though he made it clear to her that his body couldn’t sustain the state for long. She didn’t breathe with her lungs, and her heart beat once every few minutes. Vash couldn’t survive off of so little. She nearly pulled back, then, but he reminded her that he’d offered his help to other sisters before and hadn’t died yet. He trusted her to keep him alive just as she did for the hundreds of humans under her care.

Beneath her attention, his gate unfurled, tracing patterns in light over his skin.

Her own gate had weakened. (Vash could absolutely help reverse that, he assured her. It was practically the point of him.) The humans who she needed and who needed her hadn’t submerged her in the right solution in the years immediately after the Fall. She didn’t know why. Vash suspected they hadn’t known how to, and she accepted that as an explanation. They had corrected their course eventually, but the damage had crept in by then.

The current caretaker had improved matters despite not possessing the ability to fully heal her. They'd worked with other plants before coming to her side and had always done their best by them.

The other plants, were they near – ?

Yes.

Eye of Michael defector. Vash had hoped otherwise, but he couldn't call the confirmation a surprise. He was moderately curious as to why they had left, among other questions, but not so much as to risk their life by remaining long enough to ask.

Although they weren't the only person he could inquire with –

Vash hooked that thought, identified it as Laura's, and threw it back to her side of the stream. Things were, he told her, a little more complicated than that.

Do they have to be?

Well, no.

But they were anyway.

Don't tell him about them. Or about me.

She couldn't have even if she'd wanted to, but she supposed, now, that she didn't want to, either. For him, and for the new caretaker, she could keep a secret. Though she wished her family wouldn't fight with each other.

I'm not the one fighting. We'll talk if he puts the knives away. And apologized for some things, preferably, though Vash wouldn't hold out for that. He was optimistic, not delusional. (Mostly.)

If the sentiment came across as a little petulant, his sister kindly did not call him out on it.

Closer to the present day, Vash murders sixty people, levels a village, and steals a red plant. He finds out about this five weeks after the fact, when a news station reports that July has set a bounty on him for two million double-dollars, approximately the amount it would cost for the few surviving villagers to buy a new, healthy plant.

He doesn't eat for a while.

He doesn't do a lot of things for a while.

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