Summary

Rook decides not to be wrathful and decides to recruit the Seeds after agreeing that maybe the end of the world is coming. Maybe she can find love and make some friends along the way. Story is intended to serve as fluff if you need a break from all the canon/sad fics.

The Wholesome Shorts series is now here in its entirety since I've developed an actual central plot for it. I will update it as I add to it. I intend to make this a "happy" version of the story and will end it shortly after everyone comes out of the bunkers.

If you've already been reading the wholesome series, you can skip to chapter 12 in this fic to continue reading it in order.

Notes

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Exhaustion etched into her face, Rook stepped into the jail and enjoyed the cool breeze provided by the AC. She was looking for the sheriff. This idea had been on her mind for days, a steady itch in the back of her thoughts that just would not go away.

“Nice to see you again, Rook,” Whitehorse told her, taking a swig of his beer and letting out a little tired sigh. Without saying anything, she stepped forward and embraced him, wrapping her right arm around his waist and her left up around his shoulders. She squeezed him tighter when she felt him start with surprise. He was warm, and a little soft around his belly, but he was tall, and muscular and felt safe, standing there with a warm beer in his right hand, his left held out awkwardly as she hugged him.

“Rook, what…what in the world are you doing?”

“I’m hugging you,” she told him matter-of-factly, nuzzling her cheek a little closer into his chest, feeling the cold metal of his badge at her temple.

“I…” Earl dropped his arms down, setting his beer on the table next to them awkwardly, unable to escape her embrace. “Why?”

“Because you look like you needed someone to.”

“Oh.” He huffed out a little surprised breath and she could feel him melt, suddenly, felt his shoulders soften, felt his chest stop tensing. “Oh.” She smiled, her eyes closed contentedly, not caring if anyone was staring. They all knew Earl Whitehorse might as well be her dad. Earl chuckled and the deep, gravelly sound of it reverberated in her ear, vibrated through her cheek where it rested against his sternum. He smelled like sweat, and cigarette smoke, and a little like Bliss flowers, but he clearly needed this. The sad droop of his tired eyes and the slump of his broad shoulders had told her that as surely as if he had said so.

“Sheriff?”

“Yeah?”

“Hug me back.” And he did. It was just as good, just as warm and enveloping as Rook had thought a hug from Earl Whitehorse would be. He wrapped his left arm around her back, a little cautious, a little hesitant at first about touching his employee, but then he put his right hand gently on the back of her head and leaned his head down with another little chuckle, his chin bumping her hair. Earl squeezed his deputy gently and she relaxed too, let all the stress and all the fear and all the pain melt away and just hugged him.

Rook had no shortage of hugs with Hurk and Sharky around, but this was different. This was not hugging a friend. This was hugging a parent, a role-model who sorely needed the appreciation of his charge. Palpable relief flowed through her knowing that she was right. They both really needed this hug.

When at last Earl slackened his arms’ grip on Rook, she did the same and stepped back with a little shy smile, suddenly embarrassed. Earl was smiling too beneath that bushy mustache of his. He crossed his arms over his chest, and his cheeks went a little red. Regardless, he looked like someone had removed the weight of the world from his shoulders, at least temporarily.

“Thanks, kid.” Earl studied her for a moment and gave a slight nod as though he had just
assessed something about her. “Now, get back to work,” he growled gruffly, but she could see a smile still hidden in blue eyes tinted green behind yellow glasses.

“Yes, sir,” she said, and walked away with a lighter step.
“I still think you have better things to be working on, Rook,” Earl grumbled as he reeled in his line again. Out of the corner of his eye he could see her smirking.

“Skylar needs my help. She wants the prize money to leave the county. You told me to help people, Sheriff.” Earl looked over at Rook over the top of his glasses and sniffed skeptically.

“I was born at night, Rook, but I wasn’t born last night. I know you’ve got a crush on that girl.”

“I…no, I just want to help another…I don’t…how could you think…why would I…” Rook spluttered, turning wildly to look at Earl with a hard blush turning her cheeks crimson.

“Hush, Rook, you’ll scare the fish,” Earl told her blandly, trying very hard to make sure that the smile at the corners of his mouth doesn’t escape from beneath his mustache to where Rook could see it. He loved teasing the kid about this stuff. “Glad it’s finally raining,” he commented, feeling cool drops land on his shoulders just past the brim of his Stetson. With a cool flick of his wrist, he cast his line, the fly barely breaking the skin of the water as it landed amidst ripples created by tiny raindrops. Rook is quiet, but contented next to him now, relaxing. She knew he meant no harm in teasing her.

“So what do you recommend next?” she asked, reeling slowly, trying to entice the Admiral to take her bait once more. The massive fish had already broken her line twice so far.

“Just keep reelin’ nice and slow, Rook. I’ve told you before that fishing for sturgeon during rain can make it easier to catch ’em, but it can also make ’em slow about taking your bait. But I don’t think I’m really out here because you want my advice catching this fish,” he supposed in his gravelly voice, pointedly not looking at her. He heard Rook chuff a little laugh.

“No, Sheriff. It’s just, I thought we could both use the break. You especially. There’s not a time I step foot in the jail when you aren’t surrounded by people wanting your help, or wanting orders, or just wanting to jaw jack with you. I know you’re a quiet man, Sheriff, it’s part of why my dad liked you so much.” Earl laughed.

“Yeah, because he could do all the talking,” he chortled, tugging his pole up as he felt a bite at his bait.

“I miss him,” Rook admitted.

“Me too, kid.”

“So anyway,” Rook said, quickly changing the subject away from more painful topics, “I figured you needed some time away. I don’t think we’ve gone fishing together since I worked animal control.”
“Hhmm,” Earl agreed softly, reeling his line, tiring the fish at the end of it out slowly, gently. They fished together in comfortable silence for a while, soft raindrops falling lightly on them, the storm not heavy enough yet to really give them a soaking. Earl took a refreshing drink of beer after he pulled his fish in, a decent-sized bass he intended to eat for dinner. “You been taking care of yourself, Rook?” Earl finally asked, watching as she again flicked her line out over the water, the bait landing with a little *plop* that made him wince. Kid still needed practice.

“Time for that later,” she responded, jaw tightening. A fish bit and she hooked it, reeling carefully.

“You’re looking thin, Rook.”

“And I’m sure Pratt’s pretty goddamn thin too at this point,” she snapped, and so did her line. She swore and Earl looked over at her softly, his caterpillar brows pulled together in concern.

“You’ll get him out,” he assured her, though he wasn’t sure himself. Worry shot through him at the thought of Pratt, tied up in Jacob’s bunker. Poor kid. Rook stood there, her rod held limply in her hand, staring at the water with a guilty, pained look on her face. Earl reached out a hand, cupped her shoulder and shook it a bit until she met his gaze. “One more time, Rook. You gotta try one more time. You can’t give up just because you failed.” Rook frowned a little. “The fish,” Earl clarified suddenly, nodding at her rod. Rook swallowed and cast again. Earl cast as well, but his attention was on Rook’s line, not his own. The fish bit and again Rook hooked it. From the strong bend at the end of her rod, it appeared she had once again managed to hook the Admiral. “Careful now, Rook. Let him think he’s won. There you go. Let out more line. Now pull him in. Good. Let the bastard think he’s got a fighting chance, and then you hit him with everything you’ve got, Rook.”

Amidst the raindrops, sweat broke out on Rook’s forehead as she reeled, her shoulders heaved as she resisted the fish’s tugging and struggling. Finally, after many words of encouragement, and a mighty battle of wills, the Admiral came close and Earl grabbed the fishnet, dipping it under the massive sturgeon and helping Rook lift the monstrous animal.

“He’s a beautiful fish,” Rook commented as she set him down into their cooler, panting a bit from the effort of catching such a large fish. “It’s almost a shame we have to take him.”

“He’s an invasive species,” Earl reminded her. “He doesn’t belong here. He’s a big ol’ bully hurting all the other fish in the lake. There’s nothing wrong with feeling empathy for your enemy, Rook, but don’t forget that he’s just that, your enemy.” Rook met his gaze steadily.

“We aren’t talking about the Admiral are we, Sheriff?”

“Am I not allowed to give fatherly advice anymore?” he countered softly with a little smile. Rook chuckled.

“Don’t ever stop, Sheriff.”

“You got it, kid. I gotta get back to the jail. You get that prize money to Skylar and tell her I said ‘hello.’ And Rook?”

“Yeah, Sheriff?”

“Eat a sandwich. I worry about you.”
Adelaide decides to harass the Sheriff. Shenanigans ensue.

The slap came out of absolutely nowhere, making his left cheek sting suddenly. His eyebrows flew up and he stumbled forward, rubbing at his offended backside in extreme irritation as he turned to face his enemy. She was wearing a mischievous smirk and her eyes glittered dangerously, daring him to challenge her. A beleaguered Sheriff Earl Whitehorse let out an annoyed sigh and put his hands on his hips, stepping away from the seeking hands of one Adelaide Drubman.

“Adelaide, if I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a hundred times, I could consider that assault on a police officer,” he huffed out, moving his hands from his hips to cross instead over his chest protectively as her lascivious gaze took him in, taking extra time just below his belt. He felt the sudden urgent need to cover his crotch defensively with his hands with the way she was ogling him like he was a particularly well-marbled steak she had just spotted at the butcher’s shop. The woman was a menace, no question.

“Well, Sheriff,” she began, the way she said his title sending an electric shiver down his spine, “I guess you’ll have to use those cuffs on me,” and she reached around behind him quicker than he could escape, unsnapping his cuffs from his belt and pinching his ass for good measure. He had to be careful with what he said here, eyes were starting to be drawn to them. He could not make a scene in front of all the other Cougars in the Hope County Jail, especially given the innocent, questioning look he saw on Virgil Minkler’s face and the amused leer on Tracey’s as they watched Adelaide go after her prey like a shark that has scented blood in the water.

“I think you had better go and find Rook, Ms. Drubman,” Earl advised, dropping his voice to a near-conspiratorial whisper as he plucked his cuffs from her grip and put them back on his belt.

“Oh, come on now, hon, she’s up there somewhere takin’ a nap,” Adelaide replied loudly, drawing attention to them once again as she pointed to the second storey cells. She put her hand on his upper arm, squeezing the muscle there appreciatively. “You know, we could take a nap too, though I don’t know if I can guarantee you’ll get much sleep.” She waggled her eyebrows at him and Earl felt his cheeks go crimson. He sniffed and shuffled his feet, embarrassed and unsure how to respond to such an outright comment in front of so many others. He made eye contact with Tracey across the hall, his eyes pleading “please come save me,” as best they could. With a little annoyed roll of her eyes, Tracey dropped her cigarette and stomped it flat with her boot before picking up the butt and tossing it in the garbage. She then wandered over nonchalantly, to
Earl’s great relief. His relief, however, was short-lived.

“You know, I always took you for more of a cradle-robber than a grave-robber, Adelaide,” Tracey commented.

“Hey!” both Earl and Adelaide protested simultaneously, both insulted. Earl looked at Adelaide for a moment and then Tracey, his nostrils flaring a little.

“I’ll have you know I’m eleven years younger than Ms. Drubman,” he huffed. Adelaide whirled, her face suddenly furious and horrified.

“Don’t tell everyone that, Sheriff,” she snapped. “Besides, how do you know?”

“Well, for a start you’ve been given at least ten traffic citations in the past three years,” he mumbled, jamming his thumbs in his pockets awkwardly. “Your birthdate’s on your driver’s license.” Appraising him for a moment, Adelaide studied him with a little tick of her jaw and arrived at a conclusion.

“Well. You must have been payin’ close attention to me to remember my birthday, Sheriff,” she remarked. “That’s gotta mean something.” Earl’s eyes flickered in a movement that was not quite a roll.

“It means you and your immediate family are an enormous pain in my ass so I keep tabs on you. Happy?” he griped, losing his temper suddenly.

“I’m staying out of this,” Tracey commented, walking off. Both the sheriff and Adelaide hollered after her.

“You started this!” Earl and Adelaide looked at one another again, both their cheeks mottled red from embarrassment and anger. Unbidden, Earl felt his heart start beating a little harder, a little faster than it should and he forced himself to take a calming breath.

“Well,” Adelaide said, tucking a strand of blonde hair delicately behind her ear. “I can tell when I’m not wanted.” Earl’s mouth gaped like a fish. He could see he had actually hurt her feelings quite badly and that did not sit well with him. The Drubmans and the Boshaws, as eccentric and troublesome as they could be, were also two very kind and very loyal families. They
helped campaign for him every election cycle since his first appointment as sheriff of Hope county. Adelaide had even come over to his trailer with a crate of movies, a massive pot of venison stew and some blankets the winter he had had his heart attack, checking in on him to make sure he was alright after he had come home from the hospital in Billings. She had even brought his new heart medication from the local pharmacy, insisting it was the least she could do since both her son Hurk and nephew Sharky had played a not-insubstantial role in his having a stress-induced heart attack. Rubbing a hand sheepishly over the place on his chest where he sported a massive zipper-like scar from open-heart surgery, Earl felt a twinge of guilt.

Adelaide Drubman deserved better than to be insulted and summarily dismissed. Without thinking, Earl reached out suddenly as he walked after her and grabbed her left arm with his right hand, tugging a bit. She whirled around, lost her balance and stumbled into his chest where he caught her gently. She smelled…nice he realized suddenly, like roses and citrus flowers. She looked up into his face and a small smile settled on her full lips. “Well, well, Sheriff,” she purred, feeling his chest. “You might have a bit of a beer belly and love handles, but you’re still built like a Kentucky stud horse.” Earl spluttered for a moment before pushing her out to a more appropriate distance. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Virgil’s flabbergasted stare at the two of them in such an intimate pose.

“His mane leaves a bit to be wanted, though,” Rook teased as she walked up unannounced, rubbing at her eyes and yawning.

“I didn’t come here to be insulted,” Earl mumbled, a little hurt by the comment. He straightened his hat self-consciously over his receding hairline. “Thought you were taking a nap?”

“Yeah, well, I couldn’t sleep with all the commotion down here.”

“Here,” Earl said, handing Rook his keys and nodding toward the warden’s office where he had drug a bed so that he could rest in privacy. “You can nap in my room, Rook.” Earl saw Adelaide deflate a bit, but ignored it.

“Oh. Thanks, Sheriff.”

“Make another comment about my hair, though, and I’ll make you sleep on the roof,” he promised. Rook smirked and walked off, twirling his keyring on her index finger and whistling one of those damn cult hymns that had a tendency to get stuck in your head. Earl turned to Adelaide where she stood fiddling with her fingernails.

“Well. So much for my nap offer,” she murmured, giving him a sultry look that made
him feel things he hadn’t really thought about in months. He considered her for a moment, considered all the times she had come on to him and he had refused. The first time had been many years back when he was still a twenty-something bull rider, tough and fit and with all his hair, and she was a thirty-something stripper with a body that…well, that frankly looked just as good now poured into those jeans and that low-cut blouse. He had turned her down that first time, and every time since. But now, both of them dead-tired of dealing with this cult and feeling run-down, a little “morale boost” might do them both some good, he thought, temptation flooding him.

“I’m gonna step outside, have myself a smoke,” he told her.

“I don’t suppose I could bum one?” she asked a little shamefacedly. “I usually smoke Virginia Slims, but with these goddamn Peggies around, I haven’t been able to get my hands on any. Makin’ my hands shake somethin’ awful,” she admitted.

“Of course,” he said, handing her one of his Marlboros as they stepped outside. He lighted his and she leaned in close to his face, touching the end of her cigarette to his and sucking to get it started, all while making eye contact with him. He stepped back when she had successfully lit hers and took a long drag from his, attributing his sudden light-headedness to the rough smoke filling his lungs. He knew he really ought to stop, but he figured he deserved a vice or three while dealing with a cult that had taken over his entire jurisdiction. “Sorry,” he muttered as the wind blew his exhaled smoke toward Adelaide.

“Oh, honey, I don’t mind if you blow in my face,” she told him with a wink, cocking her hip up and putting one hand there while the other held her cigarette. Earl felt himself go red again, but he chuckled warmly at her joke. He was bad at this, always had been, even when he was young and considerably better-looking than he thought of himself now. “Would you look at that?” she commented. “You actually laughed instead of snapping my head off.”

“Come on, now,” he said softly with a nervous smile, showing surprisingly clean teeth for all his years of smoking.

“Why didn’t you ever give me a try?” she asked him seriously, pointblank. His caterpillar eyebrows rose, and he thought for a moment, using a drag of his cigarette to buy himself time. He let his eyes go distant and twisted his lips a little wistfully, thinking of his ex-wife and how badly the divorce five years ago had hurt. Guiltily, he fiddled with the wedding ring he was still wearing, a band of white gold that didn’t really mean anything anymore, was just a way of discouraging anyone from trying to get close to him.

“Because,” he answered honestly, “I’m a one-woman sort of man. I know it’s old fashioned, but I don’t like the idea of sleepin’ around with someone you don’t care about, someone you don’t know.” Adelaide frowned a little.
“You coulda known me, if you’d given me the time of day once upon a time.” Earl stared at her and then looked down at his dusty boots. Looking back up, he reached out with a hand and tucked an escaped strand of hair behind her ear. She leaned slightly into his touch and he didn’t remove his hand.

“Maybe I should have,” he admitted softly, his thumbnail clicking against her hoop earring.

“Bit too late for that now,” Adelaide commented, stepping back so that Earl’s hand dropped from the side of her face awkwardly.

“What do you want from me?” Earl asked, frowning, tired of games.

“You want the honest answer, Sheriff?”

“Earl,” he corrected her. She nodded.

“I want to forget, for just a little while, that all this shit is going on. I want to forget that my friends stabbed me in the back, and that my life is in shambles ever since this fucking cult came to town and started fuckin’ shit up.”

“I can’t give you that.” Adelaide scoffed.

“All I’m askin’ is for one night, Earl. That’s all, no strings, just you and me, a bottle of whiskey and a damn good time.”

“Addy…”

“Nope. You don’t get to call me that,” she informed him, clearly irritated. Earl deflated a little.

“I can’t,” he told her, voice hesitant. “I’m sorry,” he said, and he meant it. Her features
went cold, steely.

“Alright. Well. Maybe the next time the world is ending,” she suggested sarcastically.

“Yeah,” he agreed, but in a more earnest tone than hers. “Maybe next time.” Her eyes looked lonely and hurt as she turned away from him, stubbing out her cigarette though it was only halfway burned.

She was almost inside when Earl’s resolve crumbled.

Earl stepped after her and grabbed her arm, yanking her around again. Her body was rigid under his touch, defensive and for a moment it looked like she might slap him – on the face this time. Without question or warning, Earl crushed his mouth to hers and she melted, her body softening against his as she opened to his kiss, running one hand up his side and into his hair, knocking his Stetson a little askew, as the other crawled down and cupped him though his pants. He jumped a little and grunted at the sudden grasp of his most intimate parts and he could feel her smiling through the kiss. Her grip loosened and she grabbed his hand instead, depositing something in his palm before she stepped back and pushed him away, wiping her lower lip with her thumb and straightening her headband.

“Sorry, Sheriff,” she drawled, with a little impish wink. “Maybe next time.” Adelaide vanished back inside the jail without another word, Earl looking after her, thunderstruck. He shook himself and opened his hand, looking at the object sitting in his wide palm. A bark of laughter dropped out of his chest as he looked at the labelled key sitting there.

“Drubman Marina, Guest Suite.”

Earl found himself less amused when he discovered that she had cuffed his other hand to the chain link fence next to the door – and Rook had his keys.
Happy Fourth of July, Rook

Chapter Summary

The Resistance gives Rook a pleasant holiday surprise

Rook jerked upright from a particularly horrible dream, her heart racing at the sound of explosions.

“Peggies are attacking the jail again!” she yelled to anyone in earshot as she snatched up her rifle and sprinted toward the door. She kicked it out of her way and rushed outside in nothing but her tank top and flannel pajama bottoms, only to hear Earl say some truly foul words she rarely heard him use.

“Goddammit, Boshaw, you fucking jackass! This was supposed to be a surprise. When God asked if you wanted any brains you must have thought he said ‘trains’ and asked for a slow one! You absolute shit-headed nimrod, I oughta, er, oh, uh, hey Rook.” Whitehorse turned bright red, caught in the act of so much cursing. Sharky, to his credit, was silent and looked genuinely apologetic.

“What the hell is going on?” Rook asked, annoyed that she had been pulled from sleep and there was no immediate danger. Her hands were propped on her hips and she heard sniggering behind her coming from one of the Cougars named Candice. Rook realized belatedly that her pajama bottoms had fallen partially down, revealing underwear patterned with little sundaes that read “Lick Me Until Ice Cream” across her backside. Rook tugged her pajamas back up, beet red to rival Whitehorse’s embarrassed flush. She cleared her throat. “Ahem. Anyway, what is going on?”

Whitehorse rubbed a hand down his mustache sheepishly.

“We’re just, ah, we were, um,” he trailed off, looking a little miserable.

“Sorry, Dep,” Sharky interrupted, stepping forward, “I told Whitehorse I would make you some new special explosives and we were gonna give ‘em to you as a surprise so you can go blow Jacob’s stupid face off with them. One of ‘em accidentally got away from me.” The look of relief on Whitehorse’s face was so profound that Rook knew Sharky was lying for him.

“Uh, huh. Well. I’m going back to bed.”

“Why don’t you sleep in tomorrow, Rook? It’s late and you need more sleep than you’ve been getting lately. I’ll come wake you, alright?” Rook nodded tiredly and stumbled back toward her cot, taking extra care to hold her saggy pajama bottoms upright as she passed Candice. The brown-haired woman winked at her flirtatiously as she passed.

“Gonna have to get myself a pair of those,” Candace called after her.

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“Hey, hey kid, time to wake up. You gonna sleep all day?” Rook grumbled sleepily and stretched, grinding her fists into her eyes and yawning violently. Whitehorse was standing at the doorway of the cell she had slept in and he looked excited about something. Rook sniffed.
“What is that?” she asked, eyes widening at the familiar scent.

“Why don’t you come outside and see?” Whitehorse gave her a toothy grin, clearly quite pleased with himself. Rook stepped outside after she had dressed and realized with a shock that the entire backyard of the jail had been completely cleaned. Gone were bloodstains and broken bits of cars and other junk. Someone had even taken the time to mow the grass back here. God, how long had she slept? More than the cleanliness, she noticed the tables. There were several tables of varying lengths and heights set out on the lawn, from card tables to picnic tables to old school desks. Atop all of them were set tacky red, white and blue decorations, including American flag paper plates and red and blue Solo cups. Most of the tables held crockpots or foil pans full of food. Casey Fixman and Chad Wolanski were tending two enormous barbeque pits. Whitehorse handed her a beer in a blue Solo cup. “I know it’s a bit early for you, but consider it a breakfast beer and consider yourself off duty today. It’s nearly one in the afternoon, anyway. Rook?”

“Wh-what is this?” she asked, incredulous.

“Well, I guess you haven’t been keeping an eye on the calendar. It’s the fourth of July.” Rook turned to her boss, eyes glittering.

“You remembered? You remembered my parents’ Fourth of July party they always used to throw.” Before they had died, Rook’s parents always planned and hosted the county’s largest Fourth of July celebration, complete with a massive fireworks show. Everyone from the county would pile on to their ranch property, bringing various dishes and alcoholic beverages. Rook’s father and Gary Fairgrave had always cooked the barbequed meat that served as the main dish for the event while Earl and Charles Boshaw II arranged the fireworks show with Earl mostly acting as the voice of reason to Boshaw’s pyromania. It seemed that trait ran in the family. The celebration had become a Hope County tradition and was sorely missed after Rook’s parents had passed away.

“Of course I remembered, Rook. I’m just an old softie.”

“I’ll say you are,” Kim chuckled as she walked up. “Whew, I’m so tired of this,” she commented, balancing her plate on her enormous belly. Rook chuckled and gave her a small hug. “The meat isn’t quite ready yet, but there’s cubed cheese and some fresh apples if you want some, as well as some coleslaw and potato salad. Hurk brought his famous bacon mac and cheese if you really can’t wait for real food.”

“Thanks, Kim,” Rook smiled, taking a drink of her beer. Rook looked around at all of her friends gathered there and she greeted each one, her heart rising as they wished her a happy fourth of July and chatted with her, talking about anything except the cult.

When, at last, the barbeque was ready, Rook piled her plate high and sat down next to Sharky, who offered her some of his homemade Jell-O salad, which turned out to be grape Jell-O cubes drenched in mayonnaise. Rook politely but firmly refused a second helping. Like a wild animal encountering a city for the first time, Jess snuck into the festivities, hood still pulled up, looking like she would stab the first person to look at her sideways. She relaxed when she saw Rook and a little shy smile spread across her usually gruff features. Rook felt her chest go a little hot and felt the warm flush of a buzz settle over her as she watched Jess approach.

“Hey, Jess,” she greeted, voice cracking. She cleared her throat and tried again. “Hey, Jess.”

“‘Sup, hoe?” Jess responded, flopping down next to her and snatching a rib from Rook’s plate. “Shut up, Boshaw,” Jess said as soon as Sharky opened his mouth.
“Well, damn, Jess, fine, be that way. I was gonna ask if you wanted to come by my place and watch *Robin Hood* with me later but shit, never mind.”

“I said ‘shut up,’” Jess repeated, deadpan, but Rook could see humor in her eyes. Sharky was about to stalk off sullenly but Jess stopped him. “Nobody said you could go, dumbass.”

“I – why are you so mean to me?” Sharky bleated.

“I dunno. Probly cuz it’s fun,” Jess shrugged, taking a sip of Rook’s beer now.

“Hey!” Rook objected, snatching the cup from Jess’ hand. “Get your own.”

“Go get me one,” Jess commanded imperiously, but then she put on those puppy eyes. Dammit. Rook rolled her eyes and stood, grunting softly when Jess playfully smacked her on the ass.

“Well, now I’m really confused,” Sharky admitted. “And aroused,” he added.

“Shut up, Sharky,” Jess said again as Rook walked off.

Rook returned with Jess’ beer, flirted for a bit and moved on to chat with other friends, happily taking food and drinks that were offered and generally having a very good time. Eventually Whitehorse beckoned her over, his cheeks rosy from the beers he had put away. His hat sat forgotten on a chair next to him and Rook was careful not to sit on it as she joined him, instead moving it onto their table, avoiding a puddle of barbeque sauce and a mound of spilled coleslaw.

“Well, what do you think, Rook?” the contented sheriff asked her. She smiled softly and put her hand on his for just a moment.

“I think it might be the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me. How long have you been planning this?”

“Oh, for a little while, now. Since the last time we went fishing, at least. Thought you could use a morale boost. You’ve been doing great work out there, Rook. I know I said it before, but I’m damned proud of you.” Rook swallowed hard and tried to hide the tears that welled unbidden in her eyes.

“Thanks,” she said thickly. “Sorry,” she cleared her throat. “Allergies.” Whitehorse didn’t comment, just tipped his beer to her and then took a swig. Collecting herself, Rook looked down the table to where Adelaide was flirting with one of her guns for hire. “I guess that never panned out?” Whitehorse flushed, but he smiled a bit.

“A gentleman does not kiss and tell, Rook,” he replied seriously.

“I’m sure he doesn’t,” she answered with a chuckle, remembering the little red and purple marks Earl had done a poor job of hiding under his shirt collar a couple weeks ago. Deciding not to say anything more on the subject, Rook took another swig of her beer and looked around. Evening was beginning to fall, stars already twinkling here and there. Fireflies buzzed merrily in the distance over the oxbend of the Henbane that ran behind the jail. Rook looked fondly over at Whitehorse through the haze of about a dozen beers. “Dad would have loved this. Mom too.” Whitehorse nodded solemnly. Rook chuckled. “Do you remember that year Boshaw’s granddad accidentally lit the backyard on fire and we had to get the entire volunteer fire department to put it out?” Earl barked a laugh.

“How could I forget? That was a mess of paperwork.”
“The only thing that could make this night better is some fireworks,” Rook said wistfully.

“Funny you should say that,” Whitehorse commented, rising to his feet with a groan, his knees clicking. He grabbed his hat off the table and Rook opted not to point out that he had drug it through the barbeque sauce. “Come with me,” he told her, gesturing for Sharky to join them.

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The first rocket goes off with an earth shattering *BOOM* before it explodes into a blossom of white, silver and blue sparks. Sharky keeps lighting the fireworks he has made, some of them whistling, some of them spluttering, some of them letting out pops and booms that reverberate deep in Rook’s chest. Whitehorse puts his arm on her shoulder in a fatherly embrace.

“Happy Fourth of July, Rook.”

“Thanks, Sheriff.”
Take Better Care of Your Deputy

Chapter Summary

Jacob saves Rook and has a conversation with the sheriff about how he treats his deputy.

“You know, by all rights I should be killing you right now, pup,” the gigantic ginger told the small but muscular young woman in his arms. She groaned, her head lolling to the side.

“Well, then why don’t you?” asked a slightly nasally, sarcastic voice in a posh cadence.

“John.” It was a warning and an order in one. John scoffed and rolled his eyes, crossing his arms over his chest. “For one thing, you know as well as I do Joseph doesn’t want this one dead,” he said softly, looking down at the injured woman that he was princess-carrying toward a nearby cabin. “And for another, little brother,” he continued, his gravelly voice taking on a decidedly dangerous tone, like a wolf growling, “it’s poor sportsmanship.” The deputy coughed mightily, expelling water down the front of Jacob’s shirt.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake. It’s hardly our fault that this moron nearly got herself killed trying to break one of those daredevil records to boost their friends’ morale,” John objected, stepping farther away from Jacob with a look of disgust at the deputy. Jacob silenced him with a chilling look.

“She’s strong. She just needs to be trained. You don’t kick a puppy for chewing up a shoe, John.”

“YOU might not. I’d skin a puppy alive for destroying any of my shoes, especially my Louis Vuitton’s.” Jacob shook his head and gently deposited the quietly murmuring deputy onto a small cot in the far corner of the dilapidated hunting cabin. Her eyes flickered open and she jumped a little when she looked at his face and recognized him, fear overcoming her features. She was badly injured from her little stunt, having crashed a flaming four-wheeler into a deep gully. It was fortunate for the daring, foolhardy deputy that the gully was full of water from the spring snow melt. Jacob had drug her from the vernal pond just a few minutes before, his brother objecting heavily.

John was only here to spend some quality time with him and he was already pissed that Jacob’s idea of quality time was a hike in the Whitetail mountains. Jacob’s little brother was wearing a borrowed pair of hiking boots (because, of course, even after moving to Montana the little shit had refused to buy any of his own) and had paired them with some no-doubt overpriced jeans with metal studs across the back pockets and a designer fishing shirt. Jacob hadn’t even known that designer fishing shirts were a thing until John started bragging about this one. Wasteful. Whatever. It made John happy.

The Junior Deputy – Rook – Jacob recalled her last name, was huddled toward the head of the cot, curling in on herself in fear, her whole body shaking violently. She seemed to realize she was both outgunned and outnumbered, her injuries aside.

“Please…don’t hurt me,” she slurried out, holding up a hand to defend herself. The effect
was somewhat lessened by the fact that three of her fingers are broken, bent at awkward angles. He knew that ordinarily this stubborn, wrathful deputy would have told him to go fuck himself instead of asking not be hurt, but head injuries were a hell of a thing.

“Easy, pup. We’ll consider this neutral ground.”

“You realize, do you not,” John began, each of his words clipped out angrily, “that this bitch stole my fucking house from me? That she blew up my property? Oh, the things I will do to her before she’s dead,” he murmured, moving in close until Jacob put a hand on his chest to stop him.

“Joseph’s got a plan for her. Leave her be.” John stepped back with a glare at Jacob.

“Well, I hope the plan involves a shower because she fucking reeks. Ugh. What is that? Dog? Skunk?”

“Both,” Jacob answered with a little smirk.

“From the look on your face, I’d think you’ve got yourself a crush on the deputy, Jakey-boy.” Jacob looked over his shoulder at John in half-amusement, half-irritation.

“Respect is not the same thing as affection.”

“Yeah, well I don’t think she plays for your team anyway, Cupcake,” John sneered at his brother.

“Good, that means you and her have something in common.” Jacob turned and tousled John’s perfectly coiffed hair before he could stop him or object.

“Very funny,” John snapped in a way that suggested that it was not at all funny. He approached the hunting cabin’s polished metal mirror and tried to fix his hair, his motions vicious and irritated.

“What are you going to do to me?” Rook tried and failed to sit up, eyeing them both warily, like a cornered animal, which, strictly speaking, was precisely what she was.

“Well, for starters, I’m going to re-set those fingers. You’re no good to anybody if you can’t shoot a gun or draw a bow.” Rook frowned. That was obviously not what she had been expecting.

“And then?”

“And then I’ll call your people to come get you.” She tilted her chin up defiantly.

“They won’t fall for that trap, and neither will I.”

“Christ, Jacob, if you’re not going to kill her just leave her here,” John griped, arms folded over his chest. Rook’s gaze took him in flatly, no appreciation in her look at all. Jacob found himself amused by the obvious fact that John was insulted she wasn’t eye fucking him like most women did. Jacob sat on the end of the cot and in response, Rook tried again to sit up and this time succeeded, hugging her knees close to her chest. He could see she was in serious pain. There were burns mottling her arms, and there were those askew fingers jutting awfully from her half-clenched fist. Quite certainly she had a concussion, given the uneven size of her pupils in the dull light streaming in the shattered cabin window.
Reaching out a massive paw of a hand, Jacob took her arm, holding it firmly even when she struggled.

“No sense hurting yourself worse, pup,” he told her, meeting her frightened but still stubborn gaze. She was braver than Peaches, that was for damn sure. Normally she would have asked about Pratt by now, would have made demands she was in no way prepared to enforce, but in her concussed state, it appeared that Pratt was not on her mind. “Here.” Without question, Rook accepted his belt and placed it between her teeth. “Good girl,” he murmured. She spat the belt out abruptly, face going red and then white in anger.

“I am not a dog,” she snapped.

“Prior interactions prove otherwise…bitch,” John taunted from where he leaned daintily against the filthy cabin walls, looking as though the dust had been put there intentionally to insult him. Rook met his eyes coldly and Jacob tightened his grip on her arm, could tell she was about to start a fight that she would not be able to win, which said a lot about her state of injury given what a terrible hand-to-hand fighter John was. Matter-of-factly, Jacob tapped her on the chin.

“I assume you want to keep those pretty teeth of yours.” Rook slid her gaze back to him from John and huffed out a sigh before sticking Jacob’s belt back between her teeth and biting down. A shriek bubbled up and out of Rook when Jacob snapped the first of her broken fingers back into place, but when he met her eyes she swallowed the cry, ended it as abruptly as though she was turning off a radio. He grinned. “I like you,” he told her. She didn’t have to vocalize what she thought of him – he could see it in her hateful glare. He held her gaze as he popped the next one back in place, but she barely flinched. The third one produced almost no reaction.

Good.

She was strong.

Exactly what he needed. “You’re lucky I keep a medkit in my bag,” Jacob said conversationally. Those who didn’t know him well thought him quiet, brooding. Really, though, he relished the opportunity to talk to those he respected, enjoyed recounting stories to people he admired. He admired Rook. Nothing was said in response to his comment. He splinted her fingers and then taped them together firmly, making sure to leave room for circulation. “I broke my fingers once. Closed ’em in a car door.” Again, Rook said nothing, just stared balefully at him. He gave a facial shrug and continued. “I was lucky it happened to my left hand. As for burns, well…” He let the sentence end abruptly. Again, no response. Ignoring her silence, Jacob cleaned and applied antiseptic to her burns, bandaging them with expert fingers, talking the whole time, commenting on her work, asking her an occasional question, which was also ignored. He gave up trying to get her to speak to him and instead kept tending to her injuries while John fiddled with something behind them, giving little impatient sighs periodically.

Jacob could see that there was a blistered, bubbled burn that extended from the deputy’s shoulder down her side, under her top and onto her right breast. He knew what that had to feel like. Throbbing, stinging agony. Gently, he pushed her uniform top aside, and then her tank top sleeve and bra strap. He meant nothing sexual by the actions, but he was clearly making her uncomfortable. Rook was trembling, her eyes mistrustful and scared again.

“Don’t. Don’t touch me anymore.” Jacob removed his hand wordlessly, but handed her a tube of ointment and some bandages.

“Suit yourself. But you need to get those cleaned and bandaged as soon as you can. Trust me.” He tipped the scarred side of his head toward her subtly. Her face told him she got the
message loud and clear. Jacob turned back to his brother. “Hand me the radio,” he purred.

“Are you serious, Jacob? Just fucking leave her here, she’s fine.”

“She’s clearly concussed and leaving her here would be…”

“Yeah, yeah, poor sportsmanship, whatever,” John cut him off, rolling his crystal blue eyes.

“You didn’t learn anything from what Joseph told you, did you, brother?” Jacob kept his gaze steadily, challenging him. John deflated as though he were a balloon that had encountered a cactus. Jacob saw his little brother’s jaw clench. John handed him the radio stiffly and stepped outside, clearly furious. Jacob sighed. John’s anger was a weakness he must learn to control if he was to survive after the Collapse.

Jacob keyed the mic button on the radio after switching it to one of the Resistance stations.

“This is Jacob Seed calling to see if Whitehorse has his ears on or if he’s off fishing somewhere,” he drawled in a dry tone. There was a moment of silence, and then a chirp of static, and then another before the sheriff spoke, almost as though he had fumbled the radio and had to hit the mic button twice.

“This is Whitehorse,” comes his low, gravelly voice. It sounded tense, irritated.

“I don’t suppose you’re up to a road trip, Sheriff?” Jacob asked casually, a little smirk on his face as he watched Rook shift uncomfortably at the glib way he was talking to her sheriff.

“What do you want, Seed?” The sheriff’s voice is tired and his tone is suspicious. Couldn’t blame him. Whitehorse was not a stupid man, but he was far too much of a pacifist to make a very good police officer.

“Me? I don’t want anything from you, for the moment, but I have something you want. I found a Rook with a broken wing.” Jacob smirked at his charge.

“Listen here, you son-of-a-bitch,” Whitehorse ground out over the radio.

“No, Sheriff, you listen,” Jacob stopped whatever tirade Whitehorse had been about to unleash. “I’ve just finished patching up your deputy. She’s alright, but she’s got a concussion. I’m doing you a favor and letting you have her back, but only you. No one else.” There’s a long pause.

“I’ll be there in two hours,” Whitehorse rumbled, his tone clearly concerned. Jacob could hear protest in the background before Whitehorse’s audio cut off.

John left only an hour into Jacob’s wait, insisting he had something to attend to in the Holland Valley. The truth was, he was bored. Unlike Jacob, he was not content to just sit and wait and enjoy the sounds of nature. An unnatural sound finally cut into the forest and Jacob heard a soft knock on the door. He opened it only to find the barrel of Sheriff Whitehorse’s .44 Magnum L in his face. Jacob scoffed, unfazed.

“Put the gun away, Sheriff, or this doesn’t end well for any of us.”

“I have a feeling it won’t anyway,” Whitehorse muttered, lowering his weapon but not holstering it. “Where is she?”
“Inside. Gun. Put it away.” Whitehorse gritted his teeth, but obeyed. Stepping inside, he rushed over to his deputy, putting a hand on her shoulder, making her cry out in pain. He jerked his hand away like he had been shocked.

“You okay, Rook?” Whitehorse asked, his eyes earnest and worried.

“I’m fine. Just a flesh wound.”

“Alright. Get in my truck, Rook. I need to have words with Jacob.”

“Sheriff...”

“Go get in the goddamn truck, Rook,” Whitehorse ordered in a tone that brooked no argument. She looked a little taken aback for a moment, glanced from her boss to Jacob and back again before she finally stumbled through the door, a little wobbly, but obviously able to get herself to the truck. Whitehorse waited until he heard his truck door slam and then he turned to Jacob with a rough snarl. “What did you do to her?” Jacob studied Whitehorse mildly, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I saved her from drowning, patched her up, reset some broken fingers, cleaned and dressed some burns. She’s got more burns that need bandaging, but she wouldn’t let me help her there. Nearly got herself killed doing some stunt.” Whitehorse closed his eyes and took a deep breath in through his nose, clearly aggravated at his deputy’s carelessness.

“You stay away from my deputy, Seed,” the Sheriff ordered, stepping forward until they were nearly toe-to-toe, Whitehorse’s nose at Jacob’s chin. Jacob laughed in his face and he could tell it pissed the older man off something awful. Watching Whitehorse’s jaw tick, Jacob waited for a blow that ultimately did not come. Always the pacifist, Whitehorse. Jacob tilted his head to the side.

“Your deputy? Huh. It seems to me you don’t take very good care of your things, Sheriff. Maybe I should take her from you permanently.”

“If you’re trying to start a fight with me, boy, you’re barking up the wrong tree,” Whitehorse told him lowly, but Jacob could tell that his comment had unsettled him. Whitehorse stalked away. Jacob waited until the older man was just about to close the cabin door behind him before he called after him.

“Sheriff. Take better care of your deputy. Or I will.”
Jess and Rook get to know one another

“So everyone’s always calling you ‘Rook.’ Is that short for Rookie?” Rook surveyed the archer for a moment, deciding. They had been working together for a couple of months, and Jess, characteristically, had not asked for any personal information from the deputy the entire time they had worked together, had been content helping her wipe out Peggies and hanging out with her during downtimes without the need for personal chitchat. Since the Fourth of July barbeque however, Jess had been a little friendlier, tending to ask the occasional question of Rook before retreating back to her usual reticent self.

“No. It’s actually my last name. See?” She pointed at her uniform tag which had been badly stained with blood and was only barely legible. Dutch had insisted that she burn her uniform, but she had actually stuffed it in her backpack. She liked wearing her uniform, it made her feel like a professional.

“So then, what’s, like, your real name? Your first name or whatever?” Rook went a little red and adjusted her scope, stalling. “It’s a simple question. What’s your name? You know mine. What, is it awful or something?”

“Or something.” Rook conceded. “It’s just…unique, but in the worst possible way. You know how people joke about white people naming their kids really strange things to try to be different? Yeah, my mom took it to an extreme. She loved Norse legends.”

“So, what, is your name ‘Baldur’ or ‘Thor’?” Jess asked, laughing. Rook huffed out a laugh.

“Worse.”

“Helga? Loki?”

“No, but you’re close.” Rook was crimson now. “You have to promise not to tell anyone.”

“When’s the last time you saw me talk to someone who wasn’t you, Grace or Sharky?”

“Well, you especially can’t tell Sharky.”

“Come on, spill. What is it?” Jess shoved her playfully and Rook blushed an even deeper shade of red, much to her companion’s amusement.

“Hel. My name is Hel.”

“Like…the place?” Jess asked skeptically.

“Like, the daughter of Loki named for the underworld,” Rook admitted sheepishly. Jess snorted.
“Wow. That is bad.”

“Yeah. And Joseph used it to his advantage,” Rook groaned. “And behold there was a Whitehorse and Hel followed with him,” she quoted, rolling her eyes. “A bit heavy-handed with the symbolism, if you ask me.” Jess chuckled.

“Wow. Your mom was a fuckin’ nerd. And fuck Joseph, he’s always looking for the chance to be dramatic.”

“Yeah, well. Now you know. Please don’t tell anyone.”

“Oh, I’m telling everyone,” Jess promised with a smirk.

“I swear to God, Jess,” Rook griped, grabbing at the archer, who smoothly avoided her grasp.

“You swear what?” Jess challenged, eyes twinkling. Rook went even more red, but then she straightened and got a devilish look on her face. “Don’t you dare,” Jess said, tone going low and dangerous. Jess had mentioned, about ten beers into the evening at the Fourth of July cookout, that she was extremely ticklish. Rook chased after her, tackling her to the ground and tickling her until she was gigglng frantically, trying to squirm out of Rook’s inexorable grasp. “Stop it, stop it, stop!” Jess cackled, but that last “stop” sounding serious. Too late.

WHAM!

Rook landed in the leaf litter, gasping for breath and grasping at her solar plexus. “I did say ‘stop,’” Jess commented sheepishly, bending down in front of Rook where she struggled to catch her breath.

“Yeah,” Rook gasped out, “I had that coming.”

“You okay?”

“I will be.” The two of them stared at each other for a long, tense moment. Jess leaned in close and Rook didn’t stop her, felt what little breath she had managed to suck in puff out of her in a sudden rush as her lips parted. With an awkward little motion toward Rook, Jess pressed soft lips gently to the deputy’s and cradled a hand behind Rook’s head before she pulled away with a little exhalation.

“Sorry.”

“What was that?” Rook asked, looking a little overwhelmed.

“I…just…you were just there and I figured…” A mischievous smile worked its way across Jess’ features and Rook felt her stomach flip flop. “I figured ‘what the hell’?”
Different Circumstances

Chapter Summary

The junior deputy and the sheriff struggle with bad dreams after dealing with Faith Seed.

Earl needed a cigarette. Badly.

He followed Rook across the grassy hill at a slow lope, his knees complaining. His heart raced and he swallowed, feeling his throat go scratchy as he looked over the field of flowers they were near. His hands were shaking. He didn’t have the heart to tell her that he could barely stand to think of the Bliss fields, let alone be near them. He couldn’t tell her that he was terrified of going close to them again, that he was deeply afraid that any time spent near those flowers would be his last as a cognizant human being. He didn’t have the heart to tell her that he had been ridden with nightmares every time he’d slept since Virgil and Tracey had found him stumbling through one of these fields, drool hanging from the corner of his mouth. He felt disgust and shame at himself when he thought of it.

“Sheriff? You okay?” Turning to look at her, Earl holstered his pistol so she couldn’t see his hands trembling.

“I’m fine, Rook,” he told her in a low rumble, but his voice was shaking too. She frowned a little and reached out a hand, touching him gently on his upper arm.

“You didn’t have to come with me for this.”

“Yes, I did,” he insisted. “With Sharky healing up from your last encounter, and Grace and Jess working recognizance in the Holland Valley, I couldn’t let you go out on your own in good conscience, Rook. Now, quit jawjacking and lead the way,” he grumbled, pulling his arm away from her touch, though he wanted nothing more than another comforting hug from her like the one she had given him several weeks ago.

He couldn’t show weakness in front of her.

She needed him to be strong, and by God, he would be if it killed him. Rook opened her mouth as if to argue with him, but finally shut it with a click of her teeth. He saw her jaw tick. She looked out at the field of white flowers waving gently in the breeze and took a deep breath. Earl could smell them from here, that acrid gardenia and vanilla odor mixed with something chemical that burned in his nostrils. Unbidden and absolutely unwelcome, he felt tears pricking in his eyes. With a low snarl, he whipped his glasses off and yanked his handkerchief from his pocket, dabbing at his eyes roughly and biting back a fearful sob that tried to well up and out of his chest. It was fine. Everything was fine. They’d be in, out, done. He’d have a beer or two or ten tonight at the jail and try to sleep all the way through the night without any nightmares disturbing his sleep and everything would be fine.

“Allergies bothering you?” Rook asked, but he knew from her tone what she was actually asking him. She knew. She always did. The kid had good instincts. He met her eyes and felt hot shame tear through him.
“I’m fine,” he said again, meeting her gaze levelly. “Let’s get this over with.”

Without another word, Rook stepped forward, hopping lightly over the fence and into the field, wobbling a little as the flowers’ effect hit her. Swallowing hard, Earl followed, a little slower and with a grunt when he landed on his feet, wincing as a shock of pain ran up his spine. What he wouldn’t give to be young and spry again, he thought to himself with chagrin. And then it hit him. That initial terror as voices and music arose from nowhere. The edges of his vision went blurry, multiplied in reds and greens. He threw a hand out to grab one of the fence posts and instead grabbed Rook’s shoulder. She met his gaze unsteadily, but her eyes were earnest.

“If it’s too much…”

“Just get to work, kid,” he ground out as the unpleasant sensation was replaced with that disorienting euphoria. She nodded and turned away from him, sneaking up behind their prey – the fields were laced with Angels and the damn things kept coming to the jail, a constant menace that needed to be dealt with, and quietly. Too much noise and they’d have to deal with them all at once. Rook jammed her hunting knife into the place where neck met head and the Angel dropped with a little grunt that sent a shiver up Earl’s spine. In different circumstances, that might have been him.

Earl stepped forward, holding up his pistol and screwing the suppressor in place as he drug himself forward through the Bliss haze and approached another Angel.

“Are you scared, Sheriff?” He heard the thupthupthupthupthup of the helicopter rotors. The angel took a step toward him. He blinked.

“Relax, Sheriff. You’re gonna get your name in the paper.” He felt a heavy hand on his shoulder and jerked back, shaking himself. He raised his pistol, taking a deep breath and then staggered.

“You see they’ve come for me.” A glint of blue eye through yellow glasses, wooden floors squeaking under his boots. He shuffled his boots in the soft sand of the Bliss field and aimed.

“Do not touch that service weapon!” he yelled, throwing out an arm. The church flickered in his vision and the angel was closer, closer, closer, staggering toward him with a growl. More heads turned toward him, growling.

“Sheriff, what the fuck?!” Rook whispered, her eyes panicked as the horde turned toward them. He tried to shake himself, tried to reconcile reality, but it kept flickering away from him like sand through an hourglass.

“Aaaamazing grace…how sweet the sound that saved a wretch…like me…I told you God wouldn’t let you take me,” Earl heard and he stumbled back, throat closing in terror. He shot wildly and hit his target in the shoulder. It snarled, drawing even more attention to them. Like something from a horror movie, the Angels all turned and started for them, growling and groaning, arms and garden tools outstretched threateningly.

“Sheriff! Earl, pull it together,” Rook urged.

“We gotta get outta here,” Earl said, repeating his own words from several weeks before, feeling the nausea again, feeling his seatbelt sinking into his belly as he hung upside down in the crashed chopper. “We gotta get outta here!”

“SHIT!” Earl heard next to him and he felt someone grab his arm. He yanked roughly
away, feeling hands grabbing at his ankles, feeling himself yanked out of the chopper, feeling his fingernails ripping off as he scrabbled and grabbed at the helicopter’s frame, desperate not to be grabbed by the cult. Flashes and waves of memories, horrifying tore through Earl’s mind as he fell backwards, firing again as a dozen Angels bore down on him. Rook shot several of them, yanked him up with a hiss of effort. “I am not leaving you behind. Come on, Sheriff.”

“I don’t have much time, Rook,” he heard himself say and he has no idea if he’s saying it now, or if this is just another awful memory.

“Earl, come on, please,” she begged him, trying to tug him out of the infested field, trying to get him to safety. She stopped pulling long enough to dispatch a few Angels. The horde corners them against the fence and Rook screamed, seeing that they are surrounded, that there is no way to escape that wouldn’t involve leaving Earl behind.

Earl felt the hard hand in his hair, forcing his face into the bucket of liquid Bliss they had used to tame him, to make him lose his mind so that he would do nothing more than wander in a field of Bliss. He choked, trying to draw in air, but only managing to pull in more Bliss. Fear was replaced with pleasure and he stopped fighting it, thought that if he had to die, at least this would be painless. They pushed him out of the back of a van and cut his bonds, leaving him in the field, eyes glazed, mouth slack.

Footsteps approached. Rook, with a hunting knife in her hand. He felt the slick slide of cold metal between his head and his neck and had a moment of pure clarity. Different circumstances, he realized belatedly as his legs went out from under him. Rook caught him under the armpits and pulled him into her lap, crying as he tried to draw in a last breath.

Earl awoke with a gasp, drenched in sweat, tears pouring from his eyes. He sat up and covered his face with his hands, weeping into them, both in relief and in fear. Relief that the dream was over. Fear that maybe this part was the dream.

There was a soft knock at the doorway. A tired looking Rook was standing there, looking concerned. He watched her with bloodshot eyes, too exhausted to hide that he was crying. Wordless, she sat on the bed beside him and pulled him into a tight hug.

“I had a bad dream too,” she confessed. “Mind if I put my sleeping bag in here for the night?” He nodded, not trusting his voice not to break if he spoke.

Rook grabbed her bedroll and unfolded it next to his cot, sliding into it with a little sigh. He laid back, his arm hanging over the edge of the cot. She held his hand until they both drifted back off to a peaceful, and thankfully dreamless sleep.
The Fast and the Furious

Chapter Summary

Rook combines some "homeopathics" and gets help from the sheriff

Her eyes were bloodshot and there were deep, purplish-gray grooves beneath them as though she hadn’t slept in weeks. Her hands were shaking violently, making the scope on her rifle less than useless where it hung haphazardly in her loose grip as she stood before him, looking wild and high on something.

“Jesus, Rook, what happened?” Whitehorse asked softly as he set his fishing pole down. He hadn’t expected to run into her here in the middle of nowhere, a mile or so from the abandoned town of Prosperity.

“I…I didn’t know who else to go to. Tracey told me you were here,” Rook admitted, stumbling in place.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m sorry,” was her response. “I’m so sorry, Sheriff. It was stupid.”

“Come here, sit down,” he ordered, a hand on her arm, holding her steady. She was trembling all over and felt hot to the touch. Sweat was beading across her face and down her arms and he detected an odd nutty smell from her breath as she panted. Concerned, he touched two fingers to her neck where her pulse was and felt it rushing, thready and fast beneath his touch. “Rook,” he started, voice lowering in concern and anger as his brows drew together. “What did you take?” She glanced away from him, her face looking as though she was going to cry. He took her chin gently in one hand and pulled her face inexorably back toward his own so he could meet her eyes, which, yes, were swimming with tears. She looked down and the tears escaped, dripping down her cheek, one of them landing lightly on his hand.

“I…I’m sorry.” Earl sighed.

“What did you take, Rook?”

“It was Tweak…”

“Oh Christ,” he muttered, knowing the local “chemist” well.

“He made me a – a well, he called them ‘performance enhancers,’ gave me the recipes, but,” she looked back into Earl’s eyes, her green ones full of terror. “But I botched the recipes, tried to combine two of them, and it won’t stop. It won’t stop. I can’t make it stop. My heart is pounding and everything I touch I break, and it won’t go away, the effects won’t stop and I…I knew you wouldn’t judge me. And I’m sorry,” she finished again miserably. “If you fire me, I completely understand, sir.” Earl couldn’t fight back the bark of laughter that bubbled out of his chest.

“Rook,” he chuckled, putting a hand comfortably on her shoulder, “if I was going to fire you I’d have done it at least twenty assault-with-a-deadly-weapon charges ago. This is a new world. I’m not going to fire you. Hell, I’m not even sure if I can pay you anymore, the Seeds have
got things so mixed up.” He jostled her shoulder when he saw her lip cringe in the beginnings of a sob. “Hey. It’s alright. We’ll get you some help.” She looked deep into his eyes and the way she looked at him made his heart stand still – like she was his daughter, ashamed to have disappointed her dad. His chest got warm and he chuckled again. “Rook…you idiot,” he muttered affectionately. “Come on. No, you’re not walking. Let me carry you to my truck. So much for my fishing trip.”

Earl, with only a small grunt of effort and only one painful knee pop, thank you very much, lifted his deputy in his arms, her head lolling back onto his shoulder tiredly. She wrapped her arms around his neck to help him carry her and murmured something through a little sob.

“What was that, Rook?”

“I love you, Sheriff,” she told him, snuffling into his shoulder like a child. His throat got tight and his cheeks went a little red, but he smiled.

“I love you too, Rook.” He laid her gently into the backseat of his old battered blue pickup and pulled a spare blanket he kept there over her. “Get some sleep, kid. It’ll be alright.”
Faith Seed has turned herself in. Will she join the Resistance and help Rook recruit her brothers?

For a moment, Earl just stared at her, dumbfounded at the stupidity of the plan. He glanced to Eli, Dutch, Tracey and Jerome to see if they were all in agreement. There was a sullen silence in which no one wanted to speak up. Finally, it was Dutch’s niece, Jess who spoke.

“That is the dumbest fuckin’ idea I’ve ever heard,” she blurted as she crossed her arms over her chest protectively. Earl almost laughed. Of course she would think the plan was a bad one – she and Rook had been giving one another doe eyes in front of him enough for him to recognize a new relationship when he saw it. Rook’s next word cemented it.

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“Don’t fuckin’ call me that. Jesus, are we seriously considering this? It’s ridiculous. It’s bad enough you didn’t fuckin’ kill her when you had the chance and now you wanna…ugh, fuckin’ whatever.” She stormed out of the room abruptly, Rook looking after her, clearly distressed.

“I gotta say, Rook,” Earl finally chimed in, “I’m inclined to agree. Crazy woman damn near killed me.” He shuddered. Rook had fought Faith nearly two weeks ago, but had ultimately chosen not to kill her. The young woman had dove into the Henbane River and vanished. Vanished, that is, until Rook blew up Joseph’s statue and burned his holy book two days ago. Dress stained and torn, eye still a bit blackened from one of Rook’s punches, Faith Seed – Rachel Jessop, had shown up at the jail, sheepish and afraid of the repercussions against her. “If it hadn’t been for Tracey, Virgil would be dead, and the marshal with him, both because of her. Faith Seed…ugh, Rachel, is a menace. I don’t think you can trust her.”

Eli Palmer was staring at the map of Hope county on the table in front of them, face thoughtful. He stroked his beard.

“It’s worth a try. Rook’s right – if we could persuade one of them to join our side, perhaps we could persuade them all. Even if Rachel can’t get us Joseph, she could tell us how to get to Jacob and John.”

“I still don’t think…ahem, seduction is the best path to take, Deputy,” Jerome objected, looking embarrassed.

“Look, I get that y’all don’t think this will work, but what if it does? Earl, Tracey, you’ve both already tried just talking to her and that ain’t working. She’s terrified, but she could still help us if someone could get her to talk. And…” Rook’s face went very, very red and Earl had to strain to hear her next words, “I took her on a date once, before she became Faith. I know…I know she’s interested,” she mumbled, avoiding anyone’s eye contact. Tracey snorted.

“Tell it like it is, Rook, she was head over heels and you ghosted her when you found out about her drug problem.”
“Shit,” Earl mumbled under his breath, meeting Eli’s eyes and wiping a hand over his mustache, twirling one end of it thoughtfully.

“I think you’re all missing the goddamn point here,” Dutch interrupted, nostrils flaring in anger. “This cult is out of fucking control. We stood by…no,” he turned to his left and jabbed a finger in Earl’s chest, “You stood by while they bought up all the properties, while they erected that fucking statue, while they put up that fucking ‘yes’ sign. And now they’re killin’ and kidnappin’ people. I don’t care particularly that John, Jacob and Faith aren’t the ones directly doin’ the killing and kidnappin’. They’re the ones condoning it. Are we just going to let that slide?”

“Of course not,” Rook assured him, “but this is a chance to end this more peacefully. I don’t want to kill them if I don’t have to, Dutch.” She met Earl’s eyes and bit her bottom lip before she spoke again. “Not every problem can be solved with a bullet.” Earl felt a swell of pride at that, which helped tame the anger that had risen in him when Dutch had buried his finger in his chest. Everything the cult had done up to about three months ago had been perfectly legal. There hadn’t been a damn thing Earl could have done about it. It wouldn’t be the first time he and Dutch had gotten into it.

A little chagrined, Earl rubbed his knuckle where a white scar marred one of them – a scar left by one of Dutch’s teeth when they’d gotten into a knock-down, drag-out bar fight several years before. Earl had come a long way in controlling his temper since then.

“So,” Grace said softly from where she had been standing silently in the corner of the room. “Are we letting Rook do this? Because if so, I’m gonna need some more bullets to keep her covered.”

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“Forgive me if this all seems just a bit too good to be true,” Rachel told Rook from where she sat delicately perched on the checkered cloth, picking at a venison sandwich. Rook chuckled. “Consider it reward for good behavior.” Rachel met her eyes and then looked away demurely, staring out over the field of flowers where they sat picnicking. “And…as hero of the county, I was able to call in a few favors.” Rook reached a hand out, covered one of Rachel’s. “I’m sorry I ghosted you last year. It was fucked up. I was just getting started as a LEO, and I was afraid that…”

“Afraid that my drug use would make you lose your job?” Rook closed her mouth with a click of her teeth, reddening. Rachel laughed that bell-like laugh. “Well. You weren’t wrong. I…I did a lot of things wrong too.” Rook noticed she hadn’t pulled her hand away. Leaning in, Rook cupped Rachel’s cheek with her other hand, feeling a little sick at the thought that Jess might be watching. Their lips were nearly touching as they leaned over the picnic basket. Rook swallowed, remembering all the reasons she had pursued Rachel, remembered her laugh, her sense of humor, those gorgeous eyes. Those eyes, so captivating.

Rachel leaned forward the extra inch needed to press their lips together and Rook melted, deepening the kiss, forgetting, for just a moment, why she was here. She could feel the roughness on Rachel’s bottom lip where she had struck her during their fight, could taste the barest hint of Bliss on her breath, could feel the velvet tip of her tongue…

Abruptly, Rachel pulled away, a bitter smile on her face.

“You taste like her.”
“What?” Rook asked, incredulous, flustered.

“Jess always mixes a little lavender in with her cherry chapstick. What? You thought you were the first person to try to date her? We live in Montana, Rook, how big do you think the lesbians dating pool is here?” Rachel tipped her chin up imperiously. “I’m not dumb, you know. You need information. You need my help.” Rook sighed, and sat back, ultimately relieved that this farce wouldn’t have to go on any longer.

“I know. I know you’re not dumb. I just…”

“Didn’t think you could just ask?” Rachel finished for her, clearly hurt. “I told you he would punish me. I got myself in over my head. Joseph…he’s…he’s not cruel, but he knows his wrath is righteous. The only way to stop him is to agree with him. He’s not wrong, Rook. Listen to the news, the radio, watch TV. War is coming. Maybe the end of the world with it, I don’t know. You might as well agree to help him. The worst thing that could happen is he’s wrong. And if he is, get him some help. Some medication. Something other than the Bliss, anyway,” she finished desperately, soft eyes pleading.

“Where is Joseph?” Rachel scowled at the question, closing her eyes in frustration.

“I don’t know. He never did share as much with me. Probably somewhere in the Whitetails, if I had to guess. You shouldn’t start with Joseph. Start with Jacob. He already likes you. He’s got a soft spot for bone-headed people with a hero complex.”

“So you’ll help me? You’ll help the Resistance, just like that?” Rook asked, skeptical. Rachel took a little bite of her sandwich, considering, studying Rook’s face.

“What other choice do I have? You can call in your troops. I know they’re there. I’m not going to run. Not anymore.” Rook nodded and stood, brushing her pants off and turning away. “Hey Rook,” Rachel called after her as Earl stepped out of his hiding place and put his cuffs on her. Rook turned to face her, looking torn. “Jess is lucky to have you.” Rook sighed and Earl felt awkward, standing there in the middle of this intimate moment with his one hand on Rachel’s cuffed hands and the other on her shoulder to guide her back toward the jail.

“How do I know I can trust you to help?” Rook asked, pointedly changing the subject. Rachel laughed.

“You’ll have to have faith.”
Chapter Summary

Rook brings Jacob a gift and gets something in return.

“Rook, you and I need to have a discussion about what constitutes a ‘plan,’” Whitehorse told his deputy as he skillfully avoided a bite from the wolf puppy they had found. She took the squirming animal from him and placed it in a wire kennel.

“Faith says Jacob’s a softy for animals, and we already know he likes me,” Rook said flippantly. Earl rubbed a hand over his face, nose wrinkling at the smell of his hand after touching the filthy animal.

“Maybe a bit too much, Rook,” he mumbled, setting the kennel into the back of his pickup.

“Thanks for helping me with this,” she told him as he started the pickup and pulled out of Hope County Jail’s long driveway.

“Well, I’m not letting you get yourself killed going without me,” he groused. “Besides, you can’t knock on the gate on your own.” Rook went a little red, furious as she thought about her brainwashing and that fucking song that was constantly played outside the veteran’s center. “Jess didn’t want to come?” Earl asked mildly as he put on his turn signal and turned north. Rook sighed.

“She’s…not a fan of the plan. At all.” Earl shrugged.

“Can’t blame her. You alright?” Rook looked at him sheepishly.

“You’re my boss, not my dad,” she snapped. It was like a dagger to the heart. He nodded, swallowing. Rook softened. “Sorry. I just…I don’t want to talk about it. Don’t listen to me. Of course, you’re like my dad, Sheriff.” He looked over at her with those sad, droopy eyes of his and she felt even guiltier for the blurted statement. “Why else do you think I’d come to you for advice so often?” she asked, cuffing him lightly on the shoulder, feeling stupid as she did so. Earl kept his eyes on the road, annoyed that it showed on his face how badly she had hurt his feelings. “Earl.” He still didn’t look at her. “When we’re done with our mission can you pwease cut the crusts off my sandwiches for me, Dad?” Earl fought a grin and lost, letting slip a bark of laughter and finally looking at her.

“Oh, fuck off, Rook,” he laughed. Rook looked at him brightly, seeming relieved to have soothed the sting of her earlier slight. They chatted congenially until they reached the St. Francis Veteran Center. Earl stepped out of his truck, heart thundering as about twelve heavily armed Peggies strode toward the gates in response. He pulled his white handkerchief out to make it abundantly clear why he was here before he got shot. “Need to speak with Jacob. Rook’s got something for him but can’t get past the gates with that music blaring.”

“Yeah, that’s the point,” one of the Peggies mocked, raising his gun. “Why don’t you get out of here, old man?” Earl stood his ground, though he could feel his heartbeat behind his eyes, heard it thundering wildly. He put his hands on his hips, his right hand resting casually on his side
arm, and raised an eyebrow.

“Young man, it is truly unfortunate that your mother never taught you to respect your elders. Now, I think you have misunderstood me. I wasn’t asking. I was telling. Go get Jacob. Now.” The Peggies glanced at one another and one of them finally shrugged.

“Wait here.”

“My pleasure,” Earl snarked, crossing his arms over his chest now. One of the Peggies scurried toward the front doors and stepped inside. There was a space of several minutes where Earl and the remaining Peggies stared at one another, the Peggies malevolently, Earl mildly. He looked back to the truck once and gave Rook a thumbs up when the music abruptly stopped. She got out of the truck and joined him. The Peggies raised their weapons at her.

“That’s far enough,” one of them told her, his voice shaking a little. Earl almost laughed. They were scared of her.

Jacob stepped calmly out of the center, walking slowly toward the gates, looking completely unbothered by the nervousness of his men. He looked over at Rook and Earl could swear he saw the edges of his mouth lift in a small smile.

“How are the burns, pup?” Rook tugged the collar of her shirt to the side.

“Well, we match now,” she told him dryly. He hummed in response.

“So. I hear you have something for me. I trust this isn’t some kind of trap?”

“I think you know me better than that,” Rook admonished. Earl felt uncomfortable. How often had these two interacted anyway? Jacob chuckled humorlessly.

Alright, what have you got?” She walked to the back of Earl’s pickup and brought out the wolf puppy. Earl was astonished at the transformation that overtook Jacob’s face. It went from gruff, chilling seriousness to joy in a half second.

“Oh, pup. You do know me,” he told her softly. He stepped out of the gates and walked forward, taking the little whining creature under the front legs and holding it up so it faced him. He inspected it before he finally brought it to his chest and pet it on the head gently, murmuring to it. Cold blue eyes glanced up and he was all business again. “So. What’s this for?” Rook smiled genteelly.

“Consider it a peace offering. I have a proposition for you.”

“Oh?”

“Let’s go for a walk,” Rook suggested, bobbing her head toward the nearby pond. Jacob looked from her to Earl suspiciously.

“Hmm. He stays with my men.” Earl felt his stomach drop.

“Absolutely not.” Jacob huffed a laugh.

“Just who do you think is in charge here, pup?”

“That’s what I’d like to discuss,” she told him, stepping forward threateningly. Earl tried not to look worried as he stood there awkwardly, a third very uncomfortable wheel. Jacob
considered.

“Hand me your keys,” he said to Earl without looking at him. Earl looked to Rook, who nodded. Trust me, her face said. With a sigh, Earl tossed the keys at Jacob, who caught them effortlessly. He handed the wolf pup to one of his men. “Be gentle with her,” he told him, and Earl could hear the threat in his tone. Jacob turned back toward them, clapped his hands together and then flicked his arms out to the side theatrically. “So. Lead the way, pup.”

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Jacob laughed raucously, a full, chest deep laugh that made him throw his head back and hold a hand to his stomach with mirth.

“Do you have any idea what my followers will do to me if they think I’m going to help you?”

“Don’t think of it as helping me, think of it as joining our forces. I’m saying ‘yes,’ Jacob. I’m saying fine, okay, maybe the end of the world is coming. So we can stop fighting. No one else has to get hurt. No one else,” she swallowed, “No one else has to get brainwashed.”

“Ah, yes, I figured you’d bring that up.”

“Where is Pratt?” she demanded, voice deepening in anger. Earl put a hand gently on her shoulder but she shrugged it off.

“Peaches? Oh, Peaches is just fine, pup. He’s even housebroken now. Took him long enough,” Jacob said dryly. Rook snarled.

“Cut the shit, Jacob. I’m tired of playing your games. Stop torturing people, let Pratt go, work with me. Help me get Joseph and we can come to an agreement.”

“Or what?” he challenged, a dry laugh in his tone. Rook’s brows rose. It was her turn to laugh.

“Or I’ll kill every fucking one of you,” she chuckled, but her eyes were cold. Earl felt a jolt of terror go through him at her tone and her expression. Jesus. Rook looked like she would kill someone with her bare hands right about now. Jacob grinned, setting the tip of his tongue over one of his canines and putting a hand to his chin, considering. He laughed and pointed a long, scarred finger at her.

“I knew I liked you. Alright.” Rook blew out a breath and glanced at Earl.

“We need to know where Joseph is.”

“He’s got several safe houses in the area, but if you go after him now, John will just fly him out of the county.” Rook groaned.

“We figured as much, Rook,” Earl said. Jacob gave him an appraising look. They glared at one another for a moment before Earl finally relaxed. “So what do you suggest?” Earl asked.

“You’ll have to persuade John to help too. It won’t be easy. It certainly won’t be as easy as persuading me. You’re lucky I’ve got a weak, er, a soft spot for you, pup,” Jacob admitted, looking annoyed at himself. Rook grinned at him.

“I knew I liked you,” she mimicked with sass. She held out a hand suddenly and Jacob
took it in one of his massive paws. They shook hands with an air of finality. “Now then. I brought you something. It’s time you returned something of mine.” Jacob snorted.

“You’re joking, right?” There was a soft click and Jacob raised a brow when he looked down at Rook’s free hand, which was holding a cocked pistol aimed between his legs.

“I am not.” With a scowl, Jacob reached for his radio and Earl felt his blood go cold. This was it, this was the moment they would discover whether or not Jacob was really on their side now. He would either order Pratt to be released, or he would order the ground where they were standing to be salted and burned.

“O’Malley,” Jacob blurted into the radio.

“Yes, sir?”

There was a tense silence as Jacob and Rook stared into one another’s eyes, one deciding, the other waiting. Earl just stood there feeling helpless. It was like watching two alpha wolves baring their teeth at one another. Someone was about to get their throat ripped out. Jacob clenched his jaw and then rolled his eyes. “Turn Peaches loose. Tell him he’s wanted at the pond.”

“Do you need assistance, sir?”

“Did I ask for assistance?” Jacob snarled into the radio.

“No, sir,” O’Malley’s voice squeaked.

“Well, then I don’t need assistance.”

“Understood, sir.” The voice sounded terrified. Earl and Rook collectively sighed with relief and Rook put her gun away. A minute or so later, Pratt stumbled out of the gate after one of the Peggies kicked him hard in the backside. Rook reached again for her sidearm but Earl calmed her with a touch of his hand on her shoulder. Pratt approached, head down, eyes fixed resolutely on his feet.

“Peaches,” Jacob said loudly and Pratt jumped with a little whimper as Jacob put a hand behind his neck and slung him roughly toward Earl, who caught him in welcoming arms. “Your owners are here to reclaim you from the pound,” he told him dryly. Earl patted Pratt gently on the back. Pratt met his eyes briefly, the chocolate irises swimming in a pool of tears.

“Sheriff?”

“It’s alright, son,” Earl told him, steadying him on his feet. He’d like to knock the shit out of Jacob for whatever he had done to his deputy, but they need him now, had to play nice.

“So, how to we get to John?” Rook asked Jacob almost conversationally. Nerves of steel, this one, Earl thought, remembering when he had been worried that she wasn’t bold enough to make a good police officer and feeling thoroughly corrected.

“I’ve got a few ideas for you,” he assured her. “Starting with his ‘Yes’ sign.”
Yes and No

Chapter Summary

Rook and her friends destroy John's sign in the hopes of getting his attention.

“ARE YOU FUCKING SERIOUS! I WILL KILL YOU, DEPUTY! WITH MY BARE HANDS!!” The shrieking voice poured out of Rook’s radio and she made eye contact with Hurk, who giggled, his rocket launcher still perched on his broad shoulder. Sharkey was cackling as well, hands on his knees. “I WILL END YOU. I WILL BURY YOU BENEATH THAT SIGN AND THEN I WILL PISS ON YOUR GRAVE, YOU FUCKING ASSHOLE!!” Rook waited for a long enough gap in John Seed’s screaming tirade that she could interrupt. Earl had taken his hat off and blew out a breath at the angry outburst. He didn’t like confrontation where it could be avoided.

“You seem a bit upset, John,” Rook broadcasted, “maybe we should meet. How about at your Lodge?”

“WHEN I GET MY HANDS ON YOU I WILL– ” Rook switched the radio off and turned to Jacob, looking doubtful as well after a glance to the sheriff.

“I’m pretty sure you’re trying to get me murdered,” Rook muttered to the eldest Seed. He crossed his arms over his chest blandly.

“You didn’t tell him what time to meet you, pup,” Jacob pointed out, looking a little smug. Rook rolled her eyes. She switched the radio back on.

“– AND AFTER I’M DONE WITH THAT I WILL PULL EACH ONE OF YOUR TEETH OUT! AND DON’T GET ME STARTED WITH WHAT I’M GOING TO TATTOO ON YOU! SEVEN SINS DON’T EVEN BEGIN TO COVER WHAT YOU’VE DONE, YOU BITCH!”

“Are you done?” Rook asked prettily, stepping over him on the radio. There was cold, simmering silence.

“Where and when would you like me to kill you, dep-yoo-tee?” John ground out softly, sounding more dangerous at a whisper than a shout. Rook met Jacob’s eyes and he shrugged, seeming unconcerned.

“Your lodge, tonight, say seven ‘o clock?”

“I can hardly wait,” John assured her.

The four of them turned to survey their work. John’s massive “YES” sign now read a resolute and equally large “NO.” It had taken them the better part of the morning, but it had certainly gotten John’s attention.

“John ain’t gonna like this,” Earl intoned, looking a little worried.

“No, sir,” Jacob agreed.
They made their way back down the long hill, driving back to the county jail where Earl sent Rook to get some food with a quick pat on the back before turning a nasty look on Jacob. He still didn’t trust him. Jacob, to his credit, said nothing, but just stepped inside, staying quiet and keeping to himself as much as possible. Pratt was avoiding him like the plague, but that was to be expected. He casually made his way outside to where Rook was leaning against the wall drinking a Gatorade, feeling an odd tug in his chest. He pulled an apple out of his pocket and began peeling it with his knife, taking little bites directly from the blade. Curious, he surveyed the deputy where she stood, wiping sweat from her brow.

“Alright, pup?” Rook sneered.

“I’d be better if you’d stop calling me that.”

“Ah, yes, that’s right, you prefer Boshaw’s nickname, what was it, ‘Dep’?” Rook chuckled.

“Are you jealous of Sharky?” Jacob surveyed her for a moment, took a long breath, decided honesty was, in this situation, the best policy.

“I’m more jealous of your archer,” he admitted, glancing up at the jail’s wall where Jess was standing guard. Rook’s face fell.

“She’s not mine. Not anymore. Don’t think she ever was, really. It wouldn’t have worked out, regardless of…well, regardless.” Jacob found he couldn’t even pretend to be sorry for that.

“Hmm,” he rumbled, crossing his arms over his chest. It had been a long while since he’d been interested in anyone in the slightest. His work for his brother had occupied most of his time, was still occupying most of his time and his thoughts. If he was caught here, consorting with the enemy, he was a dead man. Joseph would not kill him. His followers, though? Well, Jacob had trained them, hadn’t he?

With a little nervous curl of his lip, Jacob stalked off abruptly, tossing the core of the apple over his shoulder. He found himself needing to urinate, so made his way to the large bathroom that was available for the guards when the jail was still operational. He sniffed in disdain when he encountered the crotchety old sheriff there taking a leak as well. It was clear that Earl didn’t like Jacob spending time with Rook one bit, was clear that he considered himself a stand-in father for her. It amused Jacob more than anything else, was more of a challenge than a threat. He stepped up to the long trough that served as a urinal and unzipped, standing right next to Earl who gave him a nasty look out of the corner of his eye.

“You have an aversion to giving a man some personal space, son?” Earl snarked as he pissed. Jacob shrugged.

“Well, I figured you and I have done enough waving our dicks around, we might as well measure them, get it over with,” he suggested, staring blankly at the wall in front of him as he urinated. He heard a disgusted scoff from the sheriff. “What’s the matter, old man?” he asked softly, the corner of his lip rising in a mocking smirk. “Afraid you won’t...measure up?”

The sheriff did not react, said nothing, just finished peeing and shook himself, but he turned his hips before zipping up his fly just enough to give Jacob an eyeful as he glanced down. Jacob’s eyes widened involuntarily and he just barely managed to keep his jaw from dropping. Christ. No wonder the man was so laid back.
Jacob washed his hands and stepped back out into the jail proper, slamming hard into a smaller figure who gave a little *whumph* of air and stumbled. It was Rook…again.

“Following me, pup?” he growled. She rolled her eyes.

“Dream on.”

“I might,” he challenged, swallowing. She studied him for a moment, crossing her arms defensively over her chest and looking around them for observers.

“Come here,” she demanded, dragging him into a side room. “What is your deal? You brainwash people, you torture people, but then you do this banter shit with me like you’re a normal fucking human being instead of a walking bag of severe psychological issues. What do you want from me?” He gazed at her for a moment, considered the question, considered the feelings she had given him with her sarcastic, snarky responses to his radio broadcasts, considered the way she looked at him, like he was Goliath and she was David, but not even a little bit concerned she couldn’t take him down with a single blow. Christ, she was so sure of herself, so strong. Unbidden, hot anger burned in his chest and he clamped his teeth together so hard they squeaked with the strain.

“I don’t want a goddamn thing from you, pup,” he assured her in a hiss, turning away. She put a gentle hand on his arm and tugged him to look at her, frowning.

“I think maybe you need some help. All of you,” she told him quietly, reserved, searching his scarred face. Very gently, she reached a hand up toward his jaw or his shoulder, he wasn’t sure which, but he snatched it in midair, snarling.

“What are you doing?” Jacob demanded, on edge. Rook’s hand went limp in his grasp.

“I don’t know,” she admitted, looking at his lips. He could take a hint when one was staring him in the face. He released her hand and stepped back.

“Didn’t think you be interested in a…me.” She laughed.

“Never said I was.” He chuckled dryly.

“I’ve spent years learning how to read people,” he lectured, voice low. “We’re all just dumb animals, we use all the same cues, all the same desperate little ticks. You’re no different.” Rook tilted her chin up defiantly. “The way you tilt your chin up trying to convince me you aren’t scared of me, and that I’m wrong,” he purred. “The way you glance at my lips because you want to kiss me. The way you flush when I point it out. It’s all just responses to stimuli, pup. We’ve all got ‘em. Like the way I’m stepping toward you. The way I’m putting a hand on your waist…”

“Stop it,” she objected, tugging away from him.

“Am I wrong?” Jacob probed softly. “Faith told me what you are. That you’ve slept with women and men. I know you want me, pup.” Rook turned back to him, face red.

“Stop it,” she said again, but her tone didn’t convey seriousness, instead was dripping with want. Stepping forward, Jacob knew that embracing her, that kissing her would be his death sentence. He’d fallen for her hard, had agreed to help her, but up until now he could have backed out, could still betray her, could take her prisoner…but if he kissed her now he was a dead man. He could never turn away from her if he let his lips press softly against hers, if he felt those tiny hands rest gently on his side and on his shoulder. His breath hitched as he looked at her desperately, like a dying man looking at the antidote to his poison.
Leaning over her with his massive bulk, Jacob again ran a hand down her side, pulled her closer, met her gaze steadily. She put a hand on his chest, but it wasn’t pushing him away, it was just resting there.

Jacob leaned down further, until their lips were mere millimeters apart. Rook stepped on tiptoes, completing the touch. With a little moan, Rook sank her fingers into his red hair, tugging him down. He shuddered, pulling her tight against him, deepening the kiss, running a hand into her more mahogany-toned red hair.

“Rook!” came a loud voice from the doorway and they leapt apart. Earl was standing, red-faced, at the door, looking furious. He spluttered for a moment, hands on his hips. “You’ve… you’ve got work to do. Preparation for the meeting tonight. Now, hop to it,” he demanded, jutting a thumb over his shoulder.

“Yes, sir,” Rook muttered breathlessly, face crimson.

Jacob met Earl’s eyes with annoyance as Rook darted past her boss and then into the hallway away from both of them. Earl stepped up to him, jaw ticking.

“If you hurt her, I will end you,” Earl informed Jacob calmly. There was no growl in his voice, no shake. He said it as casually as one might say ‘it’s a nice day outside’ or ‘the sky is blue.’ Jacob nodded.

“Yes, sir.”
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Oh John!

Chapter Summary

Jacob and Rook try to recruit John. Sharky goes rogue.

“I just want to reiterate that I think letting the idiot have a cattle prod is a terrible idea,” Jacob muttered as he started the truck.

“Yeah, well, apparently everyone thinks my ideas are terrible. I’m used to it.”

“I’m not seeing the problem,” Earl snarked as he looked on approvingly at Sharky pretending to use the weapon on a long-suffering Jacob. Jacob rolled his eyes.

“Good, we can drop Grandpa off at the nursing home on the way,” the red-headed Seed glowered.

“Stop,” Rook said softly, putting a hand on his disarmingly. He sighed and met Earl’s gaze.

“Fine. But I’m not carrying his fat ass if he gets knocked down in the field.”

“I didn’t come here to be insulted,” Earl griped, crossing his arms over his chest.

“And yet, it’s so easy,” Jacob answered, turning left toward the Holland Valley.

“GUYS! Did you know that this cattle prod has an ‘extra stun’ feature?” Sharky asked excitedly.

“Oh Lord Jesus, help us,” muttered the sheriff, covering his face with a hand.

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“Dep-yoo-tee,” John addressed her, arms thrown wide and a wide smile on his face as he stepped forward out of the sleek sports car he had pulled up in. Only his eyes betrayed his real emotions. “What a pleasure to see you here. And…Jacob?” he sounded genuinely surprised at this, his smile faltering.

Resistance members were gathered outside his captured lodge, muttering and watching the interaction. Several cultists had followed John in a pickup, and they too stepped forward, glowering at the deputy and her friends, looking surprised at seeing Jacob there as well. Resistance members stepped behind the cultists, weapons ready.

“Little brother,” Jacob grumbled, reaching a hand forward and shaking John’s carefully. He looked down pointedly when he felt the derringer in John’s coat sleeve. “We’re just here to talk.” John gave him a calculating look, glanced at Rook and Earl past Jacob’s shoulder. Rook rubbed a nervous hand over her neck, drawing attention to a series of hickeys on the pale skin. A new smile crossed John Seed’s face and he threw his head back, laughing with what sounded like true amusement.
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“Oh, Jacob. How the mighty have fallen. It would appear I’ve won a bet against Faith. But I imagine she already knows she lost, given that I’d place even more money on a wager that she’s sitting pretty in the county jail right about now, safe from Joseph’s wrath.” His crystal blue eyes flickered over his brother’s face, then Rook’s. “Yes, I thought as much. Why are we here, Jacob? It’s not my birthday, so I know you’re not handing over your little…pet to me. No, I think you want to keep her. Or is it the other way around? Has she tamed you instead?” John laughed again, mocking, running a hand briefly over his bearded chin. “My, my, and here I thought we were getting somewhere, you with your wolves and your dogs, finally pulling your head out of your ass and making yourself useful after crying ‘boohoo’ to Joseph about your PTSD. I guess it only took one bitch to undo all that training,” John hissed hatefully.

“Well, at least he didn’t find me in a back alley with a man’s dick in my mouth and a needle in my arm,” Jacob growled and Rook shifted nervously. This was not going well. John raised his eyebrows and laughed again, though it was a humorless, bitter laugh this time. His features darkened. John’s gaze flicked to Rook’s and he clenched his jaw and his fists for a moment before brushing a stiff hand over his coat to straighten wrinkles from it delicately.

“You heard right, Deputy,” he addressed her, stepping forward around his brother. “You won’t be able to win me over by fucking me like you did Rachel and Jacob. I don’t play for your team…in any capacity,” he assured her, looking at the Resistance members gathered. “Nor do I intend to. But…”

But Rook never got to hear what John was going to say. With a sudden zap and a strangled yelp, John hit the ground, crumpling, unconscious. The end of Sharky’s cattle prod was smoking.

“What? He talks too much,” Boshaw shrugged. With quick movements, the Resistance members took John’s bodyguards into custody.

“Well. Maybe the cattle prod wasn’t such a bad idea,” Jacob murmured, allowing his fists to unclench, forcing himself to take a breath, to calm from John’s verbal attacks, feeling shame at what he had said in response. Rook put a gentle hand on his shoulder, took his hand and kissed the back of it softly as he breathed hard.

“He was just angry. He’ll come around. Hey. It’s okay.” She squeezed his hand and all was right with the world.

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▷ “Oh John! Bold and brave!” The volume increased abruptly. “HE’S FINDING US A FAMILY, HE’S TEACHING US TO FEND, OH JOHN, OH JOHN, KEEP US SAFE!”◁

“Turn that racket off!” Earl demanded, stumbling out of his office where he had been sleeping and toward the small solitary cell that John had been placed in. Sharky turned the radio down sheepishly and the sheriff walked back into his office, slamming the door behind him after shooting Sharky a look that could have killed him.

▷ “…through Eden’s Gate! Come mothers and come fathers, come caring and come fierce, you’ve gotta see it for yourself if you can’t believe your…”◁

“Please, for the love of God, turn that off,” John mumbled from where he had sprawled dramatically on the cot he had been provided.

“Figured you’d like listening to your own shitty song,” Sharky riposted. John cracked
open one crisp blue eye and met Sharky’s. Sharky swallowed. Goddamn, that was a good looking man.

*What a fuckin’ douche, though,* he reminded himself silently as his eyes slid appreciatively over John’s form. He wasn’t gay, but a warm body was a warm body, don’t judge. So maybe he was bisexual. He thought for a moment, forehead crinkling. Or pansexual. Whichever one meant he’d fuck almost anything given the opportunity. Pansexual, he decided with a little nod. He stuck the thumb of his free hand into his beltloop, using his other hand to sling his shotgun smoothly over his shoulder. He whapped himself in the ear with it instead, wincing at the sting. John chuckled.

♪ “…in holy water there can be no tears. Oh John!” ♪

Having made John laugh, Sharky was feeling confident. He swaggered forward toward the cell door, meeting John’s intense gaze. John opened his mouth to speak.

“I said,” the youngest Seed purred, looking at Sharky with hooded eyes, “*turn that off.*” The tone of the order sent an odd thrill through Sharky that ended somewhere in his boxer briefs. He swallowed. John stood slowly, wobbling a little, still weak from his electrocution, but he stepped lithely toward the bars, wrapping two neatly manicured hands delicately around them as he faced Sharky directly.

“And what if I don’t?” Sharky challenged, jutting his chin up. John chuffed a laugh and stuck his tongue in his cheek for a moment.

“Why don’t you come in here and find out?” he suggested, sending another thrill through Sharky that began to awaken things between his legs. Cold blue eyes roamed over Sharky, from his hat to his scuffed athletic shoes, but behind the disgust there was obvious appreciation and clear interest. Sharky looked over his shoulder, considering, his braincells grinding into fifth gear as he tried to decide what to do. On the one hand, there was a decent possibility he could get laid if he opened this door. On the other hand, there was the decent possibility that he would get killed if he opened the door. On another hand that he might have to borrow from someone cuz he only had two hands, there was the almost guaranteed possibility that Rook and/or the Sheriff would kick his ass if he opened the door. But then again, maybe they would arrest him and put him in a cell with John. And so he was back to getting laid. He shrugged and reached for the keys.

“If I open this door…”

“I will kick your ass into next week, Boshaw,” Rook answered him, clicking the radio off. “Now get out, John and I have a lot to discuss.” John blew Sharky a teasing, lascivious kiss as he retreated from the room with Rook glaring after him.

That evening “Oh John” was still stuck in Sharky’s mind on a loop. He found that, for the first time ever, he wasn’t annoyed by it.
“Did a skunk get in here?” Rook asked, nose wrinkling as she stepped into the 8-Bit Pizza Bar.

“Mmmm something like that,” a figure wheezed as though they were holding in a tight breath. They coughed and hacked and smoke fluttered out of their mouth.

“Faith,” Rook said dryly. Her stomach dropped at the other figure sitting at the corner table. “And Pratt? Pratt, what the fuck, police officers can’t smoke weed! Whitehorse will have your badge when he finds out about this.”

Pratt turned to her slowly, taking a long drag on the joint he and Faith were apparently sharing.

“Here,” he said after he had fully inhaled. He fumbled at his breast and pulled his badge off, throwing it to…no at Rook who barely caught it before it whacked her in the face. “See if I give a fuck. Now, don’t you have places to be? Like sitting on Jacob’s dick?” His face was dark, aggressive, angry past the yellow-brown residue of fading bruises. Pratt surveyed her with disgust, handing the joint back across the table to Faith without looking, without breaking his furious eye contact with Rook. Faith took the joint, looking uncomfortably between the two deputies. Rook’s gaze faltered and she stared at her boots for a moment.

“Pratt…Staci…I don’t know what to say. I don’t know how to fix this. He was manipulated by his brother…” Pratt stood abruptly, his chair sliding back and falling over with a loud bang that attracted the attention of all the other patrons of the bar, fortunately all of them were Rook’s deputized guns for hire. She held up a hand and they looked away apprehensively.

“Pratt…” Pratt asked, stepping toward her. “Manipulated.” He nodded, baring his teeth as he stepped toward her, shoulders tight under his crumpled uniform shirt. “Like he manipulated me?” he asked, jabbing a finger into his own chest. “Like he manipulated you?” Pratt jabbed a finger into Rook’s chest where her infected “WRATH” tattoo burned like a beacon. She took a step back to get away from the touch, but Pratt followed her as she retreated, chocolate brown eyes burning with rage. Changing tactics, Rook cupped a hand on Pratt’s outstretched forearm, held it firmly when he tried to pull back, shifted the grip to his hand.

“Staci. I’m trying to fix things. The Seeds, they all have a lot to answer for, but there are
bigger things coming. We have to find and talk to Joseph, which means we have to ally ourselves with his siblings. My…my personal feelings aside, they will all be held responsible for what they have done. And just because I’m…just because I care about Jacob doesn’t mean I don’t recognize what he did to you was wrong. It was horrible, and disgusting. I’m sorry this happened to you. I’m sorry it happened to me too. But something is coming. You can feel it. We can all feel it. Joseph may be right. We need to unify, we need to prepare.” As if on cue a radio broadcast began and Grace turned it up so she could hear. A hush fell over the bar as they all listened.

“…UN investigators say they fear Korea may also be gearing for nuclear war. In a shocking statement, Russia’s Vladimir Putin responded saying, quote ‘We must stand against the United State’s tyranny and bullying. Too long we have been accused of being the bully. Now it is time for the world to see who the true monsters are. If China and Korea are prepared to stand against them, Russia will too.’ President Trump declined to respond in light of recent allegations regarding his election and possible voter tampering by Russian agents…”

Rook met Pratt’s gaze steadily, still had not released his hand. She tugged him forward, pulling him into an embrace. He stood stiffly for a moment, but then relaxed, going almost limp in her arms with a small sigh.

“You have to promise me you won’t let him get in your head,” Pratt murmured, voice trembling. Rook pulled him more tightly into the hug.

“I won’t. I won’t, Staci. Please. Please just stick with me on this. We have to be strong.” She wriggled something into his hand as she released him and he stepped back, surveying his badge where she had dropped it onto his palm. He stared down at it for a long, calculating moment before he looked up at her again, chocolate brown eyes bloodshot and watery with captive tears.

“Don’t ask me to cull the weak,” he whispered, voice rough. Rook shook her head.

“We don’t cull the weak. We protect them. We make them strong.” She gripped his shoulder hard and nodded reassuringly when he brought the badge back to his chest. “Train. Hunt. Save. Sacrifice ourselves for others if necessary. Right? Are you with me?”

“I’m with you. Goddammit, I’m with you to the end, Rook,” he muttered, shaking his head at himself and running a hand through his greasy brown hair.

“Come back to the jail and take a hot shower, Staci,” Rook suggested.

“Whitehorse…”

“Will agree that marijuana has some medicinal value for those struggling with PTSD and anxiety. He’s not unreasonable, Pratt. Come on. We’ve got work to do.”
Only You

Chapter Summary

Jacob admits he needs something from Rook.

Jacob walked alongside Rook coolly, allowing her hand to brush his gently. They didn’t dare hold hands or kiss outside the walls of the jail for fear that they were being watched. The cult had to think that both John and Jacob were prisoners. As it was, they were trying to formulate a plan to free Hudson by promising the “release” of Jacob and John, but John had to be onboard with their plan first, and he still, stubbornly, was not.

They stepped into one of the guard towers and Jacob backed Rook into a corner, his hands rough at her waist as he smashed their lips together, hard. Rook’s sniper rifle clattered against the wall where it was strapped across her back. She adjusted it with a hand so her scope wouldn’t be damaged with a little annoyed motion.

“What was that for?” she asked as she pulled away from the kiss, a little breathless, face quizzical. The question hurt. He knew. He knew she thought this was just fucking, that she thought that what they had was nothing more than animal attraction. He shrugged and put on a nonchalant face.

“I was just thinking about what I want to do to you later,” he lied easily. He glanced out of the guard tower at the metal chair where Earl was sitting with a pair of binoculars in his lap, sipping black coffee, his boots propped up on the edge of the wall. The sheriff turned to look at him and raised a finger to the brim of his hat in greeting.

The shot came out of nowhere.

Earl clutched at his chest, gasping, mouth gaping for air.

“Aaah!” Earl cried out in pain, falling from his chair, mug shattering and coffee spilling as he retreated into the fetal position, hands clasped to his chest where the bullet had hit. Rook and Jacob leapt into action, dragging him into the guard tower, hearts racing.

“Earl!” Rook cried, voice trembling. She ripped Earl’s shirt open as he finally managed to get air into his lungs. She stopped once she had done so, surprise on her face, and then relief. “You were wearing a vest?” Earl took a painful breath, still clutching at his chest, curling in on himself in agony.

“You... you didn’t think all of this was fat, did you, Rook?” he managed to stutter out as he held his ribs, little wheezes of pain working their way out of him, his eyes watering, fogging his glasses. Rook pulled the glasses off carefully, tugged his hat off for good measure.

“You’re okay, you’re gonna be okay? Right?” Rook sounded frightened.

“Heh,” Earl chuckled painfully. “Jury’s still out,” the old sheriff told her, breaths still ragged through the pain. Where his arm met his shoulder, Jacob could see that it was already beginning to bruise, turning purple red. Gently, Jacob patted Earl’s shoulder, meeting his
surprisingly blue eyes.

“You’ll be alright, old man,” he assured him. Earl swallowed hard, wincing.

“Where the fuck did that come from?” Jacob never got the chance to find out if Earl was talking about his sudden friendliness, or the shot, because another one sounded with a nasty thzip and Rook screamed in agony. Her right forearm had barely been peeking out of the guard tower and it now sported a hole between radius and ulna, dripping hot red-black blood.

“We gotta find that fucking sniper,” Earl urged Rook, teeth clenched. She peered out of the tower carefully, making sure to stay within cover. Pulling her rifle off her back Rook tried to raise it to use the scope but found she couldn’t. She let out a little frustrated groan of pain.

“Rook, I can do this. I can get rid of the sniper. They’re here because they’re trying to extract me. It’s one of my men, I guarantee it.” She turned to look at him, face pale. Jacob sighed as he held a wide hand out for her rifle. “Do you trust me?”

The distorted notes of “Only You” warbled through Rook’s mind, reminding her of pain and loss of autonomy. Up to this point, Jacob had been kept in the jail, had no access to weapons, had been effectively tamed, made less dangerous without his own sniper rifle, which she had insisted on leaving with the Whitetail Militia. Rook had trusted him with her body, yes, but to trust him with her weapons? To actually trust him not to turn on her, like a wolf sensing weakness in easy prey? She swallowed.

“Rook. Hand me the rifle,” Jacob ordered softly. “Train. Hunt. Kill. Sacrifice,” his voice echoed through her mind amidst agonizing pain. Her hand faltered on her weapon as blood continued to drip from her wound.

“I…” She looked over to Earl, unsure, seeking his guidance. He nodded, but still she stayed frozen.

“Here.” Earl grabbed the rifle painfully, hissing in a breath as he thrust it toward Jacob, meeting his eyes with surety. Jacob took the weapon, glancing unhappily at Rook for a moment before he turned his attention to killing the would-be assassin. He winged the man, left him alive but injured enough to give up his mission. Leaving his prey alive was not a thing Jacob Seed had ever done in his life. Rook, he realized, had changed him.

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Rook’s arm was bandaged and Earl was in the care of Dr. Lindsey, resting on a cot, snoring softly. Jacob stepped into the room, scratching the back of his head awkwardly. Rook was absently stroking a thumb over Earl’s hand as he slept, a heart monitor beeping steadily next to him.

“How is he?” Jacob asked, finding with a shock that he actually cared.

“He’ll be alright; he’s resting with the assistance of some drugs. He didn’t want to sleep, wanted to be up patrolling. Bullet bruised his heart and lungs, but he’s tough. Survived a heart attack a few years ago,” Rook said softly, looking at her boss with fondness. “Stubborn old man.” The sheriff’s hat was on the side table next to him, his glasses folded next to it. She brushed an errant strand of blonde hair behind Earl’s ear with a chuckle.

“You know Sheriff Whitehorse didn’t start balding until you all moved in and started making trouble,” she laughed. “Poor guy.”
“He’s a good man,” Jacob admitted, surprising himself. “What’s that?” he asked, pointing at an object next to Earl’s hat with a small red bow affixed to it. Rook chuckled.

“Earl broke his favorite mug. Figured I’d replace it for him.” She held it up for Jacob to see. He smirked. “World’s Best Dad” the mug declared in black Comic Sans on plain white porcelain.

“He’ll love it,” Jacob laughed, but then he grew serious. He reached to his shoulder and unclipped the strap holding Rook’s custom Whitetail Militia rifle to his back. He held it out. “Figured you’d want this back,” he told her lightly. She met his eyes, swallowed, reached for her weapon with her left hand, so he kept a grip on it so she wouldn’t drop it. Rook frowned. Careful to make it clear he wasn’t trying to keep it from her, Jacob helped her put the strap over her shoulder and released it entirely, stepping back.

“Thanks.” Her face went through a series of expressions, but finally she tipped her chin up and raised one eyebrow, suggestion clear in her features. “Want to come back to my room?” Jacob cleared his throat, scratching absently at some of the scars on the side of his head.

“I…I can’t. I need something more, pup. Something more than being used…than being tolerated, like a dog. I ain’t the family pet,” he rumbled, confidence growing. He stepped closer to her, cupping one hand on her waist. “I don’t just want you, pup. I need you. This…this isn’t just fucking to me.” She surveyed him, reddening.

“I…well, I’ve got kind of a reputation here recently, as you can imagine, I figured that was mostly what you were after.”

“I don’t care about your reputation. I don’t care why it didn’t work out with Rachel, or with Jess, or with anyone else. They aren’t relevant.” Rook took a shuddering breath, started to reach up to him with her right hand, cried out. Jacob took her arm gently, bent down so she didn’t have to extend it upwards and planted the palm of her right hand on his cheek. “So don’t ask me to go back to your room if you can’t give me something more. Something deeper.”

“Jacob…” He closed his eyes, savoring her touch, knowing this would probably be the last time he would feel it on his skin. Turning his head, he kissed her palm, removed it and then stood to his full height. He laughed sadly, saying words he wasn’t supposed to say yet, words Joseph told him he would say after he had defeated Rook…not after Rook had defeated him.

“It was always only ever you,” he murmured, a sad smile settling softly over his features as he turned away to leave.

“Jacob…” He sighed, shoulders dropping, but he stopped walking toward the door. “Come back to my room with me,” she whispered. His heart skipped a beat and he turned back toward her. She stood there like a deer, frozen, alert. With a small smile, he nodded.

“Lead the way, pup.”

“You know,” she told him as she stepped around him to the door, taking his hand, “one of these days you’re going to have to stop calling me that.”
Yes, Sharky, Yes

Chapter Summary

In which John has a request and Sharky obliges.

Chapter Notes

There is oh, so much smut in this chapter. I've made it so you can skip the sex scene by skipping from one **--** to the next. You can still get the drift of the plot without the actual sex scene.

Strictly speaking, refusing to say “yes” went against his entire aesthetic, which just really, really pissed him off. He had spent his life finding things to say yes to, but he just… goddammit, he didn’t want to this time. It was not that he believed his brother over the deputy, especially now that she had admitted that, sure, maybe the world was ending and wanted to team up. It was something more. It was something about the way her stupid face made him feel when he looked at it. He had taken great satisfaction in branding her sin on her chest, so now, when she looked at him with those pleading green eyes all he could see was a sinner who had managed not only to evade and elude him, but capture him.

Part of him had known the meeting was a trick, though the deputy insisted it had not been intended as such. Her little pyromaniac watchdog had escalated the situation against direct orders. But that…that was a stupid face he liked, he decided, staring appreciatively at the backside clad in faded Walmart jeans. What he wouldn’t give to force Boshaw into some tailored clothing. The stubborn side of him wanted to pretend he wasn’t interested, that he didn’t want to plunge himself hilt deep into that wiry ass while holding Boshaw’s neck hard enough to make him gasp for air and demanding he admit his sins while John fucked him senseless… but the other side of him couldn’t help the flush that came to his cheeks any time it was Boshaw’s turn to guard him, or bring him the disgusting fare they called “food” here. Though he had tattooed “SLOTH” across his chest as his purported worst sin, his shirts intentionally worn where cult members could see it, his real worst sin was artfully tattooed in cursive just above a thatch of brown hair, neatly trimmed… “LUST.”

John rolled his eyes as he saw his lumbering older brother pad past the doorway of the solitary confinement section of the jail, his arm casually intertwined with the deputy’s. John had, of course, lied to the deputy when he told her he didn’t play for her team, but he didn’t want to tempt her to try to seduce him. That said, he did prefer to play more for the Yankees than the Red Sox. Especially that Yankee, he thought as Boshaw shifted his stance, his hips tilting attractively, though he was oblivious to it. He was too busy chatting with an older woman, what was her name? Addison? Annie? Whatever. But Christ, John breathed in hard as Boshaw bent over to rest his elbows on the table and his chin on his hands, giving a glorious view of his backside.

“Fuck,” John muttered, biting a knuckle. A clever little idea worked its way into his head, a way to say yes without fully saying yes, and, more importantly, a way to get what he
“Oh, Dep-you-tee,” he called loudly in a near sing-song, letting his Georgia accent seep into his pronunciation of the word. “Dep-you-tee! I need a word.”

“I want Boshaw. I want the door to this section closed, and I want privacy. Just one night. And then I’ll make sure you get your little friend Hudson safe and sound,” he promised with a charming smile. Rook looked flabbergasted. It clearly was the last thing she had been expecting him to demand. But, he was a lawyer. He wasn’t stupid enough to try to barter his freedom for Hudson’s. He already knew the answer to that request would be a resounding no.

“Absolutely fucking not,” Rook snapped. “You’re disgusting.” He raised a brow. “I’m not going to let you kill or rape my friend,” she finished, lip curling as she started to walk away.

“I’m not a rapist, Deputy,” he insisted in a beleaguered tone. “I promise you everything will be consensual.” Rook drew her brows together and searched John’s face skeptically, looking very confused.

“We are talking about Sharky Boshaw, right? Not Charles Lindsey?”

“Been there, done that,” John assured her in a bored tone, crossing his arms lazily over his chest where he sat on his cot.

“Sharky is straight,” Rook told him dismissively. John actually laughed out loud at that.

“Boshaw is a lot of things, but straight isn’t one of them, Deputy.” He saw surprise, then thoughtfulness, then realization flicker across her face as she considered and put all the little clues together.

“Oh.”

“So, Deputy. Do we have a deal?”

“I….uhm….just a minute.” The deputy left the small room that kept John’s cell cordoned off from the rest of the jail.

“What?!” he heard a voice, the sheriff’s, say, and then he could only hear murmuring. Footsteps approached a few moments later. Boshaw was behind the deputy, looking like a child who has just been told they’re going to Disneyland. The deputy looked a little sick, and very, very worried.

“Yes,” Rook insisted vehemently. “Sharky…” She turned to her friend with a little shake of her head. “Sharky has agreed quite enthusiastically. You don’t have to worry about me reneging on the deal. There will be a guard by the door in shouting distance so you can’t hurt Sharky. If they hear any distressed sounds, your night of fun is over.” Both John and Sharky immediately objected.

“Yes,” Rook insisted vehemently. “Sharky…” She turned to her friend with a little shake of her head. “Sharky has agreed quite enthusiastically. You don’t have to worry about me reneging on the deal. There will be a guard by the door in shouting distance so you can’t hurt Sharky. If they hear any distressed sounds, your night of fun is over.” Both John and Sharky immediately objected.

“Shorty, you ain’t been havin’ good sex if you don’t sound distressed at some point in the evening,” Boshaw told her with a mischievous expression. John grinned.
“I heartily concur.” Rook sighed, cheeks reddening through her exasperation.

“I have to keep you safe, Sharky.”

“What, you don’t think I can take this dumb asshole?”

“I’ve got something you might not be able to take,” John purred and Sharky swallowed.

“I’ll stand guard,” came a clear voice. Rook turned, looking surprised.

“Jess…”

“I ain’t here to help you,” Jess snapped nastily. “I’m here to make sure you don’t take down the Resistance from Jacob Seed’s bed.” Rook went pale at that. John raised his brows, opening his mouth to make a comment. “Shut up,” Jess cut him off. “I’m ace. I don’t give a shit about a bunch of sex noises. I’m not going to make it weird like pretty much anyone else will. And I ain’t got a problem puttin’ an arrow right between that ones eyes if he does hurt Sharky,” she said matter-of-factly. Rook looked to John, then to Sharky.

“Boys?”

“I’m cool with it.”

“Fine,” John agreed. “Get me a radio and I’ll get you your deputy.”

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Two hours later and Hudson was out of John’s bunker and with her friends, safe and sound, just as John had promised.

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“So, uh, I guess we should establish some ground rules, huh?” Boshaw asked sheepishly, scratching the back of his head beneath his ballcap. He smelled like cheap soap and his brown-blonde hair was still damp. John smiled a little. He had prepared for this. Cute. John was allowed to shower daily, but it just wasn’t the same without all his soaps and his multiway shower. Still, he too was clean. Boshaw waited until Rook had closed and locked the room’s door before he slipped his hoodie off. John was surprised to find that he wasn’t wearing a t-shirt underneath it and wondered if that was the norm. Small pink-brown nipples stood at attention to either side of a small patch of blonde-brown chest hair. Tattooed flames were depicted licking up the man’s sides around his ribcage. He was in better shape than John had been expecting, muscle definition clear in his abdomen despite a small coating of fat, likely from all the beer and fast food Boshaw consumed. But what John noticed more than anything was how Boshaw…how Sharky was trembling, shaking as though he was afraid.

John frowned.

“I’m not going to hurt you if you aren’t into that, Boshaw,” he told him in an impatient tone. He knew he and the rest of his family had earned a deserved reputation for hurting people, but John was not a rapist or an abuser when it came to sex. Sex was for pleasure, for all parties involved.

“It’s cold in here,” Sharky said dismissively, looking around the room like a trapped animal.
“Do you like kissing?” John asked him, apropos.

“What?” Sharky said stupidly.

“It’s a simple question,” John griped, but he stepped forward, slipping his own vest and dress shirt off to reveal his lean, muscular body. He allowed Sharky to survey him appreciatively, allowed him to take in John’s form, his tattoos. Sharky’s gaze ended by meeting John’s own. John stepped forward again, raised a hand, clenching his jaw when Sharky flinched. He completed the action, cupping Sharky’s jaw and he leaned in, planted a soft, chaste kiss on Sharky’s chapped lips. Hesitant, Sharky opened his mouth and accepted the touch from the tip of John’s tongue. Gentle, John lapped into his mouth and then pulled back a little, slotting Sharky’s bottom lip between his own and applying slight suction before pushing forward and pressing his tongue into Sharky’s mouth, seeking entrance. Sharky let loose a little gasp that burned through John like wildfire and John deepened the kiss, wrapping his other hand around behind Sharky’s head and knocking his cap off.

Sharky allowed the intrusion of John’s tongue, sparred with it with his own for a moment before he drew back suddenly.

“Can I admit somethin’?” Sharky requested, breathless, his cheeks going very red. John smirked.

“My, my, I didn’t expect confession to happen so early in the evening,” he teased. Sharky took a large step backwards, removing John’s touch from his body.

“No, I’m serious,” he said earnestly, voice actually trembling. John cocked his head, shrugged.

“Alright.” Sharky looked down at his shoes for a long, long moment before he looked back up, shamefaced.

“I… I ain’t never done this… with a dude. I mean, I wanted to, just… haven’t had the opportunity.” John’s eyebrows flew up. Well, there went his plans for the evening. Rough sex was not appropriate for anyone’s first time, and, regardless what Boshaw or anyone else might think of him, he wasn’t a monster. “I mean,” Boshaw stumbled forward, digging his hands into his jean pockets, “I’ve sucked a dick and had my dick sucked by a dude, I just…” John stepped forward again, looking at Sharky kindly.

“Did you intend to do this with someone you cared about?” he asked, pointblank. Sharky shrugged, looking everywhere but John’s face.

“No really, but… shit, I don’t wanna sound like a girl, but can you please be gentle with me? I’d like to be able to sit sometime in the next month,” Sharky ground out, clearly embarrassed at the request. John chuckled.

“Take off your pants and I’ll show you how gentle I can be,” he said, putting a gentle hand on Sharky’s shoulder, trying to reassure him. This would be no fun at all if Sharky couldn’t relax. Sharky swallowed with an audible click, but he tugged his jeans down. John’s eyebrows again flew upward and he thought absently that he was going to sprain the muscle responsible for the movement if he kept doing that.

Sharky Boshaw, bless his handsome, well-hung heart, was going commando.

“Well. I’ve half a mind to let you top, given that equipment,” John admitted.
“Who says we can’t do both?” Sharky challenged, sounding a little more confident now that John had complimented him. John met his eyes and smiled.

“Maybe another time when I’ve had time to prepare. I assume you…”

“Yep,” Sharky cut him off. He clearly didn’t want to talk details. He bent over and dug in the pocket of his jeans. “And I brought protection and lube, like you asked for.”

“Good,” John purred. “I’m clean…”

“So am I,” Sharky said.

“Nonetheless…”

“Yep,” Sharky cut him off again. “So?”

“Sit,” John instructed, pushing Sharky back toward the cot. Sharky obeyed with a little huff, hands gripping the sides of the mattress. He was still nervous. Fussily spreading a blanket on the floor at Sharky’s feet, John bent down on his knees and spread Sharky’s legs, running fingernails lightly up the inside of his thighs. Sharky shuddered, but it was clearly a motion of pleasure this time, not fear. John kissed the insides of his thighs, working his way forward until his nose was brushing Sharky’s cock, which was already beginning to stand to attention. He lightly brushed a hand over it and Sharky let out a soft little moan that had John rock hard in his pants. Annoyed at the tightness, he shimmied out of them and then returned to his spot between Sharky’s legs taking his cock into his mouth without warning.

Sharky let a punched out squeak escape from him and John laughed, sending vibrations through Sharky, who grasped the edges of the mattress harder. He was fully erect now, his dick a velvety steel rod that curved slightly upward. Sharky moved one hand from the mattress to dig deep into John’s hair, pushing on the back of his head encouragingly. John worked his mouth over Sharky’s cock, adding his hands and massaging Sharky’s balls until he tasted salty precum. John looked up long enough to meet Sharky’s eyes and take in the desperate expression. Sharky’s bottom lip was clamped in his teeth and his brows were drawn together in concentration. As he brought his mouth back upwards with an adept swirl of his tongue, John released Sharky’s dick with an obscene-sounding pop.

“Oh fuck,” Sharky whispered, untangling his fingers from John’s hair. John half stood, bending over to kiss Sharky, giving him a taste of himself. All at once, Sharky unraveled, jamming the fingers of both hands back in John’s hair and tugging him down, turning and lying back on the bed until John was fully on top of him and their erections were grinding together. John canted his hips professionally, smiling at the little huff of air it forced out of Sharky. John pressed his hands at Sharky’s waist, rocking against him and kissing him, pulling his head back long enough to say, “Turn over.” Sharky obliged and John pinned him down, forcing his erection into the cot and spreading two pale ass cheeks appreciatively. Sharky whimpered when John pressed a spit-moistened finger against his hole. “Lube,” John commanded, and Sharky wriggled beneath him, grabbing the little bottle from the floor and handing it to John. John poured some into his hand and onto Sharky, and this time pressed the tip of his finger a little deeper. Again, Sharky made a frightened little sound and John stopped, slowed. He leaned forward so that his mouth was next to the pink shell of Sharky’s ear. “Relax,” John whispered, brushing a wisp of short hair behind Sharky’s ear. “We’ve got all night. We’ll take our time,” he assured his partner. John’s cock ached and gave a little jump of protest, but he truly had no intentions of hurting Sharky.

John pulled at Sharky’s shoulder until he turned over, and he was unsurprised to find that
Sharky’s cock had lost some of its enthusiasm. Concerned, John frowned.

“I’m really not going to hurt you, Boshaw. We don’t have to have sex if you’re not into it,” he offered, ignoring his disappointment. Sharky was quiet for a moment.

“I think…I think I’d feel a little more relaxed if I knew you better,” he admitted, not looking at him. “I think you’re real fuckin’ hot, but I’ve only ever known you as a douchebag who tortures people.” John nodded, considering.

“Understandable. I guess we’ll have to get to know one another, then. I was born July twenty-seventh nineteen eighty-six,” John told him. Sharky looked up with a smile.

The two spent the better part of three hours lying on the small cot side by side sharing personal information, getting to know one another. They had more in common than John would have expected. Shitty family life, bad dating life and a plethora of personality quirks to show for it. John noticed absently that Sharky had started to lean into him the longer they spoke, had relaxed and stopped that subtle trembling. When next John turned to look directly at Sharky, the look on his face was full of want and interest. John tipped his chin to kiss him again and now Sharky pressed his tongue forward demandingly, kissing him hard and crawling on top of John, rubbing them together earnestly.

This time when John flipped Sharky over and pressed a fingertip to that hot, tight spot, Sharky moaned and pushed back, enveloping John’s finger in tight, Jesus fucking Christ, so tight heat. John stretched him gently, murmuring words of encouragement, praising him every time he took another finger inside of him until, at last, he was ready. John leaned down and bit Sharky’s ear lightly, whispering,

“You feel absolutely amazing, Boshaw. God, you’re so tight. I need to move.”

“Then fuckin’ do it,” Sharky ordered, fingers wadded in the thin sheets of the cot. John groaned and started to move, pushing in and out in a stuttered rhythm as he struggled to keep himself under control, struggled not to grab Sharky’s hips and slam in and out of him in rough, hard strokes that would have hurt him. Finally, John was able to pick up a rhythm, tilting his hips and letting Sharky sink back onto him as they moved together, panting hard on the small, rickety cot. Sharky let loose a groan of pleasure when John reached around his hips and took his cock in his hand, stroking it to match his own movements.

Growing more and more excited, John moved faster, murmuring to Sharky as he did so.

“You’re doing so good, God, you’re so hot, yes, yes, fuck, yes,” he ground out, voice going deep as he clutched one hand earnestly at Sharky’s hip, their skin slapping together. He felt Sharky tighten, felt his cock twitch, nearly passed out from sheer arousal at the noise that poured out of Sharky as he came, spurtling thick release across the sheets.

John slowed now, pulling Sharky more upright so they were both on their knees on the cot, but Sharky’s back was pressed tight against John’s chest. John wrapped a hand delicately around Sharky’s throat while he other held his waist and he pumped deep into him in slower, gentler movements, kissing the side of his jaw, pressing a finger just inside his lips. Sharky sucked on John’s finger and he lost it, felt himself explode into a million pieces, spilling himself inside Sharky. None of that surprised him. What did surprise him was the earnest way the words,
“Oh, yes, Sharky, yes!” poured out of his mouth as he orgasmed.

They laid side-by-side, half snoozing, John’s hand resting lightly on Sharky’s chest.

“Alright,” he finally said, voice resigned.

“Hhmm?” Sharky asked sleepily, yawning.

“Yes.”

“What?” Sharky sounded only marginally more awake.

“I said ‘yes.’ Yes…I…I’ll work with the Resistance. You won me over,” John told him awkwardly. Sharky turned to him, expression a little quizzical.

“Well, shit,” Sharky muttered, but he was too drowsy to question it further.

“I guess you’ll be wanting out of here,” John said, voice resigned.

“You said ‘all night,’” Sharky countered, snuggling more tightly against John. John huffed a laugh.

“Are we going to sleep with the lights on?” John asked.


“You alive in there, Boshaw?”

“So far. Hit the lights, will you?” A moment later, they were lying in utter darkness. The last sound John heard as he drifted off was the soft breathing of a sleeping Sharky Boshaw.

**--**

“Did…did he explain why he said ‘yes’?” Rook asked, sounding hesitant to know any details, which was true. Sharky crossed his arms over his chest, looking pleased with himself.

“I’m just that good,” he assured her smugly.

“Well…alright then. Well done, I guess?”

“You bet your ass,” John said, walking up with his brother Jacob and holding out a hand. “Deputy.” She took it, shaking it firmly.

“John. Welcome to the Resistance.”
“I can’t believe you’re all on our side now,” Rook said, chewing thoughtfully on the last bite of her sandwich. She took a drink of lukewarm beer, crinkling her nose at the stuff. It wasn’t particularly tasty, but the water was still occasionally running with Bliss contamination, so the Resistance drank whatever was available.

“I never said I was on your side specifically,” John said in a snotty tone as he looked down the table at Sharky, who pointedly avoided his gaze. Rook gave John a little smile of encouragement, offering him a beer, which he took between thumb and forefinger as though she had handed him a bottle of biohazardous waste.

“He’ll come around,” she told him softly. He scoffed and stood.

“Like I care,” he snapped, storming off. Jacob chuckled.

“Well, you have to admit what he did to get Sharky in bed with him was extremely manipulative,” Rook said quietly, not wanting Sharky to overhear. He had resolutely refused to talk about it, had spent time around John, but only in the company of others, never alone. Rook frowned. It wasn’t a pairing she would ever have expected, but now that it had happened she kind of hoped it would work. They would be good for each other if they could get past one another’s issues.

“I hope you know I don’t think the same thing about how you got me into bed,” Jacob teased, reaching a finger out to tuck a strand of red hair behind her ear. He frowned a little.

“Didn’t know you dyed your hair,” he commented. Rook blushed, running a hand through her hair self consciously, knowing her roots were starting to show.

“It’s naturally dishwater blonde,” she admitted, “but I like it red.”

“I’d like to see the natural color,” Jacob purred.

“It’s basically the same color as Whitehorse’s hair.”

“What’s left of it, anyway,” Jacob joked.
“Stop,” Rook ordered, offended on Earl’s behalf, but she had a little smirk on her face. Jacob looked up at the night sky where stars were twinkling merrily, the moon new, allowing the purple-blue band of the Milky Way to flicker brightly in the clear sky. His face became morose and his mood shifted to something dark and brooding. Rook put a hand lightly on his and he jumped, reaching for the hunting knife strapped at his thigh. His eyes focused on her and he relaxed, swallowed.

“Don’t spook me like that, pup,” he warned in an annoyed tone. She didn’t argue, but rubbed her thumb lightly on his blotchy, scarred forearm.

“Okay?” He looked down at the table, back up at the stars, licked his lower lip, looking for all the world like a wolf with that nervous motion.

“I feel like a trapped animal in here.”

“Not a nice feeling, is it?” she asked, the pointed question unbidden. He glanced back at her, guilt on his rugged features. The tense moment passed and Rook stood, holding a hand out to him in offering. “Let’s go for a walk,” she suggested.

“I don’t want to pace around this fucking jail again,” he told her, frustrated.

“I never said ‘the jail,’” she pointed out, raising an eyebrow imperiously. Looking surprised, he accepted her hand, standing and letting her lead. She lead him to her pickup truck, gesturing to the passenger’s seat. He buckled up and cocked his head at her.

“Where are we going?”

“Doesn’t matter. Roll your window down, feel the wind on your face, howl at the moon.”

“You can’t see the moon,” he objected as she started the truck. She laughed at him.

“You know what I mean, mountain man. Let’s get you out of that cage for a while.”

“This is dangerous,” he groused, knowing that if a cultist caught them, it would be very bad.

“Life is dangerous. Come on, just relax.” Rook drove for a long time, taking winding roads, some paved, some caliche, some gravel until finally she pulled up at the top of a foothill in the Henbane River Valley. From it, they could dimly make out the lights of the jail as well as the silhouette of Joseph’s destroyed statue on the horizon. Rook reached into the backseat of the truck and pulled out a large quilt, which she spread on the soft grass. She laid down on her back and patted the spot next to her for Jacob to join. He obliged, looking at her strangely. There was so much about this woman he didn’t know, that he didn’t understand yet. How could he have abused such a beautiful person? Shame suffused him as Rook turned to him, those startling green eyes glittering in the light of the stars.

“We’re here to look at the stars, not at me,” she informed him. The console lights of her truck turned off, so she was forced to guess at the look on his face when Jacob finally turned his head, folding his arms behind his neck as a pillow as he stared upwards with her. A meteor soared across the sky, there and then gone in a bright streak of light. Jacob heard a little stuttered sound of wonder from Rook’s throat and his chest swelled with an odd sensation he couldn’t quite explain. Relief flooded through him at the sound of the night, at crickets chirping and elk calling and a whippoorwill singing somewhere nearby. He felt more free than he had felt in months. How did
They had been working together now for the better part of three months, initially with Jacob free to roam and control his men, and then with Jacob as a “prisoner” when one of the cult members saw him in a meeting with Rook outside the Grand View Hotel. They had to be careful; one wrong move and Joseph would see their treachery coming from a mile away, would possibly turn on his siblings. John had been a dangerous gamble. It was fortunate, ultimately, that Sharky had knocked him out and they had actually taken him prisoner because heaven knew what it would have taken to get him on their side if it weren’t for Sharky’s…wiles, Jacob thought uncomfortably.

Prior to those three months Jacob had been fascinated with Rook, intrigued, yes, but nothing more. She had simply been a pawn in the game. Now though...now she was something else. She turned back to him and he could tell from the silhouette of her brow she was frowning.

“What?”

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered, holding a hand out to brush the backs of his knuckles against her soft cheek.

“What about it?” she joked. He didn’t answer, just stared at her silhouette, feeling want and need flow through him. He rolled over so that he was hovering over her, weight balanced on knees and elbows. She didn’t object when he leaned down and kissed her. She objected even less when he tugged her uniform shirt open and ran his lips from her collarbone to a nipple, sucking it into his mouth as his right hand caressed her other breast. She took a shuddering breath through an open mouth, her chest arcing upwards toward his touch.

Jacob grasped her tiny ribcage desperately, like a drowning man clinging to a life preserver. He pressed his groin down into her, rutting his need hard into her leg.

“Oh fuck,” she whispered as she squirmed underneath him, trying to wriggle out of her jeans. He helped her, yanking them down roughly with an urgency that had her breathing raggedly. He pressed his mouth to her cunt, already wet with anticipation, dipping a talented tongue into her and lapping gently as he pressed a finger inside her. She made a little panting sound of want, digging her fingers hard into his hair and tugging until he groaned. He liked it when she was rough with him. Rook pushed his face deeper into her, grinding herself up into the wet, welcome roughness of his tongue and the subtle slickness of his lips as he stroked fingers in and out in slow, measured movements.

Jacob tipped his head back to take a desperate breath and she yanked him up by his camo jacket, kissing him hard, tasting herself on his breath. He flipped them, he felt deeper arousal course through him as she said, “Lose the pants,” in a voice gone breathy with lust. Obdient to no one but her, he kicked off his jeans and his boots, lying on his back propped up on his elbows. She stripped off her shirt and bra, tossing them haphazardly to the side before she leaned down to the thick thatch of bright red hair between his legs where his erect cock stood at stark attention. Gentle at first, and then with an almost painful suction, Rook engulfed him with her mouth, cupping his balls and, he realized with a little gasp, pressing a wet finger where he had not realized one would be welcome.

“Oh fuck, pup,” he gasped as her finger pressed something deep inside him that made him see stars. Who was this woman, he wondered, dazed as her touch overwhelmed him. She moved her finger in a little stroking motion and his hips stuttered upwards, pressing his cock deeper into her mouth. She released his dick with a slurp and bent back upright, wiping a hand across her mouth and removing her finger. He made an embarrassing little sound that he immediately bit back as she did do. He laid there for a moment, stunned, but then she moved again,
dropping down onto him with a sudden tight warmth that made him throw his head back. “Oh ho, oh shit, Rook,” he growled, grabbing her waist as she rode him like she had something to prove. “Slow down,” he warned her, but she increased her speed. Feeling a little stab of anger, he flipped them abruptly, slamming himself into her hard. She squeaked and he smirked. “Taste of your own medicine,” he gasped out, plunging into her with slower, more deliberate movements, rubbing the inside of her in practiced, strong rolls of his hips.

Rook gasped, feeling the length and girth of him as he moved, as he took back control. Pleasure overwhelmed her as he pressed his hips into hers, effectively pinning her to the ground as he rocked in and out of her, his fists planted to either side of her ribs. She felt herself tighten around him, felt her breath go short and there, yes, yes, yes THERE, and with a trembling cascade of ecstasy pouring through her, she cried out incoherently, scratching her nails down his scarred back and sinking her fingers into his buttocks as he rocked into her.

Jacob slid his arms under Rook’s shoulders, hooking his fingers over the top of them and pulling their bodies closer together as he changed his movements from pumping to grinding, letting friction do the work for him as he kissed her long and deeply, their tongues sparing playfully. He suckled and licked a line of hickies down her throat as she bent it back to expose the soft, pale skin there just above her jugular. Careful, but with enough force to leave a mark, he bit her and she gasped, clenching around him again as he did so. He made note of that reaction for later with a little proud smirk. He rocked into her until she came again, and then again before he finally pulled back and out of her. She made a keening little noise of protest until he covered her wet cunt with his mouth again, sucking and lapping at her until she had balled half the quilt up in her fists, making mewling noises of overwhelmed pleasure. He pushed her on her side and slid in behind her, pressing into the familiar warmth again. Rook tucked herself back into him and they rocked slowly, languorously until finally, like a pleasant fire, Jacob felt heat flickering up from his toes and seeping into his core and he made a growling, choked sound next to Rook’s ear and spilled himself inside of her.

They laid there for a long time, curled up into one another, watching the stars.

Jacob probably thought she didn’t notice.

He probably thought Rook wasn’t paying attention to the little repeated patterns he was tracing into the skin of her chest and belly as his hand roamed, raising goosebumps on her flesh in the cold night air.

Perhaps he wasn’t even aware of it himself, but she noticed, and she knew what he traced there…

“I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you...”
Monsters and Men

Chapter Summary

Sharky confronts John. Rook confronts the cult.

Chapter Notes

No smut this time, sorry, but there is a bit of possibly triggering verbage regarding John and Sharky's relationship, so proceed at your own risk.

Canon-typical violence and a major character injury occur in this chapter.

There’s a big fuckin’ difference in being interested in the idea of something, and actually being interested in the thing itself. Take this douchebag John, for instance. In theory, the idea of being friends with benefits, or shit, even boyfriends was really enticing. In practice, though, the guy was terrifying. He’d tortured people, hurt people, and still didn’t see the problem with that. Sharky had initially been super into the idea of fucking or getting fucked by John, but when the moment had actually come he had found himself terrified that he was going to be assaulted, or worse. He had put on a brave face for Rook, but when that door had closed behind him it had sounded like a death sentence.

But then John had been tender. Kind. They’d talked, gotten to know one another, and for just a moment John wasn’t a monster anymore, he was just a flawed dude with severe narcissism. Sharky had just started to think that maybe John had the capacity to be a caring person until he approached Sharky a few days later, after he had joined the Resistance, propositioning him with a lurid expression on his face. Sharky had been fine with John’s proposal to fuck, had consented to it, but the abrupt feeling of the cold brick wall against his cheek as John yanked his jeans down and had rough sex with him outside in the open didn’t feel quite right, had made him feel a little nauseated when it was over.

“All good?” John had asked with a little satisfied smile as he zipped himself up.

“All good, homie,” Sharky had lied. He told himself he wasn’t a “lovey dovey” kind of guy, that it wasn’t the lack of affection that bothered him. It was, he concluded after about five beers, the lack of anything other than lust radiating off John when he looked at him with those predatory blue eyes.

The next time John had interacted with him had been during a meeting while they were planning the Resistance’s next move. He had leaned in close to Sharky and murmured in his ear,

“I’d love to see your lips wrapped around my dick, Boshaw. Meet me at the south guard tower after.” Sharky had resolutely avoided the tower, had taken a patrol shift instead. The next time he’d seen John, it was in the alley down one side of the jail. John had grabbed him by his upper arm. “What the fuck, Boshaw? I thought I told you I wanted you in the guard tower.”
“You don’t own me, doucherocket.” Sharky had snapped, trying to yank his arm free but John had his fingers tangled in the sleeve of his hoodie. “Let go of me,” Sharky had protested, squirming in John’s grip, which was starting to hurt.

“Hey! What’s going on over here?” the sheriff had asked, approaching with his hands on his hips, his right hand lower, close to his gun holster. John’s lip had curled and he had released Sharky with a little huff.

“Nothing, Sheriff,” John bit out. He had stormed off and Sharky leaned back against the jail wall, taking a deep breath and putting his hands on his knees. “You alright, son?” The sheriff asked in a gentle tone, putting a steadying hand on Sharky’s arm. Sharky did not have a good track record with Earl Whitehorse. He’d pissed in the back of his patrol car, been arrested by him numerous times, thrown up on him on one occasion and nearly lit him on fire on another. Sheriff Earl Whitehorse had every reason to hate Sharky, but yet here he was, making sure he was alright. Sharky looked up at him, grateful.

“I’m fine, sir. Thanks.”

“He gives you any trouble of the variety you aren’t interested in, you let me know and I’ll take care of it,” Whitehorse told him, face earnest. The sheriff started to walk away, but stopped himself, turned back. ‘Boshaw, I know it ain’t any of my business, but I’ve seen enough in my line of work to know that you’d be better off telling him he’s bothering you. You can have Rook or I with you if you need it.”

“Yes, sir, thank you, sir,” Sharky had mumbled, red-faced.

So now, as John approached, Sharky was prepared to tell him exactly what he felt, especially with Whitehorse sitting casually nearby, sipping coffee and pretending to read a Western novel. Sharky met the sheriff’s gaze over the top of his book briefly and nodded very slightly, appreciative.

“Boshaw,” John greeted tersely. He glanced over at Whitehorse and rolled his eyes. “I assume your bodyguard isn’t going anywhere.” John could be frighteningly astute. Sharky squirmed and shook his head, gathered his courage and then launched into a speech he’d practiced in the toothpaste-splattered mirror in his trailer last night.

“I’m…I’m tired of you treating me like a piece of meat, Seed. Now, that first night wasn’t so bad, but you’ve been a real fuckin’ asshole since then. I’m not your property and I’m not your slave. If you put your hands on me again, I will fuckin’ kill you, I will burn your house down, I will…” Sharky felt his temper rising, but he heard a pointed clearing of the sheriff’s throat and reined in his anger, realizing belatedly that he shouldn’t be admitting to wanting to commit felonies in front of a law enforcement officer. He took a deep, calming breath and glared at John stubbornly, frustrated that he had forgotten most of his practiced speech in the light of John’s stupid, handsome face.

John’s eyebrows rose at the sudden tirade.

“I…I didn’t realize I had made you feel that way,” he admitted, and it sounded surprisingly genuine. “I…I’m sorry. I have to go,” he blurted, and he was gone. Sharky turned to the sheriff.

“You know I wasn’t actually gonna kill him or burn his house down, right?”

“We’ll add it to the wanted poster,” Earl told him dryly, taking a sip of coffee and
turning the page. “You alright?”

“Yeah,” Sharky said, frowning. “Do you think he was lying?”

“I’ve been lied to by that man enough times to recognize it when it’s happening, but... this time I’m not sure,” Earl admitted with a regretful look. “Just be careful, Boshaw.”

“You got it, hoss.” Sharky told him with a little grin, feeling better as he stood and stretched.

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The plan was to meet with some of John’s people, especially those who were more inclined to be more loyal to him than his brother Joseph. The Resistance members stood warily at the meeting place, all armed, all nervous. The cultists stepped out, looking angry at seeing their leader with his hands cuffed in front of him. John acted the part well, snarling at Rook when she gently pushed him forward. Jacob was standing awkwardly nearby, also in cuffs and trying very hard to look like they had not been consensually locked onto his large wrists by Rook, who had made a crude joke about using them again later in the bedroom. Sharky was standing just in front and to the side of Jacob, holding his shotgun and making aggressive eye contact with the cult members.

“We need to speak with Joseph,” Rook told the cultists. They glanced at one another, lips curling.

“You will do no such thing, sinner,” one of them, an apparent leader, said.

“I have two of the heralds and I’m willing to trade them for one meeting with Joseph,” Rook said, reasonably but firmly. One of them chuckled, adjusting his weapon, putting everyone on edge.

“From what I hear,” another said in a soft, dangerous tone, “One of the heralds sold us out. One of the heralds has turned his back on the Father.” Sharky felt his stomach drop at that, prepared for a fight.

It was over in a moment. One of the cultists raised and fired his weapon at Jacob. There was a grunt and a cry of pain, and then a cacophony of gunfire and then silence. Cultists laid on the ground, dead or dying. Two Resistance members had minor wounds, one on his arm, and another through the thigh. Those left alive turned, shocked. John Seed held his belly with his cuffed hands, face going pale.

“Help me,” he said as he collapsed backwards, blood seeping through his blue shirt and black vest.

“He stepped right in front of me,” Jacob whispered, eyes wide, face shocked. “The little bastard stepped right in front of me. Why did he do that?” Sharky didn’t answer, just bent down and held his hands urgently to John’s belly. He felt the taut muscles there spasming, felt John struggling to breathe.

“I’m sorry,” John told him, “I’m sorry, Boshaw.” His handsome face was earnest, his brows pulled up in the middle in agony as he took a stuttered breath, tears watering in his eyes from the pain of his wound.

“You’ll be alright,” Sharky told John, hoping it was true. “You’ll be fine. Goddammit, Dep, get these fuckin’ cuffs off him.” Rook leaned down and released John’s wrists.
“Why wasn’t he wearing the vest I gave him?” Rook snapped.

“He said something about how it didn’t match his aesthetic,” Tracey Lader muttered, rolling her eyes.

“Jesus Christ,” the junior deputy griped. “Get him in the truck. Hurry. And someone radio Dr. Lindsey to get ready for a gunshot wound to the abdomen.”

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For all that Dr. Lindsey would gripe that he was “just a vet,” he was an extremely talented doctor who could treat more than one species. He had been top of his veterinary class at UC Davis and was well on his way to becoming a world-renowned research vet when he was outed and slandered by a jealous postdoc who he wouldn’t share his research with. Rumors were spread about him throughout his academic circles and the next thing he knew, no university would touch him for fear of him being a liability. So, he had moved to Hope County, Montana for a new start.

It was fortunate for John Seed that this was the case. Few human doctors had as much experience removing shotgun pellets from animals as a country vet did…even if the animal in question was a human being this time. Lindsey knocked Seed out with isoflurane, stitched all the little nicks in his intestines and sewed the many holes in his abdomen closed with practiced ease, though he bitched the entire time about how he was “just a vet” and muttered that Seed would probably die anyway without an actual doctor caring for him, as though Lindsey wasn’t one hell of a doctor himself, even if he was occasionally scatterbrained due to his anxiety. He prescribed John a broad spectrum antibiotic actually marketed for horses, which meant that each pill was the size of the end of John’s thumb, but he accepted the medication and took them weakly, griping about the damage to his custom tattoos on his belly.

There was a soft knock on the door of the room they had moved John to after he had joined the Resistance.

“What?” he snapped, wincing as he adjusted himself on the bed. Sharky peeked his head in.

“Hey, Swiss cheese,” Sharky greeted. John chuckled, regretted it.

“Come in,” he muttered weakly. Sharky obeyed, squatting down next to John’s cot.

“You comfortable?”

“What do you think?” John asked dryly. Sharky shrugged, but he grabbed another pillow and helped lift John up gently, sliding the pillow behind John’s back.

“Better?”

“Hmm,” was all John said in response. The two existed in silence for a few long moments before Sharky finally said,

“You saved your brother, you know. Probably saved his life. I saw what you did. You grabbed that cultist’s shotgun, yanked it down. Too bad you forgot you were standing in front of it, dipshit.” John rolled his eyes, swallowed. “I bet Jacob sure as shit appreciates it.”

“I didn’t do it for him,” John murmured. Sharky frowned, but John refused to meet his eyes.
“Well, then why the fuck did you take a shotgun blast to the guts?” Sharky saw John clench his jaw under a dark brown beard gone a little scruffy from lack of care.

“I did it for you,” John admitted finally, looking up at him with cold blue eyes. “Mostly because you were too stupid to step out of the way when they were aiming at my brother, dumbass.”

“Oh,” Sharky blurted, eyebrows raising. “Oh.”

“Yeah,” John said, sounding irritated. “I’m just lucky the fucking idiot was out of buckshot and had loaded his shotgun with birdshot, or I’d be dead.”

“Oh,” Sharky said again.

“Shut up,” John snapped.

“Why are you so goddamn mean to me?” Sharky griped, feeling those roiling emotions coming up again like a pesky fly. “Everybody’s mean to me, it’s like I don’t have feelings, but I do. I got lots of feelings,” he declared. John chuckled again, groaning and holding a hand to his belly.

“Try being me. Everyone just thinks I’m a monster, and maybe I am. But…I’m trying not to be. I just don’t know how.” Sharky sighed.

“Well, for starters you don’t treat people you care about like objects. But you’ve got a pretty good start putting yourself in front of a bullet for somebody. I just wanna point out again that you could have pushed his shotgun up and nobody would’ve gotten shot,” Sharky said, tone smug.

“You’re lucky I’m in this bed, or I’d punish you for that,” John purred. Sharky crossed his arms over his chest.

“See, that’s the kind of thing I’m talking about, you don’t fuckin’ threaten people who care about you.”

“You care about me?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You did.”

“Fine. Fine, so I care about you. But you’re a real fuckin’ asshole, Seed.”

“Well, and you’re a dumbass, Boshaw.” They stared angrily at one another for a moment, but then John softened, calmed. He sighed.

“I could blame the system. I could blame my parents. Hell, I could even blame my brothers for how I am, but the truth is I don’t know how to be a good person. I don’t know how to be…nice,” John finally said, though his face and his tone made it seem like the word tasted disgusting as it rolled off his tongue.

“You don’t have to be nice,” Sharky told him, taking his hand carefully, feeling awkward as he did so. “Just stop being such a dick.” Bright blue eyes flickered up to meet Sharky’s.

“I don’t suppose you’d be interested in trying again?”

“I don’t think you can fuck for a few weeks, John,” Sharky pointed out. John sighed,
pinching the bridge of his nose between the thumb and forefinger of his free hand.

“I meant... I meant the relationship part of it. If that’s something you’re interested in.” Sharky pulled his hand out of John’s abruptly and John’s face fell.

“So you, like, like me?”

John growled, face irritated.

“I couldn’t tell you why, Boshaw, but yes, I ‘like, like’ you.” Sharky nodded, biting his bottom lip thoughtfully.

“I’ll think about it,” he promised. There was a knock and then a ginger head poked into the room. It was Jacob. “I’ll talk to you later,” Sharky told John as he stepped toward the door.

“I look forward to it.”
Joseph believes that John is dead. John hears his own eulogy and Sharky shares something with him.

Chapter Notes

There is an absolutely ridiculous amount of fluff in this one but it is actually important to the overall plot.

There's also a lot of Hurt/Comfort for John Seed in this one, if that's your thing :D

The broadcast they had all just watched began to repeat and they all stared at John where he sat, his face pale and intentionally blank but Rook could see his hands trembling. She could see him swallowing hard as he heard his brother’s words about him. As he heard what Joseph really thought of him, now that he thought he was dead.

“My brother John was loved by few. Feared by many. Misunderstood by all…except me…John was not born a monster.” John took a shuddering breath and Rook swore she could see tears gathering in his blue eyes, saw pain flicker across those handsome features. Joseph continued in the broadcast, grim and certain. “He was just a child when our family was torn apart. He was loving. Kind. Full of joy…He was easily preyed upon. John was not perfect. Sometimes he was not even—” Sharky turned off the television and sat next to John, putting a hand gently on his shoulders. John shook it off, but the movement was lethargic, not crisp and angry as he usually would be about unwanted touch.

Earl Whitehorse surveyed the young man, feeling empathy for him. He wasn’t a monster; he had the capacity to change for good, but those words coming from a loved one could drive anyone over the edge, especially in front of an audience.

“Don’t any of you have any work to do?!” Earl demanded fiercely, taking control. “Go on, git! Footy, I know you haven’t finished the welding on those doors, hop to, goddammit. Rook, you better shake your head or your eyes will get stuck like that,” he snapped as he saw her staring at John. Jacob met Earl’s eyes and nodded in thanks, glancing once at his brother as he took Rook’s hand and led her away. After a few moments of Resistance members fleeing the sheriff’s wrath, John and Sharky were left alone with Earl guarding the door to make sure they were left in peace.

“I’ve got something I think you need to hear,” Sharky told John.

“Save it,” John said dully, blue eyes gone somehow flat and lifeless. Sharky sighed.

“I wasn’t askin’,” Sharky told him. “Come on. You need a hand? Here,” he pried John up out of his chair, letting John sling his arm across his shoulders and helping him toward the door. “I
don’t think he can go anywhere on his own with his injuries,” Sharky told Earl. “I need to take John by his house. It’s important.” Earl frowned.

“Just make sure you’re back by tomorrow, son. And make sure you radio me when you get to the lodge safely.”

“Yes, sir.” Sharky loaded a wordless John into his Jeep, hopping into the driver’s seat and shifting the vehicle into gear. He flipped the radio on as he coasted down the hill from the jail. “Oh John” was playing on the radio. With an angry motion, John flipped the radio off, making a sound of displease and distress in his throat before he turned to stare resolutely out the passenger window, refusing to look at Sharky. For once in his life, Sharky Boshaw recognized the need for silence. He rolled the windows down and just drove, letting John think. Occasionally Sharky would put a hand on John’s leg when he heard what sounded like a soft sob break out of him.

After a nearly hour-long drive, Sharky pulled up to the Lodge, radioing Whitehorse, and greeting the Resistance members who came out to join him. John didn’t make any comments of disgust or displeasure at the rearrangement and redecoration of his home, which told Sharky everything he needed to know about his mood. He hoped no one had erased what he had driven here to let John listen to.

“Scram,” Sharky told Jeff, a tall black man who was handy with a rifle. He was cleaning it at the table where the phone and answering machine sat at the back of the great room.

“Sharky, you and me are gonna tangle one of these days,” he warned. Sharky gave him a meaningful look and with an annoyed sigh, Jeff gathered his things and left.

“Joseph left this for you after Rook, uh, stole your house from you,” Sharky told him sheepishly, scratching the back of his head after he had pulled out a chair for John and helped him sit. Carefully, heart beating fast at the possibility that this might have all been for nothing, that a spiteful Resistance member might have erased the message, Sharky hit the “play” button on the old answering machine and walked away from the table, standing sentinel so that John would be left alone to listen. Sharky felt relief mingled with dislike as he heard Joseph’s voice begin to pour forth from the phone.

“After all the atonements, all the confessions, and all that you have done for me and Eden’s Gate, it’s not enough, is it John? Cast away your past...” The message stopped and Sharky whirled. John had his face in his hands, was definitely crying this time. Sharky sat next to him, rubbing his back gently.

“Whenever you’re ready, dude,” he told John. John reached a shaking hand back out after a moment, and the message continued.

“You need to open up your heart. You need to see that there is more love all around you...” John took Sharky’s hand gently and Sharky squeezed his fingers to reassure him. “All the pain and suffering you spread will not help us in the long run. These actions will only feed the sin inside you. It will grow stronger. It will convince you to do wicked things. Those you scar too deeply, they will heal. They will become carriers of your sin. They will spread that sin to others. I’ve seen your death in a vision.” Sharky felt John start as though he had been stabbed or shot, a full-body flinch.

“You are destined be slayed by your own sin. It will come back around in a new form. It’s only a matter of when. I’ve seen you die young. I’ve seen you die old. The difference between the two outcomes is how much love you let into your heart. I pray you hear these words before it’s too late. I want to see you become an old man in the paradise we’ve prepared for. I love you,
brother. I love you.” John buried his face back in his hands and wept, crying with hard sobs that made him whimper in pain, moving one hand to hold his aching belly where stitches were being pulled and tugged by his weeping.

A few Resistance members across the great room where they were sitting stared until a look from Sharky made them flee. Sharky rubbed John’s back, understanding the feeling of shitty family members, of words said in anger, or words said with no consideration of how they might make another person feel. He remembered his father’s angry words when he was a kid, remembered his mother blaming him for their divorce. He understood this pain, he had lived it. And so he sat, silent, a beacon of support for a man who had once been his enemy and was now his friend and more.

At long last, John composed himself and spoke, his face red and his eyes puffy.

“I want to take a shower and sleep in my own bed.” He met Sharky’s eyes. The thing he said next was something Sharky had never heard from him. It was a request, not an order. “Will you please join me?”

“Course,” Sharky told him, helping him to his feet, helping him to his luxurious bedroom with its attached bathroom. Sharky swore softly under his breath. The closet alone was nearly the size of his trailer. John leaned on him tiredly as Sharky swung the large glass door of the shower open, helping him undress. His calloused fingers drug against the slick silk of John’s black vest, but he didn’t complain. Sharky gently eased it off his shoulders and let it drop to the ground, the shirt following it a short time later. They were both bloodstained and sported holes from when John had been shot. Sharky felt a little guilty that it hadn’t occurred to him to offer John any other clothes. He stripped off his own clothes and tossed them down the dumbwaiter to the laundry room John said was in the basement.

Turning the water on, Sharky was surprised when it came from many directions. The water was hot, and the pressure was exceptional. Sharky felt a wisp of jealousy, remembering the limp-dicked trickle he got in his trailer, where the water came out a nasty brownish-red. He hauled John inside the shower, grateful that there was a carved stone bench to rest him on. John’s head lollled against the shower wall. It was clear he was exhausted. Maybe too exhausted, Sharky thought, suddenly worried.

“Hey, man, are you okay?” Sharky asked him.

“Don’t ask stupid questions,” John responded. Sharky rolled his eyes and reached for a loofah and a bottle of very expensive smelling body soap. He attentively washed the sweat and blood and dirt off John’s skin, very careful of the plethora of stitched areas that spanned his abdomen. John sat, half snoozing at his touch, letting him clean him until he started to put the soap in his hair and beard. “That is not for hair,” he objected. Sharky rolled his eyes, but John helpfully pointed him to the correct bottle for his hair, then his beard and then his face, because apparently soap is not soap.

At last, John was clean. Sharky showered himself, enjoying the water pressure, letting it batter his sore muscles until he was drowsy as well. He handed John a ridiculously soft towel to dry off with and helped him get into his enormous California king sized bed. John snuggled down into his own bed happily as Sharky went downstairs in a too-plush robe to start the laundry. He warned the Resistance members away from John’s suite on pain of a punch in the dick and made his way back up to the bedroom.

“Want to watch a movie?” Sharky offered, gesturing at John’s massive television.
“There’s no internet right now,” John said.

“Hmm, so no Netflix and chill, huh? Got any DVDs?”

“There’s a few in the cabinet under the TV.” Sharky was surprised to find several classics there, including, he thought ironically, *Citizen Kane*. He ultimately chose *Top Gun* because it felt appropriate, cuz, you know, gay guys and planes. He laid down on the bed with a groan he couldn’t keep from spilling out of him. It was the most comfortable surface he had ever existed on. He laid there for a moment, basking in the comfort until John poked him in the ribs. “If you aren’t going to start it, then hand me the remote and I can.” Sharky obliged, but he squirmed more upright and snuggled next to John. It felt disgustingly domestic, but Sharky loved it. He hadn’t realized just how lonely he had been.

After the movie had ended, Sharky put bandages on John’s stitches to keep them from catching on the soft sheets before he went downstairs to get the laundry. He brought it up, flopping his jeans, underwear, hoodie and white t-shirt on the floor, but hanging John’s jeans up in the closet. The shirt and vest were irredeemably ruined, so he tossed them, pulled out a different shirt and vest for John to wear tomorrow. Sharky was about to clamber back into the bed when John said, “I’m cold.” Sharky reached for his now clean hoodie and helped John into it. Taking a step back, Sharky surveyed him in it, feeling a warmth in his chest.

“Doesn’t look as good on you, but I guess you can borrow it,” Sharky groused as he pulled the blankets over them.

“When this is all over,” John murmured, “I’m taking you to get some tailored clothes.” Sharky chuckled and tucked an errant strand of damp hair out of John’s face.

“Nah, homie, once you go three year old super soft hoodie you never go back.”

“Hmm,” John grumbled. Sharky switched off the bedside lamp and let his head sink into a down pillow that felt like he was lying on an angel’s ass. There was silence and Sharky was nearly to sleep when John said, “I was going to backstab the deputy, you know. Not…not literally, but I was going to warn Joseph. Was going to help him escape from whatever it is the Resistance has planned, maybe even fly him out of the county. I thought…I don’t know what I thought anymore,” John ended lamely, seeking Sharky’s hand under the covers. “But I think, maybe, the deputy’s right. We all need some…help. But I also think Joseph’s right. Everyone thinks he’s crazy, but he’s not. Look at the headlines. Look at who’s in charge,” he said with a painful laugh. “The deputy wanted to stop us because she thought she was saving people, but they were already safe if they’re in the bunkers. We had a plan. I’m glad that now she believes, that now she’s trying to reconcile with us because, Sharky…a lot of people are going to die if Joseph is right.”

John sighed softly.

“Tomorrow…tomorrow I’ll call Joseph. I know where he is. We’ll put an end to all of this.” John sounded deeply tired. Sharky considered for a moment, gave serious thought to threatening John, to tying him up and bundling him in his Jeep and driving him back to the jail and never talking to him again. But…he had admitted this to him freely. John Seed had been honest, truly honest for perhaps the first time since he had started working with the Resistance.

“Alright, stud,” Sharky said affectionately, kissing the top of John’s head and tucking him into his front, acting as the ‘big spoon.’ “Get some sleep. We’ll deal with whatever comes tomorrow.”
“We’re going to have to have the conversation sometime, Rook.”

“No,” she said stubbornly as she undressed in the room they were now sharing.

“There won’t be enough food.”

“We’ll make it work.”

“We can’t. We already gathered what we could, canned it, stored it. We don’t have room for everyone even with all three bunkers and you nearly destroyed Faith’s. It will need repair before whatever happens happens.”

“We are not having this conversation, Jacob.”

“The old…the weak…”

“Are you FUCKING kidding me? No! I am not having this conversation with you. It’s possible nothing will even happen. Do you have any idea the hoops I had to jump through to get Whitehorse to agree to this?! To get him not to shoot all of you on sight? He thought the best way to deal with you was maybe to kill you so you couldn’t cause anymore problems since we can’t get help from outside Hope County, thanks to Eden’s Gate. The only reason you’re not dead right now is that Earl prefers diplomacy to all out war. You are the ones who brought war to our doorsteps, you are the ones who started kidnapping people…”

“How else could we keep them safe? No one believed us…”

“Because that’s a fucking excuse to kidnap people and torture ones who don’t agree with you? What is going on in your mind, Jacob? That is wrong. As it is, I’ve got a Mayor recovering from a chest wound, a fucking federal marshal who still hasn’t come out of his coma, I’ve got a fucking completely broken Pratt, thanks for that, by the way, and God help us all when Hudson shows up here for the meeting because I don’t even know how to tell her that John is not only on the side of the Resistance, but is sharing a bed with her least favorite wanted criminal, let alone the fact that we’re…whatever the fuck we are. Jesus Christ, Jacob, what is your damage? How could
you possibly think any of this was okay?"

Jacob stood before Rook, shoulders rounded. It shouldn’t have taken someone saying it so simply for it to sound so ridiculous. What had they been thinking? It had been desperation. They had to save some, even if they couldn’t save all. But their methods…they had seemed right at the time. That little niggling voice in the back of his mind that told him right from wrong hadn’t spoken since…since that day. He swallowed.

“I was in Iraq during the first Gulf War. Eighty-second airborne, All-Americans. Hoorah.” He said this, monotone, feeling himself shake once before he forced himself to still with an act of iron will. Rook said nothing, just listened. “One night, there was an ambush. Me and this guy Miller got separated from the unit. No food. No radio. Nearest base two hundred clicks to the south, so we just started walking. By the third day I knew we were lost. Day six…we ran out of water. On the seventh day Miller’s legs started going all wonky. Did you know your brain starts to eat your muscles in order to survive? By the eighth day, the wolves were closing in,” he whispered, voice barely audible as he stared at nothing, remembering the madness that had overtaken him, remembering the scrabbling, violent struggle and then the hot, salty taste of blood, the feel of his teeth sinking into flesh. “I looked at Miller and I could tell we were as good as dead. And I accepted that. And in that acceptance came clarity.” Jacob allowed his eyes to focus, met Rook’s gaze. She looked terrified. “You see, I wasn’t just looking at Miller. I was looking at an opportunity. It wasn’t something I wanted. It was something that I had to do. Miller’s sacrifice…” He heard Rook make a noise in her throat, but he continued. “It got me out of that desert. But it broke something inside me, Rook.” He sighed. “The weak have their purpose. And if you don’t start understanding that, people, good people are going to starve to death or die fighting one another for resources. We cannot put everyone in the two undamaged bunkers. We’re going to have to choose who gets to come and who does not.”

“We’ll start by excluding people who think that the weak should be culled,” Rook told him, voice shaking with fear or rage or some other emotion, Jacob didn’t know, but he met her eyes, feeling sick.

“There’s no ‘win’ for us here, pup. It all ends bloody, for everyone. You die now, or you die later. It’s up to you. My brother saw what is coming. I don’t know if he talks to God, that doesn’t matter. He was right. Humanity is once again in crisis. It doesn’t matter what we build or achieve, we will always find a way to break it down. Babylon…Rome…empires rise, empires fall…America? We’re no different. We think we’re indestructible. World War Two, War on ‘Terror.’ We survived it, but it only brought us closer to the edge. And this is where we are. Right here on schedule just waiting for someone to push us. It’s happening and there is nothing we can do to stop it.”

“Fine, so maybe we can’t stop it,” Rook whispered. “But what if we could save more people? What if we could fix Faith’s bunker? What if we could assign people to the abandoned ones? There is food there, and there’s still time to add more. We can hunt, like we’ve been doing. We can ration. We can do this, Jacob. We can save everyone.” Jacob laughed, feeling a sudden relief and also feeling massively stupid for not thinking of using the other bunkers. “What the fuck are you laughing at?” Rook demanded, cross.

“John labelled you ‘wrath.’ Joseph called you ‘death.’ You are…” he stepped toward her, cupping her face in his big hands and shaking his head at her in wonder. “You are ‘compassion.’ You are ‘life.’ Alright, pup…fine. We’ll…Jesus, we’ll figure it out some way or another.”

“What would we need to do to fix Faith’s bunker?” Rook asked him, tugging out of his grip.
“I imagine the person would built it could tell you.”

“Who?” Rook asked, all business in her panties and bra, unaware of how adorable she looked, resolute about saving everyone she could. Jacob chuckled.

“An old friend…one of your allies. Eli Palmer.”

“I’ll radio him,” she said, reaching for her discarded clothing. Jacob stopped her with a hand on her wrist.

“First things first,” he told her, pushing a wide hand in the middle of her chest until her legs went out from under her when she encountered the edge of the bed behind her. “Rest,” he kissed her hand, “and relaxation,” he kissed behind her ear, seeing goosebumps form. He tore her dingy panties off her hips to a squawk of annoyance from her. “Those things have seen better days, anyway,” he told her.

“You try doing laundry when nothing but Bliss water is available,” she griped. “I really need to look into that. Maybe I can talk to Faith abou–” Jacob clamped a hand over her mouth with a small smile.

“Rest,” he kissed the inside of one thigh, “and relaxation,” he kissed the other, looking up at her from between her legs. He pressed his mouth against her warm wetness, dipping his tongue into her. She threw her head back and dug her fingers into his hair, pushing his face down hard into her until he could hardly breathe. He loved it, loved how she took control of him. For all her compassion, she was not weak. She was the farthest fucking thing from weak he had ever encountered. Rook clenched hard around his fingers, letting a soft sigh escape her. She slung her legs over his shoulders, pressing her muscular thighs against his ears in what seemed like an urgent attempt to suffocate him as he ate her out.

With a gasp, Jacob surfaced, wiping his mouth and a smirk at her.

“You trying to kill me, pup?”

“You’ll know it when I actually try,” she assured him. “Though I might if you keep calling me ‘pup.’”

“Fine then, I’ll have to find another nickname for you. Hellacious, maybe? Nah,” he stroked inside of her with a finger, “too long. Hellhound?” She kicked him lightly in the ear with a bare foot. Jacob chuckled, laving his tongue across her sensitive flesh.

“You lose points,” she panted, “Trying to use my actual name in it. I hate my name.”

“I love it,” he told her. “Hellfire.”

“No.”

Jacob laughed, pulling himself up and kissing her neck when she moved her face away from his in mock irritation.

“How about,” he murmured, stroking a hand through her hair, which had lost much of its red dye over the past weeks, “Blondie?”

“I will slit your throat,” she joked.

“Well,” he considered as he caressed her waist, brushed fingers over her breasts, covering
them with gentle kisses, “you’ve spent a lot of time making judgement calls,” he figured breathily, “How about ‘Judge’?” A sudden full-body shiver that didn’t seem to be one of pleasure flickered through her. He glanced up, frowning.

“I…I couldn’t tell you why but that one really, really bothers me,” she admitted. “Keep trying, though.”

“Alright,” he whispered right in her ear, picking her up and setting her onto his erect self with a groan of pleasure. He held her up, her legs slung around his waist, her hands holding his bare shoulders. He pushed her back against a wall for support and began lifting her up and down, relishing the feeling of tight warmth as he thrust into her. She gasped, open-mouthed as he stroked that electric spot deep inside her. Her toes curled and she clenched so hard Jacob thought she would push him out with the force of it. A scream of pleasure poured out of her and her nails dug into his shoulders.

“Keep going,” she told him, and he obeyed. “I meant the nicknames, but yes keep doing what you’re doing.” Arms aching from the awkward position, Jacob laid her on the bed and pressed deep into her, slowing his strokes as he arced above her, holding her waist.

“Baby,” he kissed her neck, “sweetheart,” he kissed her ear, “gorgeous,” he kissed her temple, “angel,” he kissed her cheek, “brave,” he kissed her chin, “smart,” he kissed her other cheek, “beautiful,” he kissed her nose, “wonderful,” he met her eyes, “mine,” he whispered, and he kissed her roughly, biting her bottom lip hard enough to draw blood. She moaned, moving beneath him, slinging her arms around his neck and holding him to her.

Rook ran a hand over the shaved back of his head, caressing his scars, making him meet her eyes as he thrust into her on the bed and she moved her hips to meet his strokes. An odd look flickered across her face and she opened her mouth as though she was going to speak, but instead another sigh poured from her. Jacob felt his chest tighten, felt his heart beating faster. She had heard his story and hadn’t judged him. She had listened to his opinion and found a solution. For every trial that was thrown at her, she faced it bravely, pure and right and good. He didn’t deserve her, he realized.

“Don’t do that,” she said suddenly and he started, throwing off his rhythm awkwardly. She flipped them over, taking control, as she always did when he was floundering, in any situation.

“What do you mean?” he gasped as she rode him enthusiastically, making fire tingle in his belly.

“Don’t talk yourself out of something good. Your poker face isn’t as good as you think it is.” Shocked, he held her hips, stopped her for a moment so he could focus, but she escaped his grip and kept moving like she was trying to force something out of him, like she knew. He felt the words inside of him like a bomb about to go off, felt the sudden surety that she was right and that all was good in the world, or that it could be made good if given the chance. If he opened his mouth they would come pouring out of him, inevitable. If he opened his mouth he would say them, there would be no stopping them. He swallowed hard. If he opened his mouth…

Jacob put a hand on Rook’s chest, feeling her heartbeat, steady and far more calm than his own. He opened his mouth just as orgasm caught up to him.

“I love you,” he blurted as the spark in the center of his being ignited into a wildfire and he poured himself into Rook.

“Good,” she said, coming with a little sigh shortly after him. “Because I love you too.”
Deputy Joey Hudson had pulled up to the county jail just minutes ago for a meeting with Whitehorse, Pratt and Rook. She was surprised to find another vehicle pulling up behind her, a familiar green Jeep she had pulled over multiple times in the past. Joey considered herself to be a reasonable person. She was calm, cool and collected dealing with the various petty crimes of most of Hope County’s residents, and was even calm in the face of an angry cult set off by a cocky Federal Marshal with a chip on his shoulder and no actual plan for taking down an entrenched religious army. She had a long temper and didn’t let things bother her, felt that getting angry didn’t really accomplish much in the grand scheme.

But when she saw John Seed walking free, when she saw him step out of Sharky Boshaw’s Jeep wearing a bright red shirt, sleeves rolled up with a sleek white vest buttoned over the top of it, hair combed and beard trimmed, and not wearing handcuffs or restraints of any kind?! Joey Hudson lost her fucking shit. She trotted toward him, her mind on the torment she had suffered at both his and his follower’s hands before he had ordered her release.

“Deputy, stop!” Sharky Boshaw called as Joey wound up to hit John.

“Joey, no!” Rook called from the wall, but she ignored them both, ignored the startled look on John’s face and slammed her fist hard into his belly. He cried out, louder and more agonized than she had been anticipating, and he dropped to the ground, clutching his belly.

The stark white of his vest was swiftly stained dark red as blood encroached upon it.

“What the fuck?!” Joey asked, voice shaking.

“Get away from him!” Boshaw yelled, shoving her forcefully backwards and picking John up as though he weighed nothing, hoofing it desperately for the door of the jail. “Let me in!” Boshaw called and someone unlocked the door.

Joey stared in shock at Rook, then met Whitehorse’s gaze. They both looked deeply displeased with her, but they were out of sight in a moment. Numb, she stepped into the jail, not knowing or understanding what had just happened.

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John sobbed in agony, holding his abdomen stubbornly as Dr. Lindsey tried to get a good look.

“He has to calm down, I don’t even know what all got damaged,” the vet said as John thrashed. Sharky was petting John’s hair gently, his face pale and terrified. “All I can tell you is that he’s maybe bleeding to death and maybe dumping septic waste from his intestines into his abdomen. Shit!”

Chapter Summary

Joey confronts John and sets off a serious of events that lead to assaults, kidnappings and arrests.
“What do we do?” Sharky asked, voice shaking.

“We take him to the cult doctors,” Jacob answered from the doorway, taking charge as Lindsey panicked. “Get him stabilized. I’ll have to turn myself in with him. It’s the only way. I’ll pull the truck around. Don’t tell Rook.”

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“He WHAT?!” Rook demanded of Sharky as he shamefacedly stepped away from her.

“Jacob told me not to tell you. They left twenty minutes ago.”

“The cult won’t have to kill that asshole, because if I find him first, I will. Where did they go?”

“John’s gate,” Sharky mumbled. “Wouldn’t let me come with them,” he told her dejectedly.

“Get in my truck. We’re going.”

“Dep, there’s something you need to know.”

“Tell me on the way.”

“John knows where Joseph is.” Rook felt the blood drain from her face.

“All the more reason to recover both of them. Let’s go. Now.”

“There’s…one other thing,” Sharky told her. She looked at him impatiently, annoyed to the supreme. In his hand, he held a key. John’s key.

“Boshaw, if we weren’t both in committed relationships, I could kiss you,” she told him as she snatched it out of his hand.

“Well, I mean…” Sharky let his sentence trail off as he sprinted after her to the truck, desperate not to be left behind this time.

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Rook shot her rifle in the air with a furious yell.

“Come out, come out wherever you are,” she hollered. “Or I’m coming in, you louse-ridden, neckbearded motherfuckers!” A Peggie spotter picked up a pair of binoculars and surveyed what she held in her hand – John’s key. He reached for a radio. Sharky and Rook watched as the man listened to whatever response he got. In a few moments, a different Peggie came out to greet them.

“Brother John says you’re to be allowed inside,” the man said to Sharky. Rook’s head whipped to look at her gun for hire.

“You’ve got to be goddamn kidding me.”

“He told me to tell you that Wrath will have to wait outside,” the cultist said smugly. Rook had never wanted to punch someone so badly in her entire life.

“Oh, you’re going to see some wrath today, buddy,” Rook told him, raising her voice.
Sharky put a hand on her arm.

“I’ve got this, Dep.”

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Jacob limped out of the compound, breathing hard, holding injured ribs with hands that were cuffed tightly together. Rook caught him and used her keys to remove the handcuffs. They had been ratcheted far too tight. Jacob rubbed his numb hands together and was shocked when Rook gave him a slap; not a hard one, just enough to really get his attention. He looked at her furious face.

“What the hell were you thinking leaving like that?” Jacob fought back the urge to get Rook a box to stand on so she could look him directly in the eye while she berated him.

“I was thinking I needed to save my brother the way he saved me,” he told her seriously. “I was thinking we should save the one person who knew where Joseph was.” Rook felt herself go hot and then cold at the realization that Jacob had known this.

“Were you planning on telling me that anytime soon?” she asked, voice flat, emotionless. Jacob let out a breath, having the decency to look ashamed, going red at the tips of his ears.

“I wanted to give John time to admit it to the Resistance himself. And I wanted to be sure of you. I am now.”

“Yeah, well you better be because I’m the one who’s going to stitch you up, you gigantic idiot.” Jacob chuckled.

“John’s men were not happy with me.” He gave a cough, his saliva coming up bloody.

“I’m amazed they didn’t kill you.”

“The only reason they didn’t,” Jacob admitted, “Was because Joseph told them not to.”

“Excuse me?” Rook’s knuckles went white as she clenched her fists.

“John spoke to Joseph. On the radio, of course, not in person, before you rush in there guns blazing, pup.” She held up an imperious finger at the epithet, stopping him from speaking any further.

“Where is Sharky? And John?” Rook demanded.

“They’re fine,” he told her. “Safe. But…”

“But what?” she asked, voice dropping. He met her eyes, knowing she wasn’t going to take this well.

“But they’re collateral. Joseph wants to meet with you. Alone.” Jacob interrupted her before she objected, “I managed to persuade him to let me come. It’s why I’m here and not still in there. Shit, that hurts,” he told her as she prodded a rib, inspecting him for damage.

“Well, you deserve it,” she snapped, but she reached up on tiptoes to wrap her arms around his neck. “You had me so worried,” she whispered in his ear before she kissed him fiercely. “And we’re going to talk about this later, after we talk to Joseph. When are we supposed to meet?”

“An hour. We’ll have to hurry.”
“Where?”

“You aren’t gonna like it.”

“There are very few things I like right about now,” she confessed, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Tell me.”

“At the top of the statue of him you destroyed,” Jacob announced after a moment, unable to fight back the chuckle that broke out of him. Rook nearly sprained a muscle rolling her eyes so hard.

“Of course.” She pursed her lips in irritation. She hated heights. “Come on, mountain man. Let’s go.”

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The wind howled and Rook swallowed hard, looking over her shoulder at the drop below her. She met Jacob’s gaze where he climbed the ladder just behind her.

“I’ll catch you if you fall,” he told her, clearly trying to be chivalrous, but she scowled.

“If I fall and you try to catch me, we’ll both fall. Shut up.” They reached the next level up and took some deep, gulping breaths. Jacob looked out over Hope County, heart racing, not just from the climb and the height, but in anticipation. Things were about to be very good, or very bad.

A few tortuous minutes later, Rook pulled herself up to the very top of the destroyed statue. Joseph was standing there calmly. He wore his white shirt and black vest, the getup he always preached in. Jacob nodded to him, but was ignored.

“Deputy,” Joseph said softly. Rook reached around behind her slowly and pulled out a pair of handcuffs.

“Joseph Seed. You’re under arrest.”
The Arrest

Chapter Summary

Rook takes Joseph into custody. John wakes up and talks to Sharky.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the quick chapter. I didn't want to leave anyone on a cliffhanger for too long. More should be coming tomorrow. Very short chapter that's building up to what happens next.

Joseph gave a soft laugh, crossing his arms over his chest.

“My child, have you really learned nothing from all of this?”

“Yeah, I’ve learned to have a contingency plan.” Rook’s mouth widened in a nasty smile. “What? You really thought I’d meet with you alone with no backup after everything your, she glanced at Jacob guiltily, “your family has done to me and my friends?” Joseph closed his eyes, looking grieved.

“You judge me. You judge us–”

“Yep,” she said, breaking his flow and smirking at the irritated look on his face. “And I’ve only just begun. Turn around, Joseph, and put your hands behind your head.” The distant thrubthrubthrubbing of a helicopter overcame the sound of whistling wind across the top of the destroyed statue and a pink helicopter rose into view, not Tulip but a former cult transport chopper that Addie had also painted pink and named “Petunia.”

“Need a ride, honey?” asked the amused voice of Addie Drubman over the helicopter’s intercom. Joseph’s face paled.

“See, you keep making the mistake of thinking that I’m angry and stupid. You’re wrong, ‘Father,’ I’m just angry. Now turn around and put your goddamned hands behind your fucking manbun or so help me, I will push you off this statue.” Joseph Seed clenched his jaw hard…and put his hands behind his head.

Rook stepped forward and pulled his arms around in front of him after checking for and confiscating his weapons, cuffing his hands in front of him instead of behind him. She carefully clipped him in place and helped him enter Petunia, buckling his seatbelt for him. She sat across from him and waited for Jacob to get in.

“No cultists to throw themselves into the rotors this time,” she pointed out belligerently. Joseph ignored her, looked to his brother, who ignored his gaze. With no headset on, Joseph couldn’t talk loudly enough to be heard over the beating of the helicopter’s rotors. They flew in silence, Rook’s hand rested possessively on Jacob’s. Joseph did not miss that detail. To Rook’s
extreme distaste and concern, Joseph looked pleased.

Sharky held John’s hand gently, unsure if it was something John would be okay with everyone seeing. Each time a Peggie surgeon or nurse came in, he would remove it, would pretend he was picking a piece of lint off John’s blanket or rearranging his IV line where it hung off the side of the bed. Really, though, he needed to feel the warmth from John’s hand, needed to assure himself that John was alive with touch, not just with the solemn beeping of the heart monitor. John looked pale and sickly in the artificial light of the bunker’s clinic. He looked small, Sharky realized, heart squeezing. John’s eyes flickered open when Sharky bent over the bed to rest his eyes. He was exhausted from staying awake all night to make sure John was still breathing.

“Hey, stud,” Sharky greeted, voice rough.

“Hey,” John commented weakly.

“Turns out you’re pretty fuckin’ hard to kill.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not as though you didn’t try while working for the deputy.”

“I still work for the deputy,” Sharky reminded him, “but now you work with her too.”

“Yes, and the number of times I’ve been shot has increased by one hundred percent,” John rasped out in a dry tone. “Was that Hudson who punched me?”

“Yep.”

“Well…I guess I deserved that. It’s not like she knew it would nearly kill me,” John admitted, eyes closing tiredly as his morphine drip overcame him again. Sharky’s eyebrows rose. Even under the influence of pain medication, it was significant that John had admitted that.

“Hey, uh, does the cult know that you…that you’re…do they know you have had boyfriends, that you have a boyfriend?” Sharky stuttered out awkwardly. John raised an eyebrow, but his eyes were still closed.

“Do I have a boyfriend?” Sharky felt his heart drop.

“Well, I mean, yeah, I mean, I thought that’s what we were doing or trying to do here, but whatever, I guess,” Sharky ended lamely, trying not to sound disappointed. John let out a little pained bark of laughter.

“Well, then that’s a first,” he admitted, finally opening his eyes and meeting Sharky’s. “Because I haven’t bothered with dating anyone since college. All the ‘relationships,’” he made air quotes with hands that didn’t leave the bed, “were all just…you know…?” Sharky helpfully demonstrated by moving his forefinger in and out of a ring formed by the forefinger and thumb of his other hand. John snorted. “Yeah. That. That’s pretty much all I’ve ever done with someone, intimacy-wise. So.”

“Wow. You are a narcissist.”

“Thanks,” John said dryly. “That’s a nice thing to say to your boyfriend,” he griped, taking Sharky’s hand. Sharky smirked.

“I…I kinda like the sound of that. ‘Boyfriend.’” There was a soft knock at the door and
Sharky tried to pull his hand away, but John held it firmly.

“Brother John?”

“Yes?”

“We have yet to hear from Joseph. It’s been three hours.” John surveyed the woman coldly.

“The Father and the deputy have a lot to discuss. You will wait for my orders and you will do nothing, not one thing unless I order you to, is that understood?” Doubt flickered across her face and she clenched her jaw.

“Yes, brother.”

“That’s the word I like to hear,” he told her with a smile. When she left, he and Sharky shared doubtful looks.

“What do we do now?” Sharky asked.
Confession and Atonement

Chapter Summary

John is forced to make Sharky atone.

Chapter Notes

Angst. Dear God, the angst. This chapter is full of it. But it will get better soon, I promise. A Rook/Jacob chapter is coming up next.

TW: description of violence
TW: description of abuse
TW: mention of past assault

“Alright,” Rook said, having handcuffed Joseph to the chair in the control room of the jail. “Let’s talk,” she said softly. Joseph nodded sagely, crossing his legs and leaning back comfortably in the chair, the very picture of confidence.

“Deputy, I came in peace to speak with you, but I, too, had a contingency plan. If you do not allow me access to a radio, my family will hunt down and kill yours. Not only that, but my family in John’s Gate will kill your friend not because I told them to, but because they will panic and take vengeance into their own hands,” Joseph told her, voice and expression earnest. “They may even kill my brother John for the same reason they tried to kill Jacob. I don’t want that to happen. I thought John was dead, but he was brought back to me. I don’t know how you...got to my brothers, but I assure you we can reach an agreement if only you allow me to assure my family I am safe before more bloodshed happens.”

“It’s a trap,” Hudson told Rook, sure, “He’s going to call in a bomb, or an attack or something.” Pratt glanced nervously from Jacob to Joseph to Rook.

“I think we should listen to him, give him a radio,” Pratt opined. Rook looked to Whitehorse.

“It’s your choice, Rook,” the sheriff told her, deferring to her judgment.

“Jacob,” Rook said softly, “Bring me a radio.”

“‘This one hasn’t confessed, hasn’t been marked with his sin. He hasn’t been baptized or committed himself to the family and you’re telling us he’s on our side?’ An angry cultist demanded.

“‘This one has confessed,’” John said quietly, looking at Sharky, remembering the night spent ‘getting to know one another’ that had devolved into spilling one’s souls out for the other to
see. “He has confessed his sins to me already,” John assured them, meeting Sharky’s eyes intensely. Sharky looked down, away from John, and pulled his hand out of John’s grip. “And may I remind all of you that I am the Baptist,” John snarled, turning toward the gathered cultists and jabbing a finger into his chest. “I am the one who decides when our followers are marked and baptized,” he growled, his abdomen aching at the effort. One of the cultists, a large male with a bushy, unkempt beard crossed his arms over his chest menacingly.

“Then prove it. Mark this one.” John swallowed, meeting Sharky’s eyes again before breaking eye contact with a shameful grimace. He had never once hesitated when marking sins on followers, had taken glee in the scared look in their eyes, in the pained little noises they made as he traced the lines of their sin over and over until the tattoo wept blood and ink. He had never once been in doubt that he was right, that this was good and holy and he needed to purge the sin out of them with agony and fury. He remembered ripping the tattoo off his one-time friend Nick Rye, remembered the satisfaction as Nick cried out in pain and curled in on himself.

John remembered the amusement he’d felt when Rook had gasped awake and grabbed his arm, when he’d told her,

“Hold still. It’s supposed to say ‘wrath,’ not ‘wrat.’” He stared at Sharky where he sat next to his bed and for the first time, felt ashamed of the ritual he had created.

“Prepare my things,” John ordered in a clipped voice. He waited until the cultists had filed out of his room and pulled himself more upright in the bed. Stubborn, and desperate for Sharky to understand, he grasped the hand that Sharky had pulled away. “It’s the only way,” he whispered, swallowing. Sharky clenched his jaw, said nothing.

The cultists arranged John’s tattoo gun, inks, and parlor chair, handing him his equipment and getting him a stool to sit on. They grabbed Sharky suddenly, roughly moving him toward the chair like an unruly dog, grasping him by his hoodie. John heard it tear and his stomach dropped, but there was nothing he could do. He could not show weakness. Sharky squirmed, objecting to being manhandled into place until one of John’s men held a Bliss-soaked rag over his face, to John’s fury. Sharky shook his head to try to remove the haze, but it was clear from the dilation of his eyes that he wouldn’t be able to fight, or object to what John was about to do to him. But he would feel it. Every stroke, every burning pass of needle over flesh.

The cultists flopped Sharky's limp body into the parlor chair John had special ordered for tattooing his followers. The sight of Sharky in that chair should have excited him, should have had him rigid with anticipation, ready to carve someone’s sin into their flesh. Instead, it made him feel sick. John wiped sweat from his own forehead and swallowed, putting nitrile gloves onto his shaking hands. He shaved a swath of wispy blonde-brown hair off Sharky's chest and a cultist wiped the area with alcohol, as they had done dozens of times in the past.

John looked at Sharky’s hazy face, felt his stomach clench. What sin? What was Sharky’s sin? He and his family had known Sharky Boshaw for about five years. Faith had tried to bring him into the fold, but John had always ignored him, had seen him as nothing more than a soul to eventually reap if it wasn’t too much effort, but now, searching for his sin, he saw Sharky Boshaw in a new light. He remembered the angry look on Sharky’s face as he and his friends had stormed into the church to save Rook. He remembered fleeing, hiding, barely managing to escape Rook and Nick in his plane. That was not wrath, he thought, but righteous fury. He remembered the look of lust in Sharky’s eyes as he engulfed his cock in his mouth, remembered him biting his bottom lip in desperation. No, not lust, pleasure. John remembered with a small smile Sharky shoveling terrible watery mac and cheese happily into his mouth while others complained. Not gluttony, kindness. He thought through all the little shared moments, both when Sharky was his
enemy and his friend. Not envy, or sloth or greed…not even pride. He thought for a moment, tilting his head.

John heard a gun cock.

“Another herald has turned his back on the Father,” the one with their weapon drawn snapped, looking disgusted. John whirled on them, furious.

“I am thinking! I am deciding this man’s sin, how dare you interrupt the identification and purging of sin!” The cultists collectively took a step back in the face of his anger, even the one with the weapon. They holstered it, but still looked skeptical. John met Sharky’s bleary eyes. “This is not your sin,” he whispered, so only Sharky could hear it. “It is something you should have, in yourself, in your cause. We were wrong, and you were right, and you should be proud.” With that, he touched the point of the tattoo gun to Sharky’s chest, and began to draw. Sharky let out a little strangled sound, a whimper in his throat as John worked, swallowing. “I’m sorry,” John murmured, “I’m sorry.” He wasn’t just saying it to Sharky. He was saying it to everyone he’d done this to against their will. Joseph and the others were right, he thought. John’s real sin was wrath…and he was a monster.

In a few minutes, it was finally over. Carefully drawn was the word “PRIDE” across Sharky’s chest. Ink and blood mingled and dribbled downward. John wiped it away with a soft cloth.

“You see, he has accepted Joseph’s word, and he has accepted his sin. He is one of us,” John assured them. "I will strike his sin out, and he will join our family." He picked up the tattoo gun, about to draw a line through the word he had just permanently etched into Sharky. There were angry murmurings. He’d been afraid of this. His heart was in his throat. He glanced to Sharky, who had come out of the Bliss and was fully cognizant again. He looked down at his chest and took a shaky breath before giving John a look of disgust that he quickly hid.

“Only those who came to the family willingly before the Reaping had their sins crossed out,” the bearded man objected. “Those who came after must have their sins stripped from them. Unless you are making a mockery of the baptism and you are no longer with the Father, Brother John,” he challenged, his lip curled. John felt the blood drain from his face, felt the sudden urgent need to vomit, but he swallowed, forced the sensation away.

“Yes...you are right,” he whispered, putting a hand on Sharky’s wrist, holding it tightly, knuckles going white. “Sin must be absolved,” he told Sharky with a shaking voice.

“Please, no,” Sharky pleaded, eyes already watering from the tingling pain of the new tattoo. Wordless, John held out his hand for his knife. It was placed in his hand.

“I’m so sorry,” John whispered, wishing he could do this to himself instead of Sharky. He remembered something in him breaking as he endured innumerable beatings as a child. He remembered being starved, being locked in closets, remembered being tormented until he had pushed everyone and everything away. He remembered the failed relationships, remembered his inability to feel empathy or love or anything toward anyone but himself. He remembered the assault in a back alley behind a college bar that had cemented his viewpoint that he and everyone he met was worthless. He remembered Joseph finding him and pulling a needle out of his arm. He remembered spending every waking second since then trying to please the one person who had ever shown him kindness and it still wasn’t good enough. He realized now it was because he had been going about everything the wrong way. He remembered his brother’s soft voice in his mind.

“You have to love them, John.”
John had no choice. If he did not strip the tattoo off Sharky’s chest, they would both be dead, or worse. He had no choice. But he loved him, he realized with a surety that surprised him. He actually loved the person he was baptizing this time, this once. For the first time in years, he felt a swell of empathy, of shared pain and fear and a tear slipped from the corner of his eye, unbidden. It was like a hole breaking in a dam. If he didn’t stop the leak now he would never be able to stop crying, to stop shrieking over the pain he had already inflicted, and the pain he was about to inflict. He picked up the Word of Joseph from the tray with all his tattooing equipment.

“Our devoted,” John said with a rough voice, “we are gathered here to bear witness to those willing to atone for their sins. Will you, Sharky Boshaw, place your hand upon the Word of Joseph?” John said nothing else, did not plead with him to cooperate, did not ask him to submit, he just waited. Sharky raised a trembling hand and touched the book, clenching his jaw so hard that John imagined he could hear the squeak of teeth grinding together. Sharky inhaled through his nose, closing his eyes for a moment before flickering them open and meeting John’s gaze with an inexplicable expression on his face.

“Yes,” Sharky ground out. “I will atone.”

Steeling himself, John swallowed the thick lump that had formed in his throat. The knife sliced into Sharky’s chest to the sound of a wavering, agonized scream.

“You tell them I need to speak to Brother John immediately,” Joseph hissed into the radio. John’s people were stalling and it was making Rook nervous. Finally, there was a hiss of static, and then a shaking voice.

“Brother.”

“John,” Joseph said, closing his eyes in relief. “Are you alright?”

“I would be better if my followers weren’t all convinced I’ve turned on you,” John admitted.

“And?” Joseph asked, pointedly, meeting Rook’s gaze.

“And you can’t turn if there is only one side to choose, Joseph,” John breathed into the radio, sounding incredibly relieved. Joseph nodded.

“I think I understand. Can our people hear me over the radio?”

“Yes, brother.”

“Good. My children. Allow Brother John and his companion to come and go as they choose. I will return to you tomorrow afternoon.”

“Yes, brother. Tell the deputy that Boshaw and I will come to the jail as soon as possible.” Rook breathed a sigh of relief at that.

“And John?” Joseph asked, his face a study in contemplation. There was silence, and then a shuddery breath, and then,

“Yes, Joseph?”

“I love you, brother,” Joseph said, holding the radio against his forehead as he spoke,
eyes closed and jaw clenched.

“I love you, too,” John answered, voice barely understandable through the tremble in it. Rook frowned.

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Sharky was silent as he drove them toward the jail. He had said nothing since he had agreed to atone, had said nothing when Joseph’s radio call had given him respite from having a tattoo stripped from his chest.

At last, they both broke the silence, each talking at the same time, each talking over the other:


And then there was silence again.
Shall We Begin?

Chapter Summary

The Seeds and the Resistance plan their merge and discuss the state of the world. John does something nice for Sharky. Rook and Jacob get wet.

Chapter Notes

Small amount of smut, small amount of angst, small amount of humor. A fairly balanced chapter if I do say so myself.

Sharky stepped into the door of the jail looking exhausted. His hoodie was ripped down the front, the soft green material shredded at its edges, exposing Sharky’s belly and chest as it fluttered with his movements.

“Oh, thank God you’re alright,” Rook exclaimed, wrapping Sharky up in a tight hug. He let out a little groan of pain and she stepped back from him, looking more closely. She pushed the remnants of his hoodie to the side and saw the bloody tattoo and a deep cut along one side of it.

“Jesus Christ, what happened?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he told her, grim, not at all his usual self.

“Where is John?” Jacob asked, walking up.

“His home,” Sharky said flatly.

“Is he–”

“He’s fine,” Sharky cut Rook off. “‘Scuse me.” He brushed past her and stepped into the building. Jacob and Rook’s eyes met.

“Goddammit. They were both supposed to come here. We’ve got to get all of you in a room together. We need John.” Jacob shrugged.

“We could just go to him.” Rook tugged the edges of her mouth down in a facial shrug.


耶稣， probie! Do you knock?”

“Oh fuck!” Rook stumbled backwards out of the room, wishing she could pour bleach in her eyes. A few moments later Pratt opened the door, wiping his arm across his mouth. Faith straightened her dress.

“I thought that’s what you called me,” Pratt muttered. She batted her eyelashes at him, but otherwise ignored him. Rook rolled her eyes. They both reeked of weed.

“We need to have a…family meeting at John’s lodge. Faith, Pratt, we’re leaving in twenty minutes. Try not to fall into a bed together anytime between now and then,” Rook griped. She heard Faith giggle as she turned to greet Jacob. He stepped up next to her with Joseph in tow. His hands weren’t bound, but he was unarmed and clearly respected the gun at Jacob’s side.

“Jesus Christ, did someone put ecstasy in the water or something? Everyone’s pairing off,” Rook snarked as they watched Faith playfully dance around Pratt.

“I mean…” Jacob let his sentence trail off, sounding amused.

“Right…Bliss, not exactly what I meant. Well, I guess they’ll be good for each other to let off some steam. Whitehorse, we’re headed to John’s ranch in twenty,” Rook called as their little phalanx made its way toward the front of the jail.

“You do remember that I’m still your boss, right, Rook?” he asked, raising an eyebrow, but she could tell he was amused.

“Well, you said you were retiring. Figured I’d throw my hat in the ring for sheriff. If the world doesn’t end, that is. Hudson, we’re going, fifteen minutes.” Hudson was leaning against the wall of the jail with Jess and Grace. Hudson nodded, but said nothing further. She was clearly unhappy about this entire situation, but she was going along with it. For now.

Nearly forty-five minutes later, the Seeds and the law enforcement officers were all crammed in a stolen cult van with the Eden’s Gates crosses repainted into penises. Joseph looked deeply offended by this, to Rook’s extreme amusement. She recognized the handiwork. She’d have to buy Hurk a beer later.

Sharky, Grace, Jess, Tracey and Eli, who had driven down from the Whitetails, drove separately in Sharky’s Jeep. Sharky had agreed to come only after a short argument and after he drove up the hill to his home to get a change of clothes. Rook had insisted her guns for hire come since they were important Resistance members and some of them, namely Eli, would have to fully agree to work with the cult or the whole plan to prepare for a nuclear apocalypse was for nothing. To the surprise and irritation of most of the group, Rook insisted on stopping to pick up Larry Parker along the way.

John sat despondently at the large table they had pulled more chairs around in his great room. Rook sat down next to him, elbowing him intentionally.

“Fuck off, Wrath,” he said, but there was no energy in his tone, no real malice, just exhaustion.

“You alright?”

“As though you’d care.” Rook sniffed.

“I find that, yes, I actually do care, John. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have asked.” John looked up at her sheepishly, blue eyes ringed with darkened skin from lack of sleep. When he moved, he moved painfully, like an old man, stiff and slow.
“I’m fine,” he muttered.

“Taking your antibiotics?” John rolled his eyes at her. There was commotion as everyone filed in from outside, scraping chairs across the wood floor and seating themselves around the table. Earl was leaned back comfortably at the end of the table, arms crossed over his chest. Joseph was seated at the other end, elbows on the table, hands clasped together and held casually at his chin. Faith and Pratt, giggling and prodding one another in the sides were the last to settle as both Earl and Joseph called for them to calm down and sit down. To Rook’s surprise, Faith gave Joseph a nasty look when he did so, but sat prettily next to Earl, who looked deeply uncomfortable with the arrangement, but said nothing more. Rook sat at the halfway point on one side of the table, Jacob at her right hand, John at her left. Sharky pointedly refused to sit at the table, leaned instead against the wall with his shotgun propped on his shoulder casually. He wasn’t wearing his signature hoodie, but was instead in a red t-shirt with white lettering that read “Do you have tickets to the gun show?” with arrows pointing at his arms. It was way too big for him, and had plenty of space so that it wasn’t sitting tight against his chest. Rook suspected it belonged to Hurk.

“So,” Rook said, standing and putting her hands flat on the table to get everyone’s attention. “Shall we begin?”

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The Seeds began first by filling Joseph in on the details of their agreement with Rook. He had listened silently and skeptically to Faith, but had nodded when she finished her explanation. John’s was more uncomfortable. He skirted around exactly why he had joined the Resistance but had enough self control to avoid looking over his shoulder where Sharky was leaning, uncharacteristically silent. Jacob went last, and, of course, Joseph was not surprised about his relationship with Rook. He sat quietly, considering as Rook continued the meeting arguing that they should prepare for the possibility of an attack on the United States, that they should join forces and prepare bunkers. If nothing happened, no bombs went off, well, then four of the people at the table were going to prison and probably many, many more to boot.

“But, I don’t get it, how do we know Joseph’s right, and I ain’t sayin’ that makes any of this shit okay, but how do we know?” Jess asked. Rook turned to Larry Parker, who looked like he might explode if he didn’t get to speak in the next thirty seconds.

“Larry?” Rook asked expectantly.

“Right, uh, yes, so I’ve been doing some research, side research, you know, I have far more important things in the works, but at any rate, I have discovered that the cellular blackout is not the fault of the cult.”

“Excuse me?” Grace asked, clearly skeptical.

“Uh, yes, it turns out that China has actually been destroying satellites owned by US-based companies in an effort to destabilize the economy…”

“Oh, thank Christ Zip isn’t here,” Earl murmured, taking his hat off and wiping his brow.

“So, as I said, the Project at Eden’s Gate did not manage to take out all of the cell coverage in the area. It’s quite unlikely that any small group of individuals, no matter how militarized could achieve something like this. They might be jamming the signals, but as of right now, there is no place for those signals to go. Hope County is not the only place with no cellular or internet service. With the phone lines outside the county cut, there is almost no way to
communicate with the outside world without scaling one of the mountains.”

“And fat chance of that with summer snow melt working its way down,” Eli piped up.

“Um, yes, essentially. Even a helicopter would have a hard time making it to any place where significant two-way radio communication could occur, and a plane would have to fly too high. Even then, we don’t know what’s going on outside the county. The country is already at war, we, uh, we, of course know this from the radio broadcasts that the cult has allowed through their jamming devices. Moscow has fallen, as has Hong Kong. North Korea has also announced their intention to attack the US, as has,” his voice squeaked as he continued, “Pakistan, India and Saudi Arabia. Shits, uh, shit’s about to get real, people. I won’t be here, of course, so you’ll all have to deal with it,” he finished.

“So we’re by ourselves here, regardless,” Hudson muttered, face pale.

“I can continue to provide you reasons, guys, but I think it’s pretty clear from what radio broadcasts we’ve been able to pick up, and from what Larry has just told us that we are shit out of luck getting outside help. Not only that, but it does appear that…ugh,” Rook sighed, “The end is near,” she said dryly. “So.” She turned matter-of-factly to Joseph. “It would appear that we would all be better off joining forces rather than fighting one another. Do you agree?”

“Yes. Yes, I do,” Joseph confirmed softly.

“Then that means that cult violence stops this instant. That means that any cultist caught harming or killing another person will be shot on sight, do you understand?”

“I do, child, but I’m unsure if you do.” Rook met his steady gaze, twisting her lip in irritation at his condescension. Joseph looked to each of his siblings for a moment and sighed, folding his hands in front of himself again as though praying. “I thought I understood God’s plan. I thought He wanted me to build a New Eden when the world fell in the Collapse. But my cause has become a cancer on this land,” he admitted, to the surprise of literally everyone gathered. He looked at John and shook his head a little. “I am a monster. I and my family have spread only suffering and death in the name of God. I am hoping…I am praying that there can be redemption from this. It was not just your plan that brought me to this conclusion, Deputy. You know that the cult was not violent before the Reaping. I allowed my wrath and my pride to stand in the way of better judgment and I stoked the flames of madness in those I should have helped defeat their demons,” he whispered, looking again at John, and then at Jacob and then Faith. Joseph turned his head back to the deputy.

“Nonetheless, the fire is stoked in all my children. They are angry and violent. Some of them have always been this way, it is why they were chosen. And I see now,” he tilted his head to the side and his eyes went a little distant, “I hear now that what I have done was a mistake,” he said grimly, face going deathly pale, his cheeks looking gaunt even in the warm light of day pouring through the large windows of the great room. “But I think that even if I admit this to my flock, they will not submit. They will not accept redemption and preservation for all. And for that I am sorry, but there is nothing I can do.”

They all sat in solemn silence, considering his words, considering his bombshell admission of guilt and error. Finally, Sharky said,

“Well, if they don’t agree with us, then we’ll roast their asses.” There were a few enthusiastic nods of agreement.

“Alright then,” Rook addressed them, “Eli, we’ll send you with some people, along with
Faith and a message from Joseph so that repairs can start on that bunker. All Bliss is to be destroyed, no argument,” she said firmly, meeting Faith’s gaze. “Jess, Whitehorse, I need you two hunting and fishing. You’ll have plenty of kitchen help between Casey, Mary May and the others from Falls End. I need more canned food for the small privately owned bunkers. John. I know you’ve got more healing to do, but do you think you can run aerial surveillance for me, get a look from above so we know what we’re dealing with, numbers-wise once Joseph announces the plan to merge? I want to know how many might swarm to attack from various bases.” John nodded, glanced at Sharky, who didn’t look away until John did. “Jacob. I need you training Resistance men. I think you know I don’t mean brainwashing or any of that shit. You’re a soldier, so lead, don’t enslave. The rest of you, keep me updated on what you’re working on. I trust you all to get things done. I trust you all.” she made eye contact with each of the law enforcement officers and her guns for hire, “can forgive past slights, if only for a little while, so we can batten down the hatches if needed. Got it?” There was a collective nodding of heads. “Good. Dismissed.” Rook glanced over at Whitehorse who had a proud smile on his face. He tipped his hat to her as he stood and walked out of the lodge.

Rook turned to Jacob, who had stood and stretched his massive form. He wrapped an arm around her waist and kissed the top of her head.

“Where were you when we needed to hear this? Where were you when we first came to this county?” he muttered. Rook snorted.

“In junior high, cradle robber,” she teased. The cult had come to the county about fifteen years before, and Joseph was not lying. They were not violent, nor had they done anything illegal until about a week before the deputies and the marshal went to arrest Joseph Seed. The cult had recruited Mary May’s brother and her parents had been killed trying to recover him. After that, all hell broke loose and a once benevolent, if strange, group suddenly revealed that they had hoarded guns and ammunition to rival a small army. Rook gazed at Jacob. “Is it bad that I’m really hoping Joseph’s right and a bomb goes off?” Jacob laughed.

“Why?” Her face fell.

“Because if it doesn’t…you’re all going to prison,” she muttered. Jacob sighed.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” he told her, taking her hand gently. "John’s guest bedroom suite has got a pretty amazing shower in the bathroom. Join me?" he asked. Rook smiled.

“Of course.”

Jacob and the deputy walked past Sharky, who was picking at his fingernails with his pocket knife, deep in thought. John walked up to him, scratching the back of his head awkwardly.

“I thought you might want this,” John told him, handing him an exquisitely soft cashmere sweater that smelled like John’s cologne. “Not…not because we’re together. I know, you’re done with that, but…I’m sorry your sweater was destroyed,” he finished lamely. Sharky took the sweater, a strange look on his rugged face.

“Hey, uh, can we talk? Somewhere private maybe?” John cocked his head.

“Follow me….please,” John added. Sharky obeyed, putting the sweater into his Jeep as they walked out to the enormous garage and airplane hangar. John reached a hand up gingerly, groaning at the pull on his many new stitches, but he brushed his fingers along the belly of his black and silver plane Affirmation.
“Nice plane,” Sharky commented, hands in his jeans pockets and shotgun leaned against the inside of the hangar. John met his gaze with piercing blue eyes that looked oddly hopeful.

“Want to take her for a ride with me?”

Rook gasped at the sudden fullness as she leaned forward against the rock tiled wall. Jacob let out a rough growl that reverberated in the small space. He held her hips and thrusted hard into her, nearly lifting her feet off the ground. Desperate not to slip, Rook grasped the cemented soap tray for dear life as Jacob had his way with her, his breaths coming ragged and desperate. Hot, pounding water ran down Rook’s back and into her hair, soaking the now-blonde strands. Between the massage of the shower and the fierce, jabbing thrusts of Jacob’s member, she orgasmed hard, crying out loudly and nearly slipping again.

“Jacob, fuck, oh shit, slow down, OH FUCK!” They went down with a crash, Jacob catching Rook and banging his shoulder hard against the shower wall. They laid there for a moment, tangled wet limbs and torsos. Rook turned over, brushing wet red hair out of Jacob’s face. “You alright?” she asked with a little smirk as he prodded the ribs that had been badly bruised a few days before.

“I’ll live,” he griped. The water pattered down on them, an annoyance now that they were stuck on the floor. Rook reached up and turned the water off, standing gingerly and pulling Jacob up. He looked comical, all muscle and wet red hair and erect, bobbing cock. Rook laughed at him gently, stroked her fingers through his chest hair.

“Want to take this to a safer location?” she laughed. He flicked wet hair out of his eyes again and nodded. She tugged him to the guest bedroom, pushing him down onto the edge of the bed and slipping down onto him, their wet flesh moving slickly together as Rook rode him up and down. He grasped her waist, then roamed his hands up her ribs, brushing over the delicate skin of her breasts, flickered along her neck and then rubbed back down to her backside, squeezing the roundness of her muscles and massaging her thighs as she moved. Jacob leaned forward and kissed her chest, and then her chin and then he slotted their lips together, pressing his hot tongue into her mouth. She sucked on it with a groan and they came together breathing soft sighs into one another’s mouths.

“You’re really making me want those bombs to drop too, pup,” he whispered into her ear as his fingers threaded up into her thick hair, holding the back of her head and wrapping his other arm around her waist urgently, intent upon holding her close to him. He leaned back, lying on his broad back on the bed and let her lie atop him. He traced, “I love you” on her skin until she drifted off to sleep.
Sharky and John have a talk. (There's smut in this one too. I'm not even sorry anymore.)

“Woohooohooohoo!” Sharky shouted over his headset and John grinned, banking the plane steeply and then executing a roll. His stomach flipped mildly at the sensation of G forces pulling against stitches. “This is fuckin’ amazing,” Sharky hollered. “Nick won’t ever let me go up when he flies.”

“Can Nick Rye do this?” John asked, turning the nose of the plane down and skimming wildly above the surface of Silver Lake before pulling up hard, the engines screaming as they shot upward. Sharky let out another yell of enjoyment and John thought his cheeks would crack from the sensation of smiling so widely for so long. His heart clenched a bit when he remembered that while Sharky was enjoying himself, it wasn’t because he wanted to be with John. He was just enjoying the ride.

John pulled Affirmation through a few more tricks, patting her control panel affectionately after doing so. Finally, he levelled out, circling slowly over the county.

“So,” came Sharky’s gravelly voice over his headset, “When I said someplace private to talk this wasn’t quite what I had in mind.” John was silent, waited to see if he was done speaking. “But…” Sharky sighed, “I’m actually glad, to be honest with you, cuz I don’t do well with this mushy shit,” he admitted. John chuckled. “I, um, I was pretty freaked out after the…”

“The atonement,” John said flatly, staring out over the beauty of Hope County, unsure whether he was glad or frustrated that he couldn’t see Sharky’s face from where he sat behind him in the gunner’s seat.

“Uh, yeah. That. Look, I, uh, I really like you. But you scare the shit out of me, man, you really do. I need a minute to figure shit out, you know? Like, a month ago you were one of my fuckin’ sworn enemies, I mean I woulda killed you on sight if you were going to hurt Dep, but now…now I don’t know what to think about you. I was just starting to maybe see you differently, but then…”

“But then I carved a sin onto your chest and nearly had to rip it off,” John said softly.

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry.” There was silence for a long, long time. Absently John increased their velocity and executed a smooth spiral to turn around. “I used to think I was right, you know? I hadn’t even considered the possibility that it was wrong. I’ve told you about my parents, about my childhood.” John swallowed. “A lot of bad things happened to me that made me okay with hurting other people just because it made me feel something. But I never wanted to hurt you once I knew you. And I’m sorry I didn’t feel that way before I did. I’m sorry I let my brokenness be an excuse for atrocities. I…I don’t know how to come back from this. With anyone, not just you.” Again John sped the plane forward, looping in the air, a favorite pastime when he flew.
“Well, like I said, you can start by not being such a dick. Seems like you’ve been working on that.” John snorted. “So, I mean, I’m cool with maybe trying this again, for like, the third time now, but I, shit, man, I need you to slow down.”

“I understand,” John murmured.

“No, I mean, really, I need you to slow down because going this fast is giving me a fuckin’ raging hard on, man. Driving a car is never gonna do it for me ever again,” Sharky gasped out. John found himself laughing with wild abandon as he pulled Affirmation into another tight spin and then zoomed out over the Holland Valley. John heard a familiar strangled grunt over the radio and cackled.

“Did you just…?”

“Maybe. Yes. Shut up.”

“Well, I have been meaning to get you into a better fitting pair of pants,” John laughed. More slowly this time, he curled their trajectory until Affirmation was aligned with his runway. A few minutes later they were back on the ground. A little wet stain was smeared on Sharky’s jeans and John found himself cackling again, bending over and putting his hands on his knees, his belly aching, but he couldn’t stop laughing.

“Yeah, keep laughing, next time it’s going in your mouth,” Sharky threatened with irritation thick in his voice as he tented his jeans outward to avoid the cooling mess he had made. John wiped his eyes and met Sharky’s, still smiling.

“Is that a threat or an invitation?” he teased. Sharky cocked a brow.

“Give me a sandwich and twenty minutes.” John chuckled. “I’m not kidding,” Sharky said, tone softening as he stepped closer to John. John tilted his head back, face amused, his chest feeling lighter now that they had talked a bit. He was sure more talking would happen, but he would take what he could get for the moment. At least Sharky was talking to him again instead of wordlessly pulling up to his house and waiting for him to get out of his car as he had done the day John had admitted he loved him.

“Meet me in the bedroom in ten minutes,” John said, voice low and purring with arousal.

“You got it, hoss,” Sharky assured him.

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John kissed his way around the scabbed tattoo he had put on Sharky’s chest gently, his hands running up Sharky’s sides.

“I have an idea,” he murmured after he had nibbled at one of Sharky’s nipples, “for fixing your tattoo.”

“Yeah?” Sharky asked, sounding interested.

“I was thinking flames here,” John ran his finger over Sharky’s pectoral muscle, raising goosebumps there, “reaching around to here,” he completed the line just shy of Sharky’s armpit along his ribs.

“Sure,” Sharky gasped out as John abruptly bent down and sucked him into his mouth. He fisted his fingers into John’s soft bedsheets, back arching upwards. “You’re sure we can do
“Eden’s Gate doctors have been working on a medication involving the Bliss,” John confided after he slid his lips off the head of Sharky’s dick a couple of minutes later. “Makes you strong, makes you heal quickly. Look.” He took one of Sharky’s hands and ran it along his stomach. Just three days ago most of the stitches had been torn in places, had been bleeding. Fortunately the damage caused by Hudson’s punch hadn’t been as bad as they had thought, but he did still have to be careful, had to take things slow. He realized now that Jacob had put himself in very real danger to save him. It was a good thing that the situation had gone as it had. It seemed as though luck was on their side, at least for the moment. “We’re going to have to talk the deputy into keeping some of the Bliss if only for this medication. The outer stitches should be fine to come out in a week from what the doctor thinks. That said,” he whispered where he perched with his legs on either side of Sharky’s torso, “Be gentle with me,” he purred, turning around and getting on all fours.

John saw Sharky’s face flush, saw his cock bob with interest.

“Alright,” Sharky promised, his face a little pale. He swallowed and then folded himself over John, running his hands down John’s sides carefully, kissing his shoulder blades, stroking his neck, his back, his ass, running one hand down and pressing a lubed finger inside of John. John shuddered with the sensation, relaxed, waited for Sharky to add more fingers, groaning when Sharky’s calloused finger ground against his prostate. His cock twitched and he palmed his own hand over it as Sharky pressed into him.


“Move goddammit,” John commanded, the feeling of fullness uncomfortable without movement. Sharky pressed in to the hilt, his hips pushing against John’s ass and then he slowly pulled back out before burying himself again, making John see stars. True to his word, Sharky was gentle, moved slowly, hands moving over John’s body in a litany of pleasure written by eager fingers. He finally wrapped a hand over John’s, controlling the speed with which John stroked himself. John pushed back onto Sharky’s dick and they both shuddered with pleasure. Sharky pulled John’s torso up and sat back on his heels, letting John slide himself slowly up and down as Sharky held his waist. Finally, with a desperate gasp, John felt himself coming, his toes curling where they sank into the soft mattress. Sharky followed him shortly afterwards, biting John’s shoulder with a growl as he did so.

They curled together in the light of the afternoon sun spilling into the lodge window, Sharky stroking John’s hair with an absent motion of his fingers as he half-snoozed in his post-orgasm lull.

“I was thinkin’,” Sharky started shyly, “I think maybe…maybe you should hold off on saying…you know, what you said to me, until you can say them to yourself.” John frowned, looking up at him. Sharky met his eyes.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you’ve spent your whole fuckin’ life hating yourself and anyone who got near you, which is probably why you fuckin’ enjoyed torturing people for a living. Maybe…maybe you were torturing yourself too. I haven’t had the past you had, man, but, shit. I know what it’s like to look in the mirror and want to punch the face you see there. I mean, you’ve got a real punchable face anyway, but regardless of that, I’m saying I know the feeling.” Sharky rambled, reddening. “Shit man, I ain’t a fuckin’ psycholotrist or whatever the fuck they’re called, but maybe you need
to give yourself a chance to at least *like* yourself before you can really love somebody else.”

“Maybe,” John hummed.

“I really can’t get a ‘yes’ outta you?” Sharky teased. John chuckled softly.

“Not this time. But I’m not saying ‘no,’ either. While I’m…working that out, would you want to patrol with me in Affirmation?” Sharky made a sound in his throat.

“Only if you admit that’s a fuckin’ terrible pun of a name for a plane owned by someone who’s got a hard on for people giving him an affirmative.”

“I didn’t hear you complaining earlier,” John pointed out with a devious smirk. Sharky grinned.

“No, you did not.”
Rook reads the Book of Joseph and learns something she didn't know before.

To say that the cult was overjoyed was an understatement, and Rook was relieved. She was also perturbed. What she had expected was all-out pandemonium and a cry for war when Joseph announced that the Seed family had joined the Resistance. But that was not what he had announced.

“My children,” he said, “my family. The deputy and her friends have joined our family. We have agreed to put down arms, to set aside our differences and become one. You must accept them. You must embrace them. Lay down your arms and instead pick up your rakes and shovels. We will need to grow and reap many provisions, for our family has grown. The Collapse is coming. And together we will march to Eden’s Gate.”

“That was not what we agreed to,” Rook griped as she watched the broadcast. Jacob chuckled.

“If we announced that we joined the Resistance and that we are changing our philosophies, we would have an uprising on our hands, pup. I have over three hundred trained soldiers, some of which were actual soldiers or police officers before they joined our cause. We have to play nice or a lot of people on both sides are going to die and I thought that was the whole reason we all decided to compromise.” Rook bobbed her head, looking a little annoyed.

“You know,” Joseph said as he walked up, “if you had not destroyed my version of my Book, you would probably understand us a little better, child.”

“I swear to god if you call me a child again, I’m going to clock you, Joe,” she told him. He winced at the nickname, but said nothing. “And… I may have lied to Tracey about destroying the book. I was gonna pee on it and send it to your brothers page by page. Before we came to an agreement.” Joseph looked shocked and offended, Jacob looked amused, but John actually guffawed.

“I was wrong about you, Wrath,” he admitted, striding forward with a toothy grin. “Maybe your sin is Pride?”

“And maybe you should go fuck yourself, John. Anyway, I still have the book.”

“And?”

“And what? Have I read it? Shit, no. I don’t want anything to do with your religion.” Joseph actually rolled his eyes at this, an odd behavior for him that looked funny compared to his usual pious façade.

“It’s not a religion,” he emphasized. “I do wish you would read it. Perhaps you might even agree with some of what was written in it, especially in my personal copy. I didn’t include my notes about my brothers in the published work.” John startled at that.
“What are you talking about?” he asked, frowning. Joseph met his gaze.

“The story of our childhood is in my personal copy.”

“No.” The word was said coldly, with a voice tinged with hate. “No. She does not get to
know our past, she does not…”

“John,” Joseph put a hand on his shoulder, “How better to make her understand?” John
huffed out a sigh, clenched his jaw.

“If it’s anything like my eulogy it will make her like me less, not more,” he hissed. There
was hurt in his tone. Joseph’s shoulders slumped and he stepped back.

“John. I have never lied about you. I didn’t intend to start just because you were dead.”
John glared at him for a moment, softened.

“I…” For once, John didn’t have a mouthy response. He straightened his tailored jacket
and sniffed. “I have things to do,” he told them, and scurried off. Rook looked after him, glanced at
Jacob and shrugged.

“I guess I’ll read it tonight,” she told them. Joseph nodded slightly, fidgeted, yet another
motion outside of his normal behavior.

“I don’t suppose I could get it back from you when you’re done, Deputy?” Rook
surveyed his face with its scraggly beard and piercing blue eyes, always behind piss-colored
aviator glasses, for some reason.

“We’ll see,” she told him, and walked away.

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Jacob whimpered in his sleep. It was just something he did, something Rook accepted.
Usually, she ignored it, let him work through the dream on his own. Ordinarily, he would settle, he
would reach out to her in his sleep and pull her close. Sometimes he awakened with a gasp or a cry
and got up to take a piss and get a drink of water.

Tonight was different. Rook was reading in the bed next to him, enjoying the luxury of
John’s guest bed as she read by the light of a bedside lamp. She could hear John and Sharky
fucking upstairs earlier, which had been awkward, but overall she was having a peaceful evening.
Until Jacob started crying. He twitched in his sleep, curling into the fetal position, much as the
book she held in her hands had described. She put a hand on his shoulder, as she usually did when
he was having a bothersome dream, some PTSD flashback to the horrors of war. He jerked
violently, crying out.

“No, no, stop. Stop it! Stop hitting him! John, no, no, please! Are you okay? Joseph, we
have to. No, please, don’t take them, please. John…” Jacob sobbed, “Joseph…please!”

Rook had heard him cry out for his brothers in his sleep before, but not like this, not with
so much grief and torment in his voice. Perhaps it was because he had flipped through Joseph’s
book? Perhaps it had reminded him of past misery? Regardless, he sobbed, tears streaming from
eyes clenched shut. Rook tried to wake him, shaking his shoulder and all hell broke loose.

Jacob came bolt upright, shoving her away hard, his face a snarling portrait of rage and
fear. He had one arm pulled back tight, prepared to give a punch.
“It’s me, Jacob, Jacob, it’s me!” He stopped, unclenching his hand and lowering his arm, his face relaxing. He took a shuddering breath and buried his face in his hands. Rook said nothing, just ran her fingers gently back and forth across his broad shoulders and down his spine as she continued to read. He took a deep breath after a few minutes and pulled her close to him.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, kissing the top of her head.

“It’s alright,” she told him. He frowned at the page she was stuck on, the page she had been staring at for the past ten minutes, the whole time Jacob had spent collecting himself and calming down.

“Are you okay?” Jacob asked after a moment. Rook set the book down, clenching her jaw.

“I had wondered why he had left you all alone,” she muttered. Jacob read where she was staring, realized she was talking about Whitehorse.

“In just a few months [John] had become friendly with the mayor, the sheriff and other important leaders. And in those few months, he found out all their dirty little secrets.”

“Everyone has something to hide, pup. Did you really think your sheriff was any different?”

“I… I don’t know. But I thought I knew him. I did know him, I’ve known him since I was a kid. My parents always had him around. He helped raise me, for Christ’s sake. I just…I thought I knew him.”

“Not all secrets are bad, Rook,” he reminded her gently.

“I’m going to go to the kitchen to get some milk. Want anything?” she asked. He shook his head.

“Don’t be long,” he requested.

“‘Course,” she told him with a small smile. She left the book behind on the side table, feeling conflicted.

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“No, look, you gotta whisk it or it won’t be as creamy,” Sharky explained, holding John’s hand on the utensil.

“I am whisking,” John snapped.

“No, you’re beating the fuck out of it. Here, look, see? Gently. Wait for the bubbles. There, now we add the cream and the milk.” John hadn’t cared much for mac n’ cheese since Jacob had prepared it for him when he was a young child, but since the Seed family had brought the watery bowl of mac n’ cheese to a Rye family barbeque, John had never heard the end of it and felt he should learn how to make it properly.

“I still don’t understand how this is better than the boxed kind,” John griped.

“That’s because you were raised by heathens,” Sharky told him. John froze in his grip and Sharky scowled at himself. “Sorry,” Sharky muttered at his faux pas. He knew better than anyone outside the immediate Seed family how much that comment must have stung. “Stir in the
cream with the milk and add the salt and pepper. Keep stirring until it gets thick.” Sharky moved John’s hand gently, showing him how to mix the creamy sauce. “Now take it off the burner and dump in the cheese.”

“All of this?” John exclaimed at the massive bowl of shredded cheese.

“Yep, all of it.”

“Christ,” John muttered, but he obliged, dumping two-thirds of a cup of mozzarella and one and one third cups of sharp cheddar cheese into the sauce.

“Now we layer the cooked pasta in a casserole dish.”

“Why not just serve it out of the pot?” John griped.

“Because we aren’t done cooking it yet, just watch, it’s worth it,” Sharky told him. Sharky dumped noodles and sauce in layers in the casserole dish, adding yet another massive pile of cheese over the top and then finishing it off with breadcrumbs mixed with powdered buttermilk, garlic and onion. He then slid the entire monstrous thing into the oven.

“It’ll cook for twenty minutes at three-fifty,” Sharky told John, proud of their handiwork. “And now you know how to make non-shitty mac and cheese, my friend. Oh, hey, Rook!”

“Oh god!” Rook exclaimed, entirely unprepared for their state of undress. Sharky and John were wearing nothing but aprons. Neither of them looked phased by her sudden appearance in the kitchen and neither of them bothered to cover their exposed butt cheeks. One of John’s had scratchmarks on it. “Put some clothes on,” Rook ordered, blushing crimson and grabbing a glass of milk before fleeing back down the hallway away from the kitchen.

“It’s my house!” John’s voice followed her as she ducked into the bedroom.

Jacob was asleep again, making soft noises deep in his throat, but he clearly wasn’t as bothered as before. Rook, however, was still unsettled. She stayed up nearly the entire night, refusing to sleep until she had finished reading the entire Book of Joseph. And he was right. She did understand his family better, and she found she didn’t regret agreeing to become a part of it. Now the world just had to end.

Rook awoke the next morning groggy, but still earlier than everyone else. It was a curse. An only child, she had always been the early bird of her family, had always preferred to get up early to start her day, where her parents preferred to work late into the night and wake up late in the mornings, affirmed night owls to their core. She’d found it funny, how polar opposite they were. Now, though, she regretted the difference as she found herself alone in the kitchen with Earl, who was also known as an early riser. There were pots and pans piled high in the kitchen sink and a half-eaten bowl of macaroni and cheese on the counter. Earl was sipping coffee and reading a book at the bar. If she didn’t ask, the question would eat her alive. She had to know.

“Hey Sheriff?” He glanced up.

“I’m ‘Earl’ before eight a.m., Rook,” he told her with a small smile. The reassurance this normally would have given her coming from him was absent. Her stomach flip-flopped when he stood, pouring and handing her a cup of coffee, black, just like she liked it, the same as him. He frowned a bit, surveying her and fiddling with his mustache. “What’s on your mind, Rook?” She swallowed and met his eyes. Steeling herself for his response to her question, and even further for
his answer, she asked.

“What did John Seed have on you that kept you from wanting to bother the cult?” Earl went red and then very, very pale. For a moment Rook was concerned he was going to have another heart attack. He set his coffee down with a shaking hand.

“I think maybe you ought to sit down, Rook,” he told her in a soft voice.

“Why?” she demanded, curling her hands around the coffee mug as though it could protect her from whatever he was about to say. Whatever she had been expecting, it wasn’t this:

“Because it’s about you.” Feeling suddenly lightheaded, Rook sat at the bar in the kitchen, waiting for Earl to speak again. “I…I wasn’t supposed to be the one to tell you this. I spent years trying to avoid it.” He met her eyes. “Ten years, to be exact.” Rook went cold and she swallowed, waiting. Her parents had died ten years ago. “Your parents…they were supposed to tell you. But then they died in that car wreck and I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know if I should tell you. And then it was too late, I’d waited too long. You joined the force and it gave me an excuse to not tell you or anyone else. It would have ruined your career if anyone had found out.” Earl swallowed, staring down at his coffee, wiping a hand over his mustache. He closed his eyes, looking deeply ashamed. “Your dad was sterile, Rook. And your parents, hell, they didn’t have money for IVF or for any of the things they do for couples who can’t have kids. Your parents were some of my best friends and they trusted me. We were family. So we did what we had to.” He looked up, met her eyes, flushing deeply. “I’m…I’m your real dad, Rook,” he told her softly. “If anyone knew, if anyone thought that I might be showing favoritism…”

“I would have been kicked off the force and you would have been kicked out of office for nepotism,” she finished for him, feeling nauseated, feeling lightheaded, feeling like her entire world had been turned upside down. He nodded solemnly. Rook covered her face with her hands, took a shuddering breath. She sat for a moment, thinking, processing the information and then deciding how she felt about it. “Please tell me I’m not going to go bald,” she said, mock-tearfully. Earl snapped his gaze up and then realized she was joking. She climbed down off her stool and walked over to his, hugging him gently. He returned it, letting out a massive sigh of relief.

“You’re not mad?” he asked her, holding the back of her head gently, their blonde hair matching where their heads leaned together in the hug.

“Of course not,” she told him with a small, relieved laugh. “Jesus, I thought it was going to be something awful. Instead it’s something amazing. I have had three amazing parents, which is more than most people can say. I just wish they could have told me themselves.” She released him from the hug, sniffing a little bit and then taking a sip of her coffee to cover the waver in her voice.

“Me too, Rook,” he said, tipping his coffee mug to her. “Me too.”
Working Together

Chapter Summary

The Project and the Resistance struggle to work together. Some of them want to work together, others do not. One Resistance member and Project member manage to work together quite well.

Chapter Notes

If y'all thought I wasn't going to introduce a love interest for Whitehorse, well, you were WRONG because I love him and he deserves all the best things in life. No smut in this chapter, sorry!

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To say that the Resistance was furious was an understatement, and Rook was worried. While the initial reaction of members of the Project was happiness, and the firm belief that they had won, the Resistance had another opinion. Some of them even thought that Rook should be killed. Fortunately, those were tempered by their friends, who understood that Rook was simply trying to prevent more bloodshed. It did mean, however, that factions began to be formed in both groups. Resentment built up in both the Project and the Resistance, and before anyone knew it, they were once again in a kind of cold war. Groups of Resistance members who refused to work with the Seeds fortified themselves and tolerated no cult members near their outposts. Any cult member stupid enough to go near a Resistance outpost of this kind was not seen again.

This, of course, resulted in the same issue in the other direction, Project outposts where Resistance members were not welcome. So now, to Rook’s great discouragement, there was conflict once more. Fortunately, actual skirmishes only occurred when one group entered another’s territory, and even then, it was dependent on who was in charge. Grace Armstrong, for instance, ultimately decided she wanted no part of working with the Project. She had lost too much and gained too little by working with them. So she set herself back up in the Lamb of God Church and many Resistance members followed, Jess, and Hudson included.

Rook pulled up in her truck, Jacob in tow only because he refused to allow her to go anywhere by herself. She knew he intended this to be protective but really it just came across as controlling, so when she got out and he did as well, she gave him an eyeroll.

“Just…stay behind me,” she ordered. He looked a little affronted at her tone, but complied.

“That’s far enough, Rook,” came Grace’s voice from the steeple. Rook looked down at her chest where a bright green dot of light sat between her breasts.

“I do hope the safety’s on, Grace.”

“My is,” Grace said significantly. Someone cleared their throat and Rook turned to find
a red dot on Jacob’s chest as well.

“I’d suggest you stay very still,” Rook said dryly, annoyed. She turned back to the church. “Grace, I’m just here to talk.”


“You sure? You can keep a closer eye on him if he’s with me.” There was a short period where Rook could hear quiet arguing, and then Grace’s voice came again.

“He leaves his weapons in your truck.” Rook nodded.

“Alright. You heard the Olympian,” she snarked to Jacob, who walked back to the truck and left his rifle, his pistol and his hunting knife in her truck with a look of extreme distaste. “You’re the one who insisted on coming,” Rook said reasonably.

They made their way inside the church and were greeted by some friendly faces, but most were cautious.

“Rook,” Hudson said. “How are you?”

“I’d be a hell of a lot better if we could all stop fighting with one another. I thought we were trying to be the better man, guys. What the hell is this?”

“What’s it look like?” Jess said softly as she walked in with Grace. “Just because they want to stop killin’ now doesn’t change anything. My parents are still dead. Grace’s house is still razed to the ground. What, you think the end of the world comin’ makes a difference?”

“No. I don’t. But I do think it’s coming, and I think we’re going to have to tolerate one another when it does. I’ve already…taken care of a few cult members who needed it. But I won’t hesitate to do the same if Resistance members start killing cultists for no good reason.”

“And what do you consider a good reason?” Grace asked, tone unreadable. Rook met her eyes.

“For the time being, we’re going with the ‘eye for an eye’ policy. But when the bombs drop, that stops. Immediately. If a cultist is being violent and attacking you, put them down, fine. But just remember they have the right to do the same.”

“We’re all just taking shelter here, away from the rest of those crazy motherfuckers,” Hudson told her, arms crossed protectively over her chest.

“I get that,” Rook said softly, understanding. “But I need a favor, which is why I’m here.” She waited, meeting Grace and Jess’s eyes. The two looked to one another and Jess shrugged.

“What do you need, Rook?” Grace asked, her tone marginally less cold than it had been during their exchange so far.

“Y’all are hardly the only Resistance members who don’t want to work alongside the Peggies. I understand that. But I don’t want anyone getting hurt or killed if bombs are dropped. We’ve got a significant military base just to the northwest of the Whitetail mountains and I think it will be attacked if nukes do get used. I want all Resistance members in the Holland Valley to have an assigned bunker if this happens. Those who can get along with Peggies should go to John’s
Gate. I’ve already made arrangements, they’ll be welcomed there. Those who won’t will need to be assigned a bunker.”

“I’m not hearing the favor so far, Dep,” Grace said. Rook nodded.

“I need you to send out scouts and find abandoned bunkers and I need you to let me know if any of them need repairs. And I need someone, I don’t care who, to work directly with the Peggies on getting food and water enough for about five years for every person assigned to a bunker. Will you help me with this?” Grace sighed, looked to Jess, who looked to Hudson.

“I’ll do it,” Hudson said softly. Rook cocked her head a bit. Hudson met her eyes. “Protect and serve, right, Rook? I’ll do it. I’ll make sure the bunkers are outfitted and I’ll meet with whatever cultist you send here. So long as it isn’t John.” Rook nodded.

“You got it. Thank you, Hudson.”

“I’m not doing it for you,” she said, voice flat.

“Was that everything you needed, Rook?” Grace asked. Rook nodded. “Then it’s time for you, and him, to go.”

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“Any time I interact with Grace Armstrong and come out alive is better than expected,” he admitted.

“Eh, Grace wasn’t the dangerous one just then,” Rook told him. “Jess wants you dead for what your man did to her parents.”

“I didn’t know he was doing that,” Jacob ground out a moment later, his jaw clenched. “When I found out…well…The Cook is lucky you beat me to him,” he told her. “I had been busy, training…”

“Brainwashing people,” Rook tacked on, annoyed. Jacob huffed.

“Yes. I…I had a plan, but you turned that all sideways.” Rook glanced at him, putting on her turn signal and accelerating up the winding road toward John’s Gate.

“For better or worse,” she said. Jacob reached a hand out and squeezed her thigh.

“For better,” he assured her. His hand sat on her thigh for a moment, but then wandered down. Rook gave a one-sided smile and wriggled.

“Later,” she murmured and he removed his hand.

They pulled up to John’s Gate, greeted by an older woman with hair dyed blue. She looked to be in her late forties or early fifties, but was fit and quite attractive with large hazel eyes and a wide mouth that smiled easily.

“ Heard you were needing another engineer,” the woman greeted in a thick East Texas accent, thrusting her hand out with a friendly smile. “Name’s Wren Johnston. Well, Dr. Wren Johnston, but you can call me ‘Wren.’”
“Dr. Johnston,” Rook started politely, taking the proffered hand, “Wren, how are you?”

“Doing great. Looking forward to helping out.”

“John recommended you very highly,” Rook said, “Says you were a civil engineer before you joined the Project.”

“I was, got tired of tearing out ecosystems to place pipelines and decided to get the H-E-double fuck sticks out of Houston and moved here. Prettiest country I’ve ever seen,” she confided with a grin. Rook chuckled.

“I’ve got somebody you’re gonna love,” she told Wren, remembering hearing Earl say exactly the same line about this county. “Hop in and we’ll head to Faith’s Gate.”

Rook barely managed to hold back a snort at the look on Earl’s face when Wren hopped out of her truck. His eyebrows rose and he stood a little taller, one hand on his belt, the other outstretched to shake her hand.

“Sheriff Earl Whitehorse,” he said as her smaller hand was enveloped by his.

“Dr. Wren Johnston. But please call me ‘Wren,’” she said with a luminous smile as her eyes roamed over him appreciatively. His eyes did the same to her, but with more subtlety.

“It would be my pleasure,” his gravelly voice told her.

“Oh Christ,” Rook muttered and Jacob choked back a laugh.

“Well, Sheriff,” Wren said as she walked alongside him toward the area of construction, “I see a wedding ring but I don’t see a wife standing anywhere around.” Earl barked a laugh.

“You’re a blunt one, aren’t you?”

“It’s my specialty,” Wren assured him.

“I haven’t had a wife in about five years,” he admitted, holding a door open for her. “Didn’t like how much time I spent at work and definitely didn’t like how much time I spent fishing.” Wren gave him an inquisitive look.

“You a fisherman?”

“Among other things,” he told her, unable to avoid being a flirt with the kind of encouragement he was getting.

“Well, I guess we oughta get some work done so we can go tomorrow morning.”

“Gotta get up early to go fishin’,” he told her. She smirked up at him as they walked.

“Or stay awake until sunrise,” she countered. “Think you can manage that, Sheriff?” God almighty. She wasn’t as bad as Adelaide given the fact that she hadn’t grabbed his ass yet, but she clearly had a goal and it appeared to be him. He found he didn’t mind, though that blue hair was… different. Outside of his norm. He chuckled at her forwardness.

“We’ll see,” he told her and she laughed. He was almost disappointed when they reached their destination. “Wren, this is Eli. Eli, this is Wren.”
“Dr. Johnston, yes,” Eli said, looking a little surprised. “I’ve read all your papers on bunker design using naturally-occurring mountain crevices. And your work on passive and active structural vibration control was a huge basis for my master’s thesis,” he told her, looking a little awed under his thick beard.

“That paper was a nightmare to publish,” she laughed, “Where’d you go to school?” Wren asked him.

“Montana State for my bachelors, then CalTech for my Masters. I was actually planning on going to University of Texas for my PhD, but then life happened,” Eli told her.

“I know how that goes, believe me,” she laughed. “So, let’s get started. What are we doing?”

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Earl flicked his line out across the water in the quiet of the morning and reeled slowly. Wren stood beside him, doing much the same.

“Your deputy told me what happened to you in there,” she said quietly, so as not to scare the fish. He hummed a little noise, frowning. A fish took his bait and he tugged to hook it, lifting the end of his pole carefully. “For the record I think it’s really brave that you’re still willing to help out here after what Faith did to you,” she told him. “I joined the Project because I was looking for something, but I did not agree with the shit she was doing. I’m glad the Project and the Resistance is working together now. To be honest, I wasn’t too happy about being on the wrong side of the law. Anyway, I’m not gonna beat around the bush here, Sheriff. I think you’re cute and I’ve got an itch to scratch before we maybe all die in an apocalypse. If you’re into that, you let me know. If not, your loss,” she propositioned bluntly. Earl chuckled as he reeled and glanced over at her.

“I’ve got a cabin about a thirty minute drive north of here,” he confided. Wren smiled at him.

“Well, then I guess we better catch a fish for breakfast soon. We’re gonna need the energy.”

“Could y’all please save these kinds of conversations for when you’re by yourselves?” Rook asked with a martyred sigh. Jacob sniggered and reeled in a trout.
Songs and Soundproofing

Chapter Summary

Rook discovers someone has a talent and they find that the bunkers need soundproofing. Badly.

It was common in any Resistance camp for someone to pull out a guitar and sing. Often couples would pair up and dance slowly to appropriate music, while other times the audience would join in with the singing. Sometimes, though, people would just listen, enjoying the talent of the musician. This was one of those times, though this wasn’t a Resistance camp. It was now a shared space where Project members and Resistance members hesitantly worked side by side. Rook came around the corner hearing a soft but strong voice that was familiar, combined with talented fingers picking and strumming notes on a classical guitar. It was a voice she had heard singing to her before in wildly different circumstances.

“When the night has come…and the land is dark, and the moon is the only light we’ll see, no, I won’t be afraid, no, I won’t be afraid just as long as you stand, stand by me.”

Rook stepped out of Faith’s Gate carrying a tray of food, surprised to find a large group of people gathered around a small fire listening to the musician.

“So darlin’, darlin’, stand by me, oh stand by me, oh, stand by me, stand by me. If the sky that we look upon should tumble and fall and the mountains should crumble to the sea… I won’t cry, I won’t cry, no, I won’t shed a tear just as long as you stand, stand by me.” Jacob met her eyes, but kept playing. “Oh darlin’, darlin’,” he sang directly to her, “Stand by me, stand by me, oh stand now, stand by me, stand by me.” He vocalized an eerie ‘ooh’ sound as he transitioned into the next line, raising goosebumps on her arms. “And darlin’, darlin’ stand by me,” he sang out with a harsh rasp in his voice, “Oh! Stand now by me, stand by my, stand by me…”

Before Rook could say anything to him past the lump in her throat, she noticed John and Sharky walking up behind her. They had driven over from the Holland Valley today to help with directing workers trying to fix Faith’s Gate as quickly as possible. Without missing a beat, Jacob smirked and transitioned into a more upbeat rhythm and Rook chuckled when she recognized it, as did several others gathered. John turned bright red as a half dozen of the gathered crowd started singing the lyrics enthusiastically along with Jacob.

“Come brothers and come sisters, Come weary and come strong, Come meet the man who reaps the land on which we walk upon, The time has come for judgement but we’ve got nothing wrong. Join us so we all can sing along!” Sharky grabbed John’s arm hard and yanked him forward, dancing the two of them around the fire. John squawked, narrowly avoiding singeing his fancy shoes, much to Jacob’s amusement. He had a nasty frown on his face and was hissing something in Sharky’s ear but the pyromaniac ignored him and kept forcing him to dance, so of course those gathered started dancing around too. Rook was cackling, having set down her tray of food and she found herself, to her great surprise, paired up with Joseph, who also looked deeply amused at his brother’s prank and his other brother’s irritation.

Rook spun around with the preacher, surprised at the strength in his hand where he gripped hers. Jacob finished John’s song and transitioned easily into Joseph’s.
“He once was a peach picker, and he toiled in the sun. He reaped the orchard on his own, until the day was done. His hands were hard and calloused, cause he didn't have a choice. He served so many non-believers, 'til he heard the voice…” Joseph pulled Rook close and she let him, felt his strong hand on her waist now. His eyes were ridiculously blue, the same color as his brothers’ and his gaze was intense. She could see clearly for the first time how one man could have collected so many followers willing to die for him. Joseph was kind, and smart, and deeply charismatic. She tugged away from him suddenly as the song started winding down and Jacob transitioned into “Bad Moon Rising.” Joseph frowned a little, but released her without question.

“I enjoyed dancing with you, my child,” he said, effectively distancing her, a relief.

Desperate not to seem awkward, she grabbed the arm of a woman who had been working as one of her guns for hire.

“Have you met Megan?” she asked, tugging Megan toward him. The lanky brunette woman smiled when Joseph took her hand. “You have now,” Rook muttered, stepping away with a chill sliding down her back like an ice cube. Rook watched the two dancing, saw them talking, saw a truly charming smile slide over Joseph’s face. Jesus Christ, the thirst for the Seed family was real, she thought to herself, wiping her forehead and feeling a bit ashamed of herself. She turned back to Jacob and smiled. That was the one she wanted, she thought, feeling her chest warm.

Jacob smiled widely and Rook thought it was perhaps the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. She leaned in close to him as he strummed to fill the silence between songs and asked,

“What do you take requests?” He nodded and she whispered in his ear. He barked a laugh and started to play.

“Baby, when I met you there was peace unknown, I set out to get you with a fine tooth comb, I was soft inside, There was something going on. You do something to me that I can't explain, Hold me closer and I feel no pain, Every beat of my heart We got something going on! Tender love is blind, It requires a dedication. All this love we feel needs no conversation, We ride it together, ah ha, Making love with each other, ah ha. Islands in the stream, That is what we are No one in between. How can we be wrong? Sail away with me To another world, and we rely on each other, ah ha! From one lover to another ah ha!”

They sang together to the entertainment of the crowd, which had grown as the noise level had increased. From the look of things, Joseph and Megan were getting along quite well, much to Rook’s relief. Earl and Wren had joined the crowd from inside and were dancing a little more stiffly than the younger crowd, but just as exuberantly. Both Resistance and Project members were smiling, intermingling, happy and whole, if only for a few minutes.

Rook kissed Jacob hard, smashing their lips together almost painfully, holding the shaved back of his head in desperation as he plunged into her.

“I love you,” she whispered roughly as he gasped next to her ear, his muscles tightening and his broad back slick with sweat where she held a hand to push him closer, deeper. “I love you,” she cried again, louder this time as he slammed into that sensitive point inside of her, “I love you!” she screamed. He growled harshly, his fingers digging hard into her legs where he held them over her head and to each side of his shoulders. She was scrunched up underneath him, the weight of him smashing her into the bed they had been using while staying at Faith’s Gate. Rook let out a little shriek of pleasure as she clenched around him, her breaths coming ragged in the warmth of the room. Jacob threw his head back and cried out and Rook felt him pulsing inside her, felt his
legs go out from under him like Jell-O as he released her legs and slid out of her, flopping onto the bed. There was a long pause, and then a voice.

“Hey, if you’re testing the soundproofing of the walls,” came the voice through the wall, “It’s not.”

Jacob started cracking up and Rook covered her mouth with her hands, holding back a cackle.

“Sorry, Megan,” Rook called, recognizing her gun for hire’s voice.

“It’s alright,” said two voices, one Megan’s, one…

“Holy shit,” Rook laughed. She and Jacob exchanged glances, grinning at each other.

“’No fornication’ my broad white backside,” Jacob grumbled, pounding a fist on the wall. “You’re a hypocrite, Joseph,” he called and Rook cackled, no longer able to hold it in. Jacob pulled his pants on and left, knocking a moment later on Megan’s door. Joseph looked out sheepishly, his manbun askew and his glasses nowhere to be seen.

“Brother,” Joseph greeted, trying and failing to look guileless.

“Joseph.”

“We need to soundproof the walls,” Joseph admitted softly.

“Yes, we do.”

“Add it to the list.”

“Consider it done,” Jacob said, looking amused at his little brother. “And Joseph?”

“Hmm?”

“No more telling people they can’t fuck. It isn’t a realistic rule,” Joseph sighed and closed his and Megan’s door with a click. When Jacob returned to their room and stripped off his pants, he laid down next to Rook, tweaking one of her nipples to make her giggle or shriek. She did both and then shushed them both, laughing again. He met her eyes intently, looking for all the world like a wolf.

“Move in with me,” he blurted.

“What?”

“Move in with me,” he repeated. “Just for now. I have a cabin, it’s–”

“Yes,” she interrupted with a smile, stroking his broad chest. “I’ll move in with you.”

“I love you,” he murmured, kissing her on the forehead and then the lips.

“I love you too,” she said.

“We know,” came Megan’s voice followed by a laugh.

“Everyone knows,” came Eli’s voice from the room to the other side and Rook tried very hard to melt into the bed, turning bright red.
“When can we go?” Rook laughed.

“Tomorrow,” Jacob promised, dragging his knuckles across her cheek. “For now, sleep.”
Broken Seals

Chapter Summary

Joseph wonders if the seals are still being broken, or if Rook refusing to be Wrath has prevented the Collapse.

“Be still, goddammit,” John snapped, grinding his teeth in irritation, forcing himself to calm down and not to dig the needle any further into Sharky’s skin as he drew.

“It tickles!” Sharky protested, wriggling.

“If you keep moving, you’re going to fuck it up,” John griped, wiping a gob of ink away with a cloth. Something was bothering him and it wasn’t just Sharky’s squirming. The fact that he couldn’t put his finger on just exactly what was bothering him made him even angrier.

“You’re really hurtin’ my wrist, man,” Sharky told him softly and John let go of it immediately. Embarrassed and frustrated, John forced himself to very slowly, very deliberately set down his tattoo gun, forced himself to stand, to stretch, to breathe. Previously he would have thrown the tattoo gun across the room, would have maybe hit his subject, would possibly have forced them back into the Bliss water to make them limp and unable to fight back. But, no more of that, he thought, taking a deep breath in through his nostrils. Sharky had been trying to help him with his temper, trying to help him focus his negative energy into constructive destruction. He had built up much of the muscle tissue he had lost when he had been shot moving chunks of concrete by hand out of Faith’s Gate. The deputy had been impressed with his healing time and to the relief of all the Project members, had allowed some of the concentrated Bliss to be kept for producing the medication responsible.

“Let’s take a break,” he suggested to Sharky, his voice and his hands shaking a little bit. Sharky nodded and kissed him carefully. John smiled a little at that. If Sharky thought he didn’t notice the classical conditioning he was doing, he was mistaken. It had probably been at Jacob’s suggestion, John thought with amusement. Every little step, every time John got his temper under control, or at least admitted that he was struggling with his temper, Sharky would reward him in some small way, most often with a kiss or a squeeze of his hand. Once, John had halted a full-blown shit-fit tantrum on his own when he realized he was being a jackass and Sharky had drug him into the bedroom as a reward. If he wasn’t careful he was going to condition John to get aroused every time he managed to rein in his temper.

“It’s looking good, stud,” Sharky told him happily as he looked at John’s handiwork in the mirror, taking in the detailed flames around the emboldened word PRIDE appreciatively.

“Thanks,” John said with a little smile. Sharky stepped forward and kissed him again, more intensely this time, suggestively.

“You wanna, uh?” John grinned, showing all his teeth, putting a hand on each of Sharky’s shoulders before he responded.

“Yes.”
In the Holland Valley, all was quiet, and peaceful and the sound of two men’s mingled pleasure could be heard carried on the breeze.

“Are you okay?” Rook asked quietly, pulling Jacob close to her. He embraced her, pulled her closer to him.

“Bad dream,” he confided. “As usual.” He felt dread like an ice cube down his back, but did not know why.

“Everything’s okay.”

“As okay as it can be,” he agreed quietly, looking shell-shocked, his blue eyes a little unfocused. Rook frowned.

“I’m here,” she told him. He glanced up at her, engulfed her cheek in a palm.

“I know,” he whispered, bumping his forehead against hers. He traced her brows, ran a thumb down her nose with a small smile as she cuddled close to him.

“I love you,” she reminded him.

“I know,” he rumbled.

“All right, Han Solo,” she teased. He chuckled, shucking her pajama bottoms off.

“I love you too,” Jacob assured her, sliding two fingers into wet warmth, making her gasp as he made a ‘come here’ motion with his calloused fingers. She wrapped her legs around one of his, ground on his thigh, rubbed on the soft red hair there, cupped his face in her hands.

Jacob moved against her in the semi-darkness, seeing only her silhouette in the light of the half-full moon. They slid together, whispering assurances, making promises they did not know if they could keep, pressing two bodies together until they were but one soul as the world continued around them, unknowing.

“Darling,” Jacob whispered.

“My love,” Rook called and they crashed together like two waves on an unending shore, sure and eternal as the universe. In the Whitetail mountains, quiet spread over the hills and whispered calm in the valleys.

“Lord, give me guidance,” Joseph prayed softly, lashing his back with his wrist flagellum, wincing at the sting as it slapped across his bare back. He was sitting atop of the high hill that contained Faith’s Gate, staring up at the bright moon through yellow-tinted glasses that brightened his view. He heard crickets singing softly, heard an owl hooting close by, but no Voice. He sighed. The deputy was supposed to have broken seals, was supposed to have kicked off the entire Collapse, but none of that had happened. Had he misinterpreted the Voice? Had the deputy prevented the Collapse by refusing to be wrathful? The first seal had been broken when Whitehorse had shown up with Rook, but then none of his siblings had fallen. Jacob was perfectly happy with Rook. John was doing wonderfully with Sharky. Faith seemed happy enough with her friends and with Deputy Pratt. They were all alive and well, and while Joseph was, of course, relieved by this, he was also unused to not knowing what was going to happen.
And then Megan had happened.

Was it a mistake? He wondered. He remembered his beautiful wife Sarah. He remembered the infant, doomed to die. Whether he had pinched the oxygen line shut or not, the infant had been doomed, struggling to breathe, struggling to keep its little heart beating. Doctors had wanted to leave the child to suffer, to die slowly. Neither God nor Joseph could abide anymore suffering. But it had broken something in him, left him scarred, terrified of taking another chance. But Megan…

She was beautiful. And smart. And sarcastic. He smiled slightly. She had not been impressed with him, hadn’t thrown herself at him as so many of his family did, worshiping him as a god. That wasn’t what he wanted. He wanted a companion, not a sycophant. He had not intended to fall into temptation, but then, who did? She had whispered suggestions in his ear as they danced together and he had found himself, for the first time in years, off guard. He had smiled to her, wrapped his arm around her waist and hadn’t thought about Sarah. He had looked right at his tattoo and felt happiness instead of grief. He knew Sarah would want him to be happy, would want him to move on. But it was hard. And he thought that perhaps it was wrong.

“Are you angry, Lord?” he asked the heavens, his chest clenched, his brow furrowed.

“Why do people always look up when they pray?” came Megan’s voice as she approached. She sat down next to him, putting a blanket over his bare back, frowning a little at the long red welts from his self-flagellation. “I thought God was supposed to be everywhere?” Joseph smiled and adjusted his position from kneeling on his knees to sitting cross legged next to her.

“He is,” he whispered, closing his eyes slowly and listening hard for a Voice he needed to speak to him. “He is in everything and everyone.”

“Then maybe we should look at one another when we pray,” she suggested softly, taking one of his hands. He turned to her, eyes flickering open. Was she his answer? He wondered as he stared into those soft brown eyes. Megan put a gentle hand on his jaw, pulling his chin up slightly so he met her eyes fully. “You put so much responsibility on yourself. Have you ever thought that maybe your part here is done? That maybe you’ve done what God meant for you to do? Maybe it’s time for a break,” she murmured with a small smile. “Maybe God isn’t angry at you. Maybe he is pleased with you.” Joseph shuddered when her hand ran to his chest, pressing flat there, warm and solid.

She was feeling his heartbeat.

With a terrible tenderness, Megan ran her hand up from his chest to his neck around the back of his head and pulled his hair tie out, letting his dark brown hair fall down around his face like curtains. He took her wrist gently, removing her touch, closing his eyes slowly, wanting nothing more than to melt into her touch, but feeling it was wrong, maybe even dangerous.

“Child,” he whispered, throat tight, unsure of himself for the first time in years.

“Joseph,” she whispered, sounding so eerily like the Voice that it terrified him. He opened his eyes and met hers, swallowing. “Maybe we have come here for such a time as this,” she suggested, pushing her hand stubbornly back into his hair, caressing him gently. She brushed her fingers through his soft hair, smiling at him as she pushed him onto his back on the soft grass, straddling him. She leaned down, kissed him gently, smiling again as she felt his heart racing beneath her fingertips.

Megan pulled the wrist flagellum off his arm, tossed it far away, not waiting for any
argument.

“Stop hurting yourself,” she murmured. “Whatever God might want, He doesn’t want that,” she assured him, kissing his cheek. Joseph was breathing hard beneath her, felt temptation hot and burning in his chest, making its way to his...

He grunted as her hand cupped him and unzipped his jeans, unbuckling his belt.

“Child…Megan,” he objected, licking his lips and tangling his fingers in her shirt, but she just redirected his clutching fingers to her bosom and he arched his back, letting a shuddering breath out through his wetted lips. She shushed him, lifted her skirt and enveloped him in warmth. “Lord,” he half-prayed, half-cried out, letting himself feel the ecstasy of the moment, letting pleasure overcome him as she moved over him like some conquering angel come to bring him good news.

“Be not afraid,” came the soft Voice in his mind and he sank his fingers into her hips, pressed himself into her as she moved.

But he didn’t need the Voice to tell him this was right.

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Two miles away as the crow flies, the Hope County Jail sat in sullen silence in the warm night, its residents asleep or snoozing. Dr. Lindsay snoozed in his chair and a quiet tone of death played from Marshall Burke’s heart monitor.

A seal had been broken. Only a few remained.
He wiped sweat from his brow, panting hard as he flopped onto his back.

“What’s the matter, old man? Can’t keep up?” Wren asked. Earl laughed but it was through a gasp. They laid next to one another in the bed, stretched out languidly, relaxed. They had spent the night together, and then the next day, and then another night. This morning was the second day in a row they had been together, side by side, alone, getting to know one another.

“Can I be honest with you about something?”

“I’d prefer it,” he told her frankly, cocking a brow.

“I knew you were divorced,” she confided a little embarrassed. “Had a bit of a crush on you for a while, but with me being a Peggie and you being the law, I figured it wouldn’t have worked out. I voted for you every election cycle since I moved here in two-thousand and eight. I liked seeing that handsome face pasted on plastic signs stuck out in people’s yards. Figured I could at least throw you a vote, keep you in office so you’d hang around. I even pestered John about getting you to join Eden's Gate, but that didn’t work out.” Earl huffed a laugh.

“He still managed to blackmail me, though. Still managed to make my life hell for a bit. Can I be honest with you about something?” he echoed, meeting her eyes timidly. She nodded, tracing a finger through his chest hair.

“It was my secret that destroyed my marriage,” he admitted softly. “That I’m Rook’s real father. I had kept it from everyone, even my wife, but then John started sniffing around about five years ago, started probing into my background, found out and threatened me. I had to come clean, at least to my wife. I never wanted anyone to know about it, figured Rook’s parents would have told her, but they died just before her eighteenth birthday. She was conceived well before I had even met my wife, mind you. My wife…she told me when we got married that she was okay with us not having kids.

“My dad was a mean drunk. Beat the shit out of me for the hell of it, most often with a Bible in his hand,” Earl recalled, his voice going a little bitter. “My mother was ambivalent. Tried to protect me on occasion, but that just got her beat too. I had…I have a temper, but Rook’s dad
helped me with it. Taught me how to leave well enough alone when it was necessary. Anyway, all of that to say, I never wanted to be a dad. I was terrified I’d be just like my father, would screw a kid up. And I stuck to my guns. I only stayed around Rook because her parents were my friends and…” he swallowed hard, his hand shaking a little where it rested on Wren’s hip. He hadn’t even intended to tell her this much, but the words were flowing out of him and it was like he wanted to turn himself inside out, wanted to admit everything and get it out in the open for once in his life.

“And you were in love with Rook’s mother,” Wren guessed. Earl went a little pale and let out a shaky breath, looking at her uncertainly. He had never told anyone what he was about to tell Wren. Finally, he opened his mouth and what he said was not what Wren had been expecting.

“No. Not her mother.” Wren’s eyebrows shot up.

“Oh. Shit. Wow. Okay.” Earl went very red from his chin all the way to the tops of his ears, blinked quickly a few times and sat up, crossing his arms protectively over his chest.

“I’m not…” Earl refused to meet her gaze, “I’m not like…that, but Richard…” He paused, his eyes going distant. “He was the only exception. I met him in college. We both went to Montana State on a bull riding scholarship. We started out competitors, enemies. Got in a fair few fist fights with each other. But then…we became friends. Best friends. I never told him how I felt, all through college, and hell, I refused to accept what I felt myself. Mostly it just made me angry, feeling that way toward him and not understanding why, feeling like it was wrong. It was the late seventies and that kind of thing just wasn’t done in Montana, wasn’t okay like it’s starting to be now. But I couldn’t stay away from him and he was a good friend to me. He bailed me out of jail a fair few times when I drank too much and lost my temper, started a bar fight. He told me I needed to learn how to leave well enough alone. He taught me how to walk away if something ain’t worth fighting about.” Earl’s eyes had gone very distant, and Wren put a gentle hand on his side, encouraging him to continue. “He wanted to stay in touch after graduation, wanted to start a ranch together, but once I had my degree in hand I said goodbye, accepted that it was for the best and took off. I didn’t give him a number or an address to contact me by.” He let out a deep sigh.

“People come to Hope county for a lot of reasons; wanting to horde guns, or start half-cocked religions, convinced that the end of the world is coming they flock here and build bunkers and safe houses. But a lot of people come here to escape the world, or to run from themselves. I’m one of those. So you can imagine what a shock it was when he showed up in Hope county three years later. He had bought a ranch and started his own cattle company, tried to hire me on, but I was a deputy and wanted to stay one.” Earl clenched his jaw a bit, sniffed. “Damn near broke my heart to see that he had come here with a wife,” he whispered. He met Wren’s eyes. “But I didn’t hate her. If anything, I loved her because she made him happy. I loved that man the way the moon loves the sun. We became close friends again. One night, we got a little too drunk. I kissed him.” Earl swallowed. “And he…kissed back. But…he was with Astrid. And I accepted that. When he told me he was sterile…when he asked…” Earl looked deeply ashamed, face red and brow furrowed, eyes troubled. “I agreed to the arrangement because it was the closest thing I could get to actually being with him. I think he knew that. I think he was trying to give me something, trying to love me in the only way he could, by making me a part of his family, in a way. It was all very discreet and the night itself was very…tasteful. It’s a memory I’ll treasure until the day I die. But…” Earl’s voice dropped so low that Wren had to strain to hear. “I didn’t realize how bad it would hurt to see him holding that kid. My kid. And then hand it to Astrid instead of me. In some ways Rook is a bad reminder of those feelings. But I thank God every day that I made the decision I did because it means I can still look into her father’s eyes, I can still hear her mother’s voice.” Earl wiped a hand over his face. “‘Good God, this is too much to be dumping on you, I’m sorry.’ He started to get out of the bed, but Wren put a hand on his wrist, stopping
“No. Go on. I’m listening. I want to know.” Earl didn’t meet her eyes, but kept talking, voice shaking now as though he was trying not to cry.

“I basically raised Rook from the moment her parents died to adulthood. I helped her get into college. Helped her get into the academy. I felt responsible for her, in more ways than one. The car that hit her parents was a cult transport vehicle. An accident, everyone said. But it was a little too coincidental that Rook’s parents had just been invited to the cult’s church and refused to go back. Rook has every reason to be wrathful, hateful, angry. And she chose not to be. So maybe I could have been a better father than I thought. Maybe the parts of me that are in her are good. Or maybe that’s just her father in her. I was never the same after Richard died. I grieved him for years and my wife Gloria didn’t understand why I took their deaths so hard, never did appreciate that I spent every waking minute trying to find a way to implicate the Seeds without John destroying Rook’s career by revealing that she was my daughter.” Earl swallowed hard like he was trying to keep control, his fingers clamped on two fistfuls of the sheets. “Anyway, when I admitted to Gloria that I had a child with my best friend, but never agreed to have one with her, that was the end of it. I think she figured my motivations out too, though I think she believed I was in love with Astrid, not Richard.” Earl glanced up at Wren, who had gone very still. Concerned that he had offended her, and knowing that he had deeply overshared, Earl spoke again.

“You might have noticed there are a lot of odd types here, and a lot of people very reclusive about their... well, affinities. I doubt you’ll find another rural area in Montana with a higher per capita population of gay, trans or bisexual people. Hell, that Boshaw kid is a furry, whatever the hell that is. We leave each other alone here. It’s how we like it, how we wanted it all the way until that damn Seed family showed up, no offense. Anyway, I hope you don’t think less of me for...”

“What? For loving someone?” Wren asked, cocking her head and smiling a little at him. “Honey, I’m from Austin. Unless you’re diddling kiddos you ain’t gonna bother me none. You love who you love. I’m sorry you lost him.” A closed-mouth smile wandered back across her face and she went quite red.


“I know this is insensitive, but all I want to do is make a Brokeback Mountain joke.” Earl laughed and she laughed too, pulling him closer. “Well, I don’t have a trademark ‘tragic backstory,’ but I understand the want to escape the world, or to run from yourself. Hope county is as good a place as any to do it.”

“Prettiest country I’ve ever seen,” they said in unison and chortled a bit.

“This whole ‘cult’ thing got way out of hand,” Wren admitted. “It didn’t start out a cult, you know? It was just a man with a message and a lot of people who agreed with him. Unfortunately, you gather enough people who believe in the end of the world and you’re pretty likely to get some bad apples in the barrel. John is bad, but Jesus, some of his men are worse. I think in some cases he got so out of hand because they were egging him on, and if he wasn’t vicious and merciless, I think they would have killed him like a wolf pack killing one of their own. Same goes for Jacob. I don’t know what the hell Faith’s problem is. I’ve never been a fan of hers.” Earl snorted.

“Well, thank Christ for small blessings,” he said dryly. Wren laughed softly, cuddling closer to Earl.
“Thank you. For telling me,” Wren whispered, getting serious. Earl glanced at her, looking chagrined.

“Well, you know, apparently the end is near. I’ve never gone to confession, but I figured someone ought to know.”

There was a sudden urging pounding at the door. Earl pulled his robe on, went to the door, his .44 Magnum in his hand. He cracked it open.

“Earl,” Tracey said, looking relieved that he had answered. “The Marshall just died. We need you to come to the jail to keep things calm.” Earl turned to Wren, who was pulling her clothes on.

“All work and no play goes the other way too,” she shrugged, grabbing her shotgun. “Let’s go.”
Sharky lights John's house on fire and John and Sharky accidentally break a seal.

“This one’s not clean,” John said, voice low and tense.

“Oh, shit, sorry.” Sharky took the spoon from John’s hand and started scrubbing at the little piece of stuck on cheese with a vengeance. John glanced at Sharky for a moment, watching his muscular hands with their fingernails chewed short and cuticles overgrowing and felt his heart clench. How did he, of all people, get a second chance and how in the world had the universe aligned to put him with possibly the most opposite person it could find? He remembered the first time he’d said those words, remembered nearly drowning the deputy, remembered his rage and his disgust. He remembered the cold pain in his chest when Joseph had told him he would be barred from Eden if he didn’t convert the deputy.

John remembered his eulogy and his wrath was back, full and cold and freezing him from the inside out. His wrath was not a fire, but it was just as destructive, a spreading sliver of ice in his guts, far stronger and longer lasting than any flame. He wanted to lace his fingers around Joseph’s neck, wanted to carve the word “UNFAIR” into his chest the way one would carve into an ice statue. He swallowed, gripping the kitchen towel so hard his knuckles ached. He held a crystal glass in his other hand, unnoticed. He remembered the house fire that Jacob had started, remembered Jacob refusing to accept the status quo. He remembered being taken away because of it. He remembered being given to the Duncans. Remembered beatings and lashings like they had happened yesterday. It was their fault. Joseph for talking about that damn Voice, Jacob for burning their foster parents’ house down. If he had never fought, if he didn’t have to turn everything into a war, if he…

The glass shattered, slicing the inside of his palm open and he screamed furiously and threw the rest of it across the kitchen where it smashed into thousands of tiny little snowflakes of glass. Sharky said nothing, didn’t touch him, didn’t react. He walked to the pantry and pulled out the broom, swept up the mess while John stood, shaking and dripping hot blood down his fingers and onto the tile floor where it quickly cooled and congealed. Sharky approached him carefully, as one would approach a spooked horse and pulled the kitchen towel out of his hand, wrapped it around his injured one, but John was keeping it in a clenched, tight fist.

John still just couldn’t let go. He was just so angry, so furious at the life he had been meted out by a cruel, uncaring universe, or worse, by a callous, despicable god who dared create him and then allow him to live in torment. He felt cold, felt himself shaking, felt the hairs on his arms lift and he imagined that perhaps his heart was frozen too and maybe that’s what was so very, very wrong with him. Maybe he didn’t know how to unfreeze his insides and let warmth in after all.

“John,” Sharky said softly in his gravelly tone. John’s icy gaze flickered up and he met warm blue-grey eyes. John gasped out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding and suddenly breaths turned to weeps. Carefully, Sharky pried John’s hand open, removed a small sliver of glass and wrapped it up in the cloth. “I don’t know much, hombre, but I know it’s gonna be okay. You’re
gonna be okay. Just let it out, man. Just let it go.”

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The next morning, the Resistance members still staying around John’s ranch were destroying cult flags and other propaganda John had created. The mocking “NO” far up on the foothill facing his house still taunted him, but he found he didn’t mind as much, found it didn’t make him as angry every time he saw it, especially if Sharky was there to take his hand tenderly and distract him. But this morning, after a night spent nearly sleepless, deep in thought with a haphazard bandage on his hand, he was in no mood to look at that damn sign, which is why he hadn’t stepped outside yet this morning.

John smelled burning, however, and that was deeply concerning, especially when followed by the words,

“Ah fuck! Shit. Oh shit. Oh, that’s not good.” John stepped outside, prepared for the worst, but he still was not prepared for what he saw.

The giant bonfire the Resistance members had started to destroy cult property (a thing that already rubbed him strongly the wrong way) had grown to monumental proportions, and some of it had crawled down a line of lighter fluid or gasoline to just below John’s first story flowerboxes and was lapping away at the plants and wood there.

John’s hands went to his hair in dismay.

“My peonies!” he griped. “My house!” he continued, his rage growing. He followed the little streak of burning fuel with his gaze, looking where it curled around the bonfire and across the ground to end at…of course: Sharky.

The pyromaniac was looking sheepishly at him, trying unsuccessfully to hide his homemade flamethrower behind the fuel canisters strapped to his back.

Wrath, icy and destructive, rose up in John again and for a moment, he wanted to kill everyone in his sight, wanted to rend and rip and smash. He wanted to go on a rampage, spreading cold terror through everyone and everything he encountered. But then Sharky approached with that goddamn flamethrower, looking so innocent, and yet so ashamed.

“Somebody go get water!” yelled one of the Resistance members, the priest from Falls End, John realized idly, and there was a flurry of action to halt the damage that Sharky’s overexuberance had done. Sharky approached John, having no idea that his life was in danger, having no idea that John was sucking in air in little angry gasps, having no idea that ice is impervious to fire…unless that fire is big enough to melt it all. Sharky threw a friendly arm over his shoulder, pulled him to his chest.

“Sorry, bro. I’ll buy you some more flower seeds in Falls End, ‘kay?” John felt his chest unclench, felt his rage fall apart and leak from him like an ice cube melting in the face of the sun. He felt his gut unclench where he had been holding an iceberg of fury at Jacob. He felt his mind relax from the anger he had been letting pile inside him at Joseph like a blizzard. As though he was no longer flesh and bone, he felt his legs go out beneath him as every angry, venomous, cold thought he had been refusing to release toward himself and others just…left. He felt his anger and his hatred at himself vanish, melted like the mountain snow in summer. He let it all go. And melted, and let Sharky pull him close, warm, and bright as the bonfire behind him.

John huffed out a breath and blinked quickly, feeling himself recover from his sudden
“You all good, amigo?” Sharky asked, sounding concerned.

“I think I’m the best I’ve been in…ever,” John whispered. “You know you told me not
say it until I could say it about myself,” he muttered, and Sharky did a double-take at him. John
met his eyes with surety. “Sharky…I love you.”

“I love you too, broseph,” Sharky said, cheeks going a little red when he did so.

“Please don’t call me that,” John laughed, feeling lighter and warmer than he had ever
felt. He looked at Sharky again and pointed at the crispy black peonies where the gathered crowd
had only managed to stop the flame before it caught the actual box on fire. “I was thinking maybe
we could plant some Prairie Fire this time.”

There was a sudden rumble above them and they all craned their heads upward to see
what was flying over. High, high above them flew military jets. A Resistance member peered
through binoculars and then turned to them.


Unknown to all gathered, Sharky and John had just broken yet another seal.
Faith might be the next seal. But then again, she might not.

It was clear now, as he lay beside her with her stroking fingers over his scalp and through his hair, that the seals had changed. They were once a downfall, destruction. Now, however, he realized when he broke his own, they were acceptance. Resolution. He had let the death of his wife and his child go, had allowed his heart to open as he had encouraged so many others to do. The brokenness in him had begun to mend, but with that mending came the destruction of a seal, and a step that much closer to the edge. He thought, or at least he suspected that Jacob was close to breaking his. Yesterday, John’s had broken, and with it’s destruction had come jets flying over, malevolent and terrifying. But they flew over Hope county. Hope county, Joseph knew with a surety, was safe. It would be their New Eden. He had no idea when or how Faith would break her seal. But hers and Jacob’s would be the last, would be the final foretelling of the end of the world.

“What are you thinking about?” Megan asked softly, pulling his glasses off. She had a way of stripping him bare, not just his body, but his soul. He blinked, eyes adjusting to the dimness without the bright yellow lenses to increase contrast in his surroundings.

“Destruction,” he told her honestly, “and creation.” He reached a hand up and took a strand of her brunette hair, met her hazel eyes. She leaned down and kissed him.

“I thought you were full of it, you know?” she admitted. “But then I heard all those radio broadcasts. I watched the news. Hell, I saw who got elected. I know a lot of people in Montana voted for him, we’re a conservative state, but...”

She was quiet for a moment. “Why do you think the Voice talked to you?”

“I don’t know,” he said, again honest. “All I know is that the deputy has something to do with the last seal. I made a great many mistakes, trying to pull things together. I did a lot of things I regret.” Megan frowned.


“Where to begin?”

“‘Begin at the beginning,’” she murmured, “‘and go on till you come to the end. Then stop.’” Joseph chuckled.

“Alice in Wonderland?” Megan smirked. He began to speak, pouring out his sins before her in a way he could not have done to John. She listened, gently stroking his hair as he spoke, frowning and offering an occasional question of clarification, which he answered. When he had finished, she sat silently for a long time, still brushing through his hair with her fingers.

“I’ve always been pretty religious,” she admitted. “I was raised in the church, loved the rituals, loved the idea of a loving Creator. But I can understand your frustration with mankind. I can understand why God would be angry again. And I think…I think even with the mistakes you made, God forgives. I think the harder part is forgiving yourself.” Joseph smiled, let out a little
“I’ve already been working on that.”

“That’s all anyone can ask,” she answered and she pulled him up to kiss her. He ran tender hands up her waist, feeling interest rising again. His hair fell around his face and he pulled it back into a ponytail before tucking it into a tight bun. She laughed. “Not going to let it free?”

“It’s bothersome,” he said distractedly as he brought his lips to her breast, kissed it gently, pushed her down on her back and pressed into her with a little strangled grunt. She threw her head back and let a sigh fall out of her as he enveloped himself in her warmth. He pulled her close to him, let her claw her fingernails over his back, stuttering over scars from beatings and fights he had been unable to avoid. She saw each one of his wounds and accepted them, put all her effort toward healing them. He clung to her, and forced flickering images of a fiery ending away from his thoughts.

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There was pandemonium at the jail. Project members and Resistance fighters were bickering, arguing now that the marshal was dead. At their center was Faith Seed, otherwise known as Rachel Jessop, curled in on herself, trying to avoid the angry crowd. Accusations flew, and then fists flew, and then rocks and other objects were thrown. Whitehorse couldn’t keep the crowd under control, felt anxiety rise as he was reminded of that night they had tried to arrest Joseph. Pratt struggled to get through the crowd to Faith, to put her in protective custody. Frustrated with the delay and tired of dealing with the fighting, Wren raised her shotgun in the air and fired it with a deafening roar.

“That’s enough!” she hollered, one hand on Earl’s shoulder to keep herself close. “Knock it off!” Pratt shoved his way through, picked Faith up in a princess carry. She clung to his neck, eyes frightened. The gathered crowd began to turn its ire toward Wren, but she aimed her shotgun one-handed at them, waving it as needed as she turned her body to address them all. “You idiots are just now deciding to be angry about the marshal? We all knew that dumb fucker was gonna die. We all knew he was doomed. He walked into Joseph’s compound with delusions of grandeur, threw fucking gasoline on a diesel fire and then thought he’d come out okay? He’s the one who pulled the trigger on himself, and fine, Faith’s the one who encouraged it, but Eden’s Gate provided medicine to try to fix it, made from Bliss, I might add. And you’re mad now, because something that probably wasn’t going to work, that you were told wasn’t going to work didn’t work? Settle your asses down, my god.”

There was soft murmuring. Then there was rumbling. Everyone collectively looked up, Peggies and Resistance members alike.

“I think we’ve got bigger problems anyway,” Earl muttered.

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Pratt, wide-eyed and looking half-mad loaded Faith into his car, muttering something under his breath as he started it with a splutter and a choke before it finally came to life. He drove for a while, making his turns a little too sharp, his knuckles tight and white on the wheel. Faith sat silently before she finally looked over to him.

“Thanks,” she said softly.

“Don’t thank me. Wasn’t me. Was that Peggie,” he insisted. “He was right,” he growled
under his breath as jets soared over. “He was fuckin’ right.”

“Hey.” Faith tried to distract him. She wasn’t sure exactly what Jacob had done to Pratt, but she was sure it wasn’t kind. She felt a little streak of guilt at the thought of what she did to the citizens of Hope county that fell into her web. If people couldn’t or wouldn’t be converted with Bliss then they would be made catatonic, and if their will was too strong for that, then they were convinced to kill themselves. The sheriff had been a particularly hard nut to crack. She had to whisper awful, despicable things in his ear to convince him to lace that rope around his neck. He had fought her hard. She hadn’t even bothered to try to keep him in captivity when she first took him. He had fought the Bliss hard, shaking his head, grounding himself, refusing to go into oblivion. He was a distraction. He would prevent the deputy from doing her work. Faith wasn’t sure exactly how, but something about Earl would keep the deputy from fulfilling the prophecies Joseph had seen.

Faith remembered taking Earl’s face in her hands, telling him his deputies were dead, that it was his fault. He had refused to accept it, had fought, angry and strong. So much stronger than she would have expected from an old washed-up cop from a county in the middle of nowhere. Earl Whitehorse hadn’t given up when she had targeted his deputies. Knowing what John had found out, she had waited until she again had him in her grasp, reminded him of Rook’s parents. Pointed out how that might have been his fault too. She whispered their names in his ear and he had wept at one of them, lashed out at her before he finally went into the Bliss, finally let go.

When Earl had responded to that name, she had latched onto it, made him see his friend with her words. The look on his face when he thought he saw Richard Rook again would haunt her until the day she died. Before she could finish him off, his deputy had shown up.

Faith shook herself, searched in Pratt’s glove compartment where she had hidden a joint. She lit it and he held a hand out shakily. She handed it to him. He took a long drag on it before handing it back. He finally pulled up to their destination shortly after, his small mobile home. She followed him inside. He paced back and forth wildly.

“Don’t know who to believe,” he was mumbling, “Don’t know what was real. Why would Rook…? No. I can’t. He has her. He has a plan. They’re all right. But they’re wrong. I don’t, I can’t…” he buried his fingers deep in his wild black hair, panting.

They had broken so many people when the Reaping had begun. It had seemed right. But it wasn’t, she realized with dread. Joseph had turned her and the others loose on the county and instead of working for him, they had worked against him, taking out their own issues on the innocent citizens of Hope county.

Faith thought back on all the terrible things that had happened to her, the terrible things she had done to herself. She looked at the terrible, broken figure pacing in front of her and let herself breathe out, let herself accept that she had been wrong. She accepted it, and then forgave herself, let anger and desperation flood out of her.

Nothing happened.

All was quiet and peaceful.

No seals were broken.
A Problem to Solve

Chapter Summary

Rook encounters yet another problem to solve and turns to a friend for help.

Two months passed in no time as Eden’s Gate members and Resistance members formed a sort of wary alliance in most areas after the jets flew over. Both were deeply suspicious of the other, but the cult members who refused to lay down arms had stayed to themselves, exiled from Joseph’s sermons, similar to the Resistance factions who refused to share resources with the cult. Both groups were a constant threat, and a constant source of stress for Rook, who was trying very hard to bring everyone together in the face of impending doom. There was, of course, always the possibility that nothing would happen and that the outside world would come into Hope County to find its residents and its law enforcement in bed with a paramilitary cult that absolutely had hurt and killed people and it wouldn’t just be the Seeds going to prison, Rook knew. She’d be going too if no bombs dropped, if the end of the world didn’t come. She should not, she thought, be so eager for the world to be destroyed, but here she was, nauseated at the prospect that it might not.

Rook had awoken in the early morning nauseous and had found herself bent over the toilet in Jacob’s cabin, tossing her cookies. She wiped her mouth and leaned back, feeling an odd flip flop in her abdomen. It was the fifth day in a row she had woken up like this. She thought for a moment and the blood rushed out of her face.

Oh fuck.
Oh shit.
This was bad.
This was really, really bad.

Rook found her keys and left a note on the counter so Jacob wouldn’t worry when he awoke.

“Gone to get eggs,” her note said. She would have to stop at the local poultry farm so he wouldn’t suspect anything. Where she actually went first, however, was a local convenience store run by a couple who had previously been split up. The husband had joined the cult, the wife had not. They now more or less happily ran their business, back on the same page and the same side. They greeted her with a smile when she walked in.

“Deputy! How are you?” the wife, Cheryl asked.

“Doing great, Cheryl, how’ve you been?” Rook asked, forcing a smile.

“Much better lately. I’m so glad we’re working everything out.”

“Certainly trying to, anyway,” Rook assured her with a small fake laugh. She excused herself and meandered up the aisle. You know, that aisle. The one with pads, tampons, lube, condoms…and pregnancy tests. She swallowed. She hadn’t had a period since the night of Joseph’s first arrest. The stress had been too much. She had spent too much time running around,
and Jacob had half-starved her for nearly a month the first time he had kidnapped her. She let loose a small laugh at the odd change of events, shaking her head at how her life had made a hard left turn. Not wanting anyone to know what she was buying, she jammed a pregnancy test into a box of tampons, feeling like a criminal when she checked out. She’d go back and pay for it later, once she knew for sure.

Rook swung by the poultry farm, the pregnancy test sitting like a lead weight in her bag.

“I don’t suppose I could use your ladies room?” she asked. “Bad breakfast burritos this morning,” she confided in a soft whisper, holding her stomach significantly. That should give her enough time to let the test run without too much suspicion, she thought.

“Oh, of course, dear,” Anita, the farm manager told her with a little grin. “First door on your right, then down the hall to your left, middle door.”

“Thanks,” Rook told her, rushing to the bathroom. She squatted, unwrapped the test and stared at it for a moment, swallowed. She read the instructions five times, just to be sure of the thing before she followed through. She sat, waiting for the prescribed two minutes to pass, leg jiggling madly. It was stupid, she was stupid. She had continued to take her birth control, not considering that the abandoned pharmacy she had been stealing them from might have ordered them months ago. She pulled the little yellow cartridge out of her purse and looked at the expiration date. “Shhhhhhit,” she hissed. They had expired six months before. The timer on her phone went off and she took a deep, steadying breath, picked up the test and stared at it, feeling like she was going to pass out.

Unmistakable, it sat there, mocking her, two little lines shifting her entire life in a second. A blue plus sign. She put her face in her hands, ignoring the fact that she was holding a stick covered in her own piss next to her face.

“Shit.” Unbidden, she felt tears gathering in her eyes. She had never wanted kids. This world was too evil, too full of violence and hate. It was bad enough bringing a kid into the world knowing that about it. It was worse to know you might be bringing one into a world about to end. There were nearly eight billion people on the planet, who was she to rip another one out of the void and force them to live in the shitshow this world had become? Panicking now, she sobbed, covering her face in her hands, letting herself weep in terror and frustration with herself, with Jacob, with the entire world. She gave herself one more minute and wiped the tears away roughly, cramming the heel of her hand into her eyes and sniffing, forcing herself to calm. She would figure it out. She always found solutions to problems. This was just another problem to solve.

Having collected herself and splashed her face with water, she stepped back out. She knew her face was red from crying. She looked to Anita and sheepishly said,

“You might give that a few minutes.” Anita just laughed. Rook bought a dozen eggs and got into her truck, drove a ways down the road and allowed herself to fall apart fully, allowed herself to freak out and scream and punch her steering wheel. “FUCK!” she screamed, heart pounding. What was she going to do? She put a hand delicately on her abdomen where she knew her uterus sat. She lifted her shirt, touched the pale skin there, dipping a finger briefly into her navel as she thought. If they really were about to be some of the last people on Earth…perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad? And it was Jacob’s child. She loved him, that much she knew for sure. Oh shit. What would Jacob think? Terror tore through her.

“The weak…the old,” he had said. Wouldn’t being pregnant make her fit in that first category? The whole reason Joseph had warned his followers against fornication was to prevent this exact thing. Babies did not belong in a bunker for some unknown period of time. Family, she
thought. They were a family. Surely Jacob would welcome another member of their family. She swallowed. She had to tell someone, but she wasn’t ready to tell Jacob yet.

Larry Parker, bless his nerdy little heart, had set up a communication system that allowed cellphones to make calls within the county now that the cult was sure no one on the outside could be reached. That was still a point of deep contention, but there was nothing to be done for it. With a little sigh, Rook pulled her phone out, dialed a number.

“Hey, Shorty,” came the gravelly voice on the other end of the phone. “What’s up?”

“Hey, Sharky,” she chuckled, her voice wavering, her hand still on her belly absently. “Do you have a second?”
Rook reveals something to Jacob and he has a decision to make.

“Oh shit. Uhm. Is this good news or bad news?” Sharky asked, a little flabbergasted that Dep had called him about this. He knew they had become best friends, but still.

“I don’t know,” came Rook’s shaking voice from the other side of the phone. Sharky glanced to John, who looked curious.

“And, uh, is it, uh, you know, is it…Jacob’s?” John definitely tilted his head at that, crossed his arms over his chest where he wore a forest green silk shirt with a brown and tan houndstooth patterned wool vest over it. Rook laughed.

“Yes, Sharky, it’s Jacob’s.”

“Well, don’t you think that would make him happy?” Sharky wondered, unsure what advice to offer. Any time any of his friends had knocked a girl up it had been a definite ‘oh shit’ moment. They were never happy about it. This, Sharky thought, was probably different though.

“Again, I don’t know, Sharky. I just had to tell someone,” she said, sounding tired.

“Why don’t you come by the ranch, we can have a beer?” he suggested helpfully.

“Sharky…”

“Oh. Right. Well, uh, I can drink and think about what to say that might actually help, and you can have, uh…” he searched the fridge for a moment, peering inside with his phone still pressed to his ear. “Water. Or four month old OJ. Your choice, Popo.” Rook chuckled.

“Is John there?”

“No. Uhm. Yes. Why?”

“I think you know why, you knucklehead,” she said affectionately.

“I don’t know, Dep,” Sharky told her, making eye contact with an increasingly more curious John. “He’s pretty good at keeping secrets.

“This ought to be good,” John muttering, bringing his fists together and rubbing one hand with the fingers of another gleefully. There was a sharp sigh on the other end of the phone. “Water. Or four month old OJ. Your choice, Popo.” Rook chuckled.

“I’ll be there in a couple of hours. Do not tell John before I get there.”

“No problem, Dep,” Sharky assured her. John met Sharky’s eyes with those intense blue ones and smiled winningly.
“What’s the news, my love?” he asked, tone ingratiating in an almost infuriating way. Sharky swallowed.

“M not supposed to say.” John pulled him close, glanced at his lips, tilted his head like a puppy. He knew exactly what he was doing.

“But we tell each other everything now,” he said convincingly, putting his thumb on Sharky’s chin while the rest of his fingers cupped his jaw. Sharky swallowed again, opened his mouth, his brain fighting to cut off the words before they tumbled over his teeth but those blue eyes were just too much.

“Dep’s pregnant with Jacob’s kid.”

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Three weeks later and Rook still hadn’t told Jacob. Fortunately neither John nor Sharky had told him either, but still, she was nervous, flighty. Anytime his hand lingered on her belly, she felt her stomach clench. She needed to tell him. She had hoped it would be under better circumstances.

They ran madly, hearing barking behind them. They had called Sharky and John, but neither had answered their phones. Rook had left a frantic voicemail on Sharky’s phone and a text on John’s. She had then called Adelaide, but she wasn’t picking up either, nor were the Ryes, who only had a landline and were rarely home to check it.

“Shit,” Jacob said, cradling his rifle in his hands. “I didn’t realize they had Judges.”

“Yeah, well, who’s responsible for those?” she snapped, feeling particularly irritable. They had stumbled upon a little faction of the cult that was not okay with sharing resources with the Resistance and they were running like mad from their pursuit, not wanting to kill their enemies if they could avoid it. Jacob sighted and shot the hat off one of them before they kept running.

“Quick, Rook, in the lake,” he told her urgently, diving in himself. She stopped, heart pounding.

“I can’t,” she said, desperation in her voice.

“Why not?” he yelled, face furious as he paddled back toward the shore. Bliss fumes were fluttering off the surface of the water and she felt terror in her, felt a protective swell for the child growing inside her.

“I just can’t, Jacob, please! We have to find another way.” He growled, but he climbed out of the water, shaking himself mostly dry and giving her a quizzical glance.

“So then what do you suggest, pup?”

“Somewhere without Bliss,” she said quickly. He rolled his eyes.

“Its effects are temporary.”

“On adults. As far as we know.”

“And?” he asked, not looking at her, instead scanning the tree line. She sighed. This was not how she had pictured this. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on how one looked at it, it was at that moment that a young Judge sprinted out of the woods, hackles raised, that red cross a
beacon on her forehead. Rook recognized this wolf, felt an odd mingling of fear and relief trickle through her.

“That’s Maggie,” she said, remembering the wolf pup she had given Jacob months before. “Come here, girl. Come.” The wolf laid her ears back, showing teeth, steps nervous. She sniffed the air, growling deep in her throat. Jacob aimed at the wolf with his rifle.

“Stay away from her, Rook,” he warned.

“No,” Rook whispered, stepping forward. Maggie’s tail wagged uncertainly, nervously and still her teeth were bared. She got a whiff of Rook and stepped forward, holding one front leg in the air, unsure. “It’s alright,” Rook told her, bending down. Maggie growled and Rook heard Jacob chamber a round. “Don’t,” she said just loudly enough for him to hear. Maggie stepped forward, slow, careful, only the tip of her tail moving. She stopped showing her teeth and finally stepped forward confidently, sniffing Rook’s closed fist. Suddenly a transformation flickered across the wolf’s body. She hunkered down, whining, licking Rook’s mouth, tail wagging as she flipped herself on her back, sliding herself beneath Rook’s bent legs, an odd, almost grin-like grimace on her slender face.

“Oh shit,” Jacob whispered, recognizing the body language of a wolf that has realized something about a packmate that needs protection, a packmate carrying something very important. Rook turned her head to face him as he approached. “You’re pregnant,” he murmured, feeling faint. His eyebrows flew up but the rest of his face went still, blank. He stood, stock still, stunned.

“Jacob!” Rook called as she stroked Maggie’s belly, hoping to break him out of his stupor. Gunshots went off nearby along with the loud sound of an airplane soaring over.

“Did someone call in the cavalry?” came John’s cocky voice over Rook’s radio. Rook closed her eyes, sighed with relief.

“Oh, thank god,” she muttered. She turned to look at the tree line, saw a fluttering of movement as their aggressors fled. She turned back to Jacob, who was still staring, still just standing there, silent and blank. “Jacob?” she asked, stepping forward carefully. He looked at her, blinked, opened his mouth, shut it.

“I…can we…?” He staggered, caught himself, grabbed her arm carefully, his face relaxing from its blank stare to a look of wonder. “If it’s a boy, can we name him Jacob?” he asked softly.

Jacob felt every uncertainty, every fear tear through him, realized it didn’t matter. Nothing that had happened before this moment mattered. All that pain, all that agony, all that anger. It didn’t matter. All that mattered was her. And that baby inside of her. It was not weakness, he realized, to love, to care about others. It was not weakness to put others before yourself. It was a strength unlike any he had ever seen. The thought did not even occur to him to object. There was no decision to be made, no problem to solve, only the acceptance of more love than he had ever felt filling his chest. A massive lump in his throat, he stepped forward, blinking away a haze that had formed in his eyes. He put a huge hand over her belly, felt the tiny swelling there, pulled her close and let peace overcome him as he kissed her gently.

"Of course," Rook promised, voice shaking.

“Thank you,” he whispered, unsure if he was saying it to her, or to God or to the universe, only knowing that he meant it. “Thank you.”
Another seal had broken.
Rook receives information she didn't have before and has to process it. The end is near.

“We’re close now. Very close to the edge,” Joseph intoned seriously over the phone.

“Do you think it’s time?”

“I think we should treat it like it is,” Joseph told her seriously. “The Voice is…unclear, but it whispers to me quite often these days. It seems…ready.” Rook puffed out a breath and nodded, though she knew he couldn’t see her over the phone.

“Alright. Let’s spread the word. We’ve made preparations, we’ve got everything prepared, food canned and water filtration in place. I’ve got assignments for bunkers too. Larry got our radios all hooked up so we’ll be able to communicate until we can venture out. I’ve got hazmat suits and Geiger counters in all the large bunkers, including each of the Gates. I think we’re ready.”

“Then, go, child, and gather your people.”

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“Please, Jess. I’m begging you. Please, you have to go in a bunker. Even if you don’t believe Joseph, you’ve seen the jets flying over. Russia. China. North Korea. Pakistan. Don’t be stupid.”

“I ain’t bein’ stupid,” Jess snapped, continuing to pack her bags. “I just ain’t gonna hide underground like some fuckin’ rat.” Rook sighed.

“There’s room in Grace’s bunker. We’ve restored it.”

“Which you wouldn’t have had to do in the first place if you and your fuckbuddies hadn’t burned her house to the ground.”

“Look, Jess, I’m tired of arguing with you. I’ve got more people I’m responsible for, so I won’t waste anymore time trying to persuade you. But I can tell you this.” She waited until Jess met her gaze with a deeply unfriendly look. “If you don’t get your skinny ass in a bunker, you’re gonna die. Bye Jess. I hope I see you again.” Rook didn’t wait for a response.

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“We’ve got it handled, Dep-you-tee,” John assured her in that smug tone of voice. She met Sharky’s eyes.

“I know y’all have been going on joyrides. Now is not the time. You gotta be ready to get your asses to John’s Gate at any moment, or at the very least get to the bunker under John’s house, though I don’t think the two of you will come out alive if you stay together just the two of you for five or seven years.”
“So long as there’s beer, weed, and lube, I think we’ll be alright, Shorty,” Sharky said offhandedly. Rook rolled her eyes. She might have known that things would go to shit just before things got serious.

“It’s up to you. But stay safe, okay?” she asked, pulling Sharky into a hug. She grabbed the shoulder of John’s shirt and ignored his sound of displeasure as she pulled him into the hug too. “Just in case it happens before I see you again. See you, Sharky. John.”

“Deputy. Take care of my brother.” Rook nodded and took off. She had too many places to be.

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“Are you excited?”


“No, silly. About your baby.”

“Oh.” Somehow Rook had successfully forgotten all about the baby as she rushed around trying to help her friends. She had gotten Kim and Nick set up in Jacob’s Gate with her since they were keeping a doctor there who had worked as an OBGYN before she had joined Eden’s Gate. They had agreed only reluctantly, but felt better when she helped them put their plane “Carmina” in the shed and had Dr. Johnston come over to add shielding to the building. It was fortunate she had gotten them to Jacob’s Gate, because just yesterday Kim had gone into labor and as of early this morning, her and Nick were proud parents to another Carmina…this one a tiny baby girl. “Honestly, amid trying to get everyone safe, I had totally forgotten about my baby,” Rook admitted.

“Well, you’ve got another one to think about,” Megan told her in a conspiratory whisper. Rook’s jaw dropped, but Megan shushed her. “I’m not sure yet, but I’m never late. Ever. So, you know.”

“Oh my god,” Rook said, pulling her into a hug, “congratulations!”

“Like I said, not totally sure, but, I’ve got a feeling, you know? At first I was terrified. I mean, we went from taking potshots at cult members to me being in a relationship with its leader. But Joseph is…he’s changed. He told me. About your parents. I’m sorry that happened. He’s sorry too.” Rook turned her head slowly to Megan, her face frozen into a blank mask.

“What?” she asked dully. Megan frowned.

“The accident. I thought you knew…?” Feeling suddenly faint, Rook reached for her truck keys, urgently wanting to leave. Why would Joseph be sorry about an accident? Why, she wondered, beginning to put two and two together, did Earl spend every waking minute they had not been on an active case staring at casefiles from her parents’ wreck? It had happened in Holland Valley, but John was the last person she wanted to talk to about this, and she had sent Joseph to talk to his people, to gather them.

“Um. Yeah. The accident,” she said numbly. She needed answers. Now.

Driving carefully to Jacob’s cabin, her mind racing, she parked her truck, breathing hard. Anytime she had asked about the accident Earl had changed the subject, insisted she go work on something else. He had kept the files from her, insisting it would be a conflict of interest if she went through them. Technically speaking he was correct, but what else was going on? What did
Joseph have to do with her parents dying? Grief at the memory of their deaths sank deep in her stomach, making her feel heavy. She curled her hands around her belly, holding her child as best she could for comfort before she remembered that her child was just one more thing her parents would miss because they had died.

Rook’s eyes watered. Her high school graduation. Her college graduation. Her academy graduation. Getting hired as a deputy. Everything. They were missing everything and…had that been the cult’s fault after all? She had suspected, but she had always pushed the thoughts to the side, figured Earl would have told her anything she needed to know about the accident, but he hadn’t even told her about her parentage until a few months ago.

Like glass left too close to the edge she felt all the trust she had built in the Seeds, in Earl, in everyone drop and shatter into pieces. She took a deep breath and stepped inside Jacob’s cabin.
Chapter Summary

Rook gets Jacob and Earl's side of the story.

Chapter Notes

This is a sad one, Gentlefolk. Buckle your seatbelts, we're going on a feels trip.

TW: description of serious bodily injury
TW: description of the aftermath of a car wreck
TW: minor character death

“Was my parent’s death an accident?” Rook asked him, pointblank. She was too tired to beat around the bush, too exhausted from helping both Resistance and Project members get to bunkers, helping to secure food and water and other resources. There was no more time to waste, the end could happen at any time. And she had to know.

Jacob turned away from her, swallowing and then licking his lips before he met her intense gaze.

“No.”

Rage poured through her like it had not in years. Fury, anger, wrath, call it what you would, she felt it boiling inside of her. Her hands were shaking and her breaths were short and stilted.

“And you never bothered to tell me. Earl never bothered to tell me.” Rook’s lip curled, furious. “How…exactly…did it happen?” she ground out with effort, wondering if she was about to shatter her teeth with how tightly her jaw was clenched. Jacob wiped a hand over his face tiredly. Ten years ago he had been a different man. They had all been different, all been terrified of someone actually managing to stop them, of someone taking their guns and their resources away before they had a chance to establish the groundwork to create an Eden after the Collapse. Eden’s Gate had needed as many followers as possible, as many people as possible on their side, and Joseph had received a blurry, uncertain vision about Rook. They had to convert her parents, to make sure she didn’t gum up the works.

Jacob told Rook as much, and paused.

“You have to understand that Joseph never intended for anyone to be killed. Hell, the only person he’s ever personally hurt was a mole who was trying to rat us out.”

“And he put his eyes out with his thumbs. And he killed his kid. Oh yes, Joseph is the very picture of innocence,” Rook spat. Jacob sighed.
“It was John and I who first advocated the use of force. But even we didn’t mean for anyone to be seriously hurt at that time. The driver, he was one of John’s. Angry. Stupid. Looking to prove himself. He...he ran them off the road. He had been told to rear-end them, to damage their vehicle so the Project could step in and replace it, in the hopes of ingratiating us with your parents. That wasn’t what happened.”

Rook listened coldly, leaning against their dining room table on one hand, her legs crossed at the ankles where she stood, silent and still like a statue.

Jacob finished explaining, his face grieved and apologetic, but it didn’t matter. They had hidden this from her. They had covered it up. They had blackmailed Earl and he hadn’t done enough either, hadn’t bothered to tell her, though she deserved to know. Cold fury cementing her decision, she walked to the door and picked up her pack.

“Where are you going?” Jacob asked, smart enough to know not to try to restrain her or take her hand as he followed her toward the door. She turned back and looked at him with an expression that could only be described as disgust, one hand on her slightly rounded belly, the other on the strap of her pack where she had slung it over her shoulder.

“To get more answers. And to get away from you,” she finished venomously. “Maggie. Come.” The wolf whined, looking from one of them to the other before ultimately deciding to follow Rook. Rook slammed the door behind her, and was gone.

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“You’ve been lying to me,” Rook said darkly when Earl answered the door.

“Rook?” he asked softly, face confused. She stepped inside without an invitation, her rifle in her hands and her wolf on her heels. Boomer, who had been staying with Earl, whined and gave a sharp bark from where he sat in the corner. One look from Rook silenced him.

“I want to know about my parents’ accident. I want to know everything. I want you to tell me exactly what happened that day. Everything.” She sat at his dining table, keeping her rifle on her lap significantly.

“Earl?” Wren asked, stepping into the dining room from the kitchen, holding a plate she was drying. He held up a hand.

“Give us a minute,” he said softly. “Alone.” Uncharacteristically obedient, Wren nodded and went back into the kitchen. A few moments later they could hear her listening to music in the living room. Earl looked to Rook, sighing.

“I never meant to hide this from you, Rook. But I didn’t want you going after Eden’s Gate and gettin’ yourself killed.”

“Until you decided we were going to kick the hornet’s nest by arresting their leader?” she asked blankly, face cold and still. Earl swallowed.

“You know as well as I do that wasn’t my decision, Rook.” Rook’s face was carved into an expression of contempt and anger.

“Tell me. Everything. Every detail. Don’t leave anything out.”

“Rook...”
“Now.” Her tone brooked no argument and Earl didn’t like the mad, wrathful glint he saw in those all-too-familiar green eyes. He’d seen that glint before, shortly before Richard had beaten the shit out of him over some slight or other when they’d gotten too drunk in college.

“Alright,” Earl said reasonably, face sad. “Alright.” He ran the scene back through his mind as he had done a thousand times before. He would tell Rook the important parts, the parts about how the cult had seemingly intentionally forced her father’s truck off the road, about how John Seed had conveniently showed up, about how he had probably paid off people to write it up as an accident instead of what it really was – murder. But he didn’t tell her everything. He didn’t tell her the details of her parents’ last moments. But he relived them anyway, as though it had happened yesterday.

Earl approached the scene, his stomach dropping when he recognized Richard’s red pickup truck upside down in the ditch. One of his deputies tried to stop him from getting any closer, but he brushed the man aside.

“Oh, Jesus, please no,” he muttered, feeling sick as he reached for his radio and called for a medevac chopper. He knew the volunteer fire department was already inbound, but they wouldn’t be able to get his friends to help fast enough. He stumbled down the incline, heart beating hard. The passenger’s side was closest and Astrid hung from her seatbelt, limp. Her neck was very obviously broken. He felt for her pulse, but didn’t find one. Bile rose in his throat. Feeling as though this was a nightmare, he braced himself along the side of the pickup, desperate to move quickly to the other side, to Richard. His friend was breathing raggedly, a gash sliced along the side of his face and neck. His eyes were already bloodshot, his cheekbone badly bruised.


“You’ve been in an accident, Richard. We’re gonna get you some help, but it’s gonna be a bit. Volunteer fire department should be here in ten minutes to get you out. You gotta hang on, you hear me?” Richard looked around, assessed the situation from his upside-down position, braced in place by his seatbelt. He saw his wife and he gasped out a sob, defeated. He looked up to his lap and then looked back down and to the side where Earl was crouched outside his window.

“I don’t…” Richard coughed and blood splattered the steering wheel and the inside of the windshield, “I don’t know that I’ve got ten minutes, bud.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Earl told him, grinding his teeth hard against panic as he looked for a way to safely extract him.

“Earl…” Richard grabbed his arm with surprising strength considering how pale he was. He pulled Earl toward him, forced him to look at his lap where one of the steel t-posts he had been carrying in the bed of his truck had punctured his abdomen. “Bad…” he coughed again, winced, “Bad day to pick up fencing supplies, I guess.” Richard turned away from Earl to look at his wife again, let out a little sob of pain and grief. He turned back to Earl, green eyes soft. “I never…I never wanted to say this this way,” he forced out raggedly, grabbing Earl’s forearm where it rested at the truck window. “Not with…” he let out another pained sob, “Not with my wife dead next to me, but…Earl, I ain’t got time to put this off any longer. I love you. I’ve always loved you. Please,” he bared his teeth in a hard grimace and Earl saw his teeth and gums were stained with blood, “Take care of our daughter. Please.”

“Don’t you fuckin’ do this to me, Richard, don’t you die on me, goddammit! Where the fuck is that chopper, or the firemen?!” he yelled to the other law enforcement officers and
bystanders that had gathered, his chest clenched. They yelled something to him, but he couldn’t hear it over Richard’s rasped inhalations of air. Richard took a shuddering breath that Earl recognized. He had heard that rattling before and terror shot through him. Looking around carefully to ensure that he was the only one directly in line of sight of Richard, he leaned in close, his very soul aching as he put a hand to the back of his friend’s neck and bumped their foreheads together awkwardly with Richard dangling upside down as he was. “I love you too, you son-of-a-bitch. Please, please don’t die on me.” Richard choked, his grip on Earl’s arm wavering.

“I’m sorry,” he gasped out, “You take care of her, yeah? You promise me?”

“I promise,” Earl ground out through a throat thick with tears. Richard breathed out one final rattling breath, Earl feeling the air flutter in his mustache their faces were so close. He looked up, his vision swimming with tears and saw a black doubled-cross on the side of the transport truck that had caused the accident. He swallowed hard as he saw a fancy new pickup truck with the same logo pull up, saw a handsome young man get out and straighten his overpriced coat.

“We came as soon as we could,” Earl heard the man say loudly to the other deputies milling around above, taking reports, measuring skid marks. “Do you need help getting people out of the wreckage?”

But it was too fucking late for that. Earl stood, his legs almost going out from under him as he forced himself to be composed, forced himself to hide the agony he was feeling inside.

“Get that bastard out of here! This is a crime scene,” he snarled as he struggled his way back up the incline. John Seed’s cold blue eyes met his.

“This is the scene of an accident, Sheriff. A tragic one. I’m just here to help in any way I can.”

“You son-of-a-bitch,” Earl rumbled, making his way to John and fisting his fingers in his too-nice shirt, lifting the shorter man up a little by his collar. John’s eyebrows rose and he put an infuriating smirk on.

“Sheriff, this was not my fault. I understand these might be friends of yours, but this is extremely unprofessional.” John looked significantly to Earl’s hand and Earl forced out a breath, forced his fingers to unclench from the fabric. John straightened his shirt and cleared his throat. A few of his deputies and others at the scene looked uncomfortable, or surprised. Nauseated, Earl turned away from them all, putting a hand to his brow. Sirens sounded close by, but it was too late. It was all too late. Earl was too late.

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Rook sat stock still in the chair, hands gripping her rifle hard. Her gaze flickered from her lap to Earl’s face. There were tears shining in her eyes and one escaped, sliding down her cheek. Earl wanted to wipe it away, but wasn’t sure if the touch would be welcome, wasn’t sure if she would allow him the right to comfort her.

“Thank you,” Rook said stiffly. “For telling me. I have to go,” she said flatly. Earl frowned.

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“Rook.” Her face flickered and it was as though some demonic presence had made itself known, a change overcoming her features and distorting it into a look of pure hatred and fiery, eternal wrath.
“Don’t follow me,” she commanded, standing and patting her leg so her wolf…her Judge would follow.

“Okay,” he said softly. “Okay.”

But he did not obey.
Rook paced inside the church, heard a vehicle pull up. Finally. She had told Joseph to meet her here. He hadn’t asked why, had just agreed to it. Her head snapped toward the doors when she heard voices and she stalked forward, slamming both doors open abruptly.

Joseph stood there, Earl, Hudson, Pratt, Sharky, John, Jacob, many of her friends all behind him, all looking concerned. She met his gaze, lip curling and eyes narrowing in fury.

“You made martyrs of my family,” she snarled, “and I’m prepared to do the same to yours.” She held up her rifle, switched the laser guide on. The red dot appeared on John’s forehead. Sharky went pale with horror and pulled John to the side, but Rook just followed his head with her aim.

Joseph stepped forward and her aim switched to his bare chest without hesitation.

“God is watching us,” he said, “and He will judge us on what you choose in this moment. I told you that we were living in a world on the brink…where every slight, every injustice, where every choice reveals our sins. And where have those sins led us?” He gestured around them calmly. “Where have those sins led you?” Rook was breathing heavily, her finger sitting on the trigger, but Joseph showed no fear. “Your friends were taken and tortured, and it was my fault,” he told her softly, tone apologetic. “Countless people have been killed, and it was my fault. The world is on fire…and it is my fault.” He sighed. “It wasn’t worth it, child. It took all of us too long to realize that every problem cannot be solved with a bullet. When you first came here, I gave you the choice to walk away. You chose not to. In the face of God, I am making you a similar offer. Put down your gun, you join your friends, you stay with your family, and we all live in peace.”

“Live in peace”? After you ordered the deaths of my parents?” Rook snarled. “You’re fucking insane!”

“Is he?” Pratt asked her softly. “Is it so much to learn how to forgive?” he looked at Jacob, took a shuddering breath. “Rook?” Rook shook her head, fighting back tears. “If I can forgive…” Pratt clenched his jaw but Rook stopped him with a palm held outward, balancing her rifle in one hand under her arm.

“Every slight…” Rook ground out, picking up some of Joseph’s own rhetoric, feeling hate and anger choke her, “Every injustice…every choice reveals your sin,” she told Joseph, pointing with a finger. “Your sin is pride. You’d rather watch the rest of the world suffer and burn than swallow your pride and admit that you are no better than anyone else you’re letting burn because they wouldn’t join your little club,” she hissed through teeth bared like a wolf’s. She raised her rifle again, moving to squeeze the trigger. Jacob yanked his brother back, Sharky threw himself in front of John for good measure and Earl jolted himself into action, pushing over a barrel of Bliss nearby since there was no better option with which to distract Rook.

Rook felt nausea overtake her and a windstorm swept up. The sky turned green and she
felt debris battering her arms and face, disorienting her. She staggered through the compound, eyes nearly shut to protect from the dust the storm was kicking up.

When the dust cleared slightly, Rook saw Hudson and Pratt and...her heart clenched, Earl all pointing their weapons at her. She ducked behind a cargo box, holding her rifle close.

“Your friends now see the Truth. They welcome Eden’s Gate into their hearts! They will die for me!” Joseph screamed. Snarling, Rook fired and saw Joseph stumble and go down. She felt satisfaction at that. Let him bleed out slowly, she thought. Hudson came around the corner of the building and Rook fired. She cried out and went down. Ignoring her, Rook pursued Pratt, shooting him in the back.

“No! Not like this!” he cried out, clutching at his chest. Rook stood over him.

“You are weak,” she told him, before walking away, searching the area for Earl. Instead she saw Joseph where he was dragging himself to cover, holding his bloodied leg.

“Begone, demon!” he cried, true fear in those blue eyes hidden behind yellow lenses. Rook growled, low and rough in her throat, like a wild animal. Figures popped up out of the haze created by the storm. Rook saw both enemies, and those she had once considered friends, all armed, all defensive against her. She laughed.

“It will be sweeter now when you all fall,” she hissed. “I gave you every chance and you threw it all away,” she told Wren and John and Jacob and Faith and the other cultists gathered amidst Resistance members. “You’ve brought the world crashing down around us. Don’t you see that?” Rook cried out in pain and anger and frustration, aiming her rifle at each of them in turn, trying to decide who to hit first. “Everything I’ve done. Everything I’ve earned. Everything I’ve fought for is for nothing!” Tears were streaming down her cheeks in rivulets.

Earl stepped out from behind one of the buildings near the church, just under the metal archway reading “Eden’s Gate” that they had walked under so many months before. He pulled Joseph to his feet, provided him with something strong to lean against. Joseph clung to his arm, blood pouring from his thigh.

Joseph met Rook’s eyes.

“I am so sorry, my child,” he told her, voice sincere.

“It doesn’t matter,” she snapped, aiming once more at his head, that red dot wavering just above his yellow glasses. Earl looked to Joseph, helped him balance on his own and started to walk toward Rook. “Get back,” she warned him, lip curling, aiming at him. He kept walking, kept moving toward her carefully, though the wind blew and sand beat at his face, he kept eye contact with her. He reached her, pushing her rifle to the side. She stood, stiff and defensive as he wrapped his arms around her.

“What are you doing?” she demanded harshly.

“I’m hugging you,” he whispered as he pulled her stiff body close.

“Why?” she ground out through tears.

“Because you look like you needed someone to,” he told her, quoting her from months before. “Kid?”

“Yeah?” she asked, voice trembling.
“Hug me back.” Hesitant at first, she released her rifle, let it slide to the ground as she put her arms around him and let him hug her more closely. A hundred thoughts filled her mind, many of them evil, negative, terrible memories. Memories of being chased, of leaving Pratt behind in a dark building, of an insidious song, of drug-induced haze, of Earl coming to her door when she was eighteen, telling her that her parents were dead… but then she remembered fishing. She remembered Earl’s words.

“There’s nothing wrong with feeling empathy for your enemy, Rook.” She remembered fireworks, and barbeque, and kindness. She remembered him trying his hardest to replace what she had lost. She remembered Sharky making fireworks especially for her. She remembered Jess’ timid glances and teasing banter. She remembered Jacob tenderly bandaging her wounds when he was still her enemy. Remembered his words too…

“No sense hurting yourself worse, pup.” She remembered Faith willingly coming to her, wanting to help freely.

“You’ll have to have faith.”

She remembered all of her friends trying their best to help her fix things, remembered Pratt’s trembling voice.

“I’m with you. Goddammit, I’m with you to the end, Rook.” She remembered Jacob aligning himself with her, in more ways than just the one. She remembered Jacob tracing I love you on her skin.

“It was always only ever you,” he had murmured. She remembered a hesitant and skeptical John being snarky and moody, but also agreeing to help. Agreeing to help, and to redeem himself after all the evil he had done. She remembered John throwing himself in front of Sharky to protect him. She remembered Joseph doing everything in his power to make sure her friends were safe once they had reached an agreement. Again, Jacob’s voice was in her mind.

“Where were you when we needed to hear this? Where were you when we first came to this county?”

“I was here,” she sobbed into Earl’s chest. “I was right here. With my family. My family,” she cried, throat raw and painful as she wept and Earl rubbed her back, murmuring gentle reassurances to her.

But they were all her family now. And she had to forgive them. She had to forgive all the hurt and all the pain they had caused. She closed her eyes tight against the beating of the wind and cried. She felt people coming close, stepping around her, hugging her. Jacob, Sharky, Mary May, Hurk Jr, Wheaty, Eli, Virgil, Hudson, John, Faith… they all enveloped her and she felt her hate and her anger disintegrate as though it had never filled her to the brim, as though it had never overflowed and made her threaten her new family.

Rook took a gasping breath and her eyes snapped open.

Joseph was standing gingerly, holding one bloodied leg up off the ground, his weight partially supported by Megan. Earl helped Rook up from where she had passed out and fallen to the sandy earth just outside the church doors. The rest of Rook’s friends were gathered around, concerned. They were all shaking off the effects of the Bliss.

“Alright, Rook?” Earl asked her earnestly.
“Yeah,” she whispered, finding that it was true. She took Jacob’s hand gently when he walked up and offered it to her. There was a sudden eerie silence. There was no wind, no birds singing. Even the lapping sound of water seemed abnormally quiet. Joseph went pale, looking at Rook, and then looking to the sky, raising his arms.

“When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in Heaven.” A sound like thunder crackled through the sky, breaking the silence, and birds panicked, fluttering out of trees madly. “And the seven angels before God were given seven trumpets. And there were noises,” Joseph intoned, “Thunderings.” There was a crack and a flash of light. “Lightnings.” Rook felt her hair stand on end and those gathered looked into the sky, searched their surroundings, looking for a storm cloud that was not there. “And I heard a Great Voice from the temple say to the angels ‘Go your ways and pour from the vials the wrath of God upon the Earth.” Rook met his eyes and nodded, knowing. She braced herself.

There was a sudden blinding light and a boom like ten thousand grenades going off at once. When her vision returned, Rook could see in the distance a mushroom cloud peaking just over the mountains.

“It is finished, child,” Joseph told her, face and voice gentle.

Twenty seconds later and they were pummeled by an enormous shockwave. It knocked some of them to the ground, but most of them managed to keep their feet. Rook felt a sharp pain in her belly and gasped, wincing. Earl was the first to recover.

“GET TO THE TRUCKS!” he shouted and they scrambled. Chaos rained.

The end was here.
Safe, If Not Sound

Chapter Summary

♪ It's the end of the world as we know it ♪ ...and people need to get to their bunkers.

If you had told Sheriff Earl Whitehorse eight months ago that he would spend the better part of what would otherwise have been a normal Monday afternoon for a Hope county taken over by a cult trying to get one of his employees, who was pregnant by one of the cult leaders, to a bunker because he had dumped a tank of hallucinogenic drug near her, he probably would have punched you. He would have punched you not only for telling tall tales, but for creating such a run-on sentence of catastrophe. But, here he was, trying to get Rook to Jacob’s bunker. Except that, there was no way to get to Jacob’s bunker anymore. A massive forest fire that had been started by the hot shockwave of the bombs going off outside the protective ring of the Whitetail mountains had just destroyed the bridge leading from Joseph’s compound to Jacob’s bunker. He had barely managed to screech the pickup to a stop without going off the edge of the now-collapsed bridge.

“What do you mean you can’t get us there?” Rook screamed from the backseat, holding her belly painfully.

“I mean there’s no road anymore, goddammit. We’ve gotta go somewhere else.”

“Faith’s Gate?” Wren suggested. Earl stared straight ahead, hands clenching on the steering wheel until his knuckles were white.

“John’s Gate’s got an internal medicine doctor staying in it. Faith’s Gate only has Dr. Lindsey.”

“Where is Jacob?” Rook groaned, breathing hard at the pain in her abdomen. Wren and Earl made eye contact through the rearview mirror.

“He’s with the others in another vehicle. It’ll be fine, Rook,” Earl assured her.

“No, no,” she sobbed, “No, we’re going to be separated if you don’t get me to his gate. And the last time I said anything to him, the last time I saw him before Joseph’s Compound, aah!” she cried out, curling onto herself. Wren wiped a strand of hair behind her ear gently.

“Jacob’s Gate is not an option, Earl. I think…I think she might be miscarrying. We need a doctor. Now.”

“I can’t, I can’t be miscarrying, I can’t lose Jacob, not after all the good…please God, no. I tried. I made a mistake, I just got so angry…I…” Tears were streaming down Rook’s face as she held her belly, whispering to her child and clenching her teeth.

“It’s alright, darlin’,” Wren told her, “It’ll be okay. Earl! Make a decision!” Earl shook himself, threw his truck in reverse and whipped it around, punching the accelerator hard to get to their destination quickly.
Jacob went very pale.

“What do you mean we got separated?” he hissed at Eli.

“I mean you just barely made it over that bridge before it collapsed, Jacob. I don’t think they were on it when it went down, but I can’t be sure.”

“Fuck!” Jacob screamed. “Fuck!” He buried his fingers in his hair as scurrying Resistance and Project members made their way into the bunker, which was blaring its warning alarm.

“Radioactive material detected. Please enter the bunker in a calm and orderly fashion. Radioactive material detected. Please enter the bunker in a calm and orderly…”

“Get me a hazmat suit,” he demanded of a soldier whose arm he had grabbed.

“Dammit, Jacob, you cannot stay out in this. Not even in PPE. You have to give it a few days for the fallout to settle. It’ll be safer to try in a week. Even safer in a month.”

“I am not leaving her out there by herself.”

“She’s not by herself, Jake.” Jacob met his old friend’s eyes. They had been good friends before. Before Eli had joined the Resistance. The two groups’ new ‘understanding’ didn’t change the fact that Eli had been a Judas.

“You don’t get to call me that, anymore, Eli.” Eli sighed, his shoulders slumping.

“Goddammit, Jacob, I am not going to let you kill yourself.” He raised his bow and aimed at Jacob’s leg. It was a threat, but not a lethal one. “Get in the fucking bunker. I’m not asking.” Jacob chuckled, stepping forward, using one finger to push Eli’s arrow down. He leaned close to Eli’s face, so close he could see the gold speckles in Eli’s brown eyes.

“You’re gonna have to kill me to keep me away from her,” he rumbled, face cold. Eli clenched his jaw.

“You don’t even know where she would have gone. She was with Whitehorse, right? So probably Faith’s Gate, but are you absolutely sure?” Jacob’s gaze faltered. “You try radioing right now and you’ll get nothing but static from all the gamma particles in the air. Give me a week and I’ll help you get to her, Jacob, but you gotta get in that–” There was a massive flash and a rumbling boom as yet another bomb went off miles away. Jacob went to one knee, caught off guard. “Fuck!” Eli yelled, staggering. At this point everyone but Jacob and Eli was in the bunker. Wheaty was at the door, looking at Eli quizzically. “Get inside, Wheaty!” Eli called.

Eli reached a hand down to Jacob. Jacob stared up at him with hate pasted on his features for a moment before he relaxed and sighed. He took Eli’s hand and allowed him to help him to his feet. Sluggishly, as though through mud, he made his way into the bunker…and closed the door.

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“What the fuck is she doing here?!” John demanded.

“Hey, be nice, amigo,” Sharky warned.

“I am not nice,” John snapped.
“She needs a doctor,” Earl told him, panting a little from the effort of holding Rook in his arms. “Right now.” John deflated and rolled his eyes, looking truly martyred by the inconvenience of the deputy’s presence in his space.

“Down those stairs and to the left.”

“I don’t suppose there’s an elevator?” Earl asked hopefully. John rolled his eyes again.

“See, this is why Jacob wanted to cull people,” he griped. “Here.” Between John, Wren, Earl and Sharky, they managed to carefully carry Rook down the stairs and into the clinic.

“Set her down,” Dr. Allen, the resident doctor, told them. “Let me see.” He rummaged in the cabinets and found what he was looking for. “This injection will stop the cramping, and if you’re attempting to miscarry, hopefully it will stop that too. Bring me those pillows,” he ordered. “Get her on the bed and get as many of those under her legs and backside as you can. I’d like her kept at a forty-five degree angle upwards. That should help too. Here. Drink some water,” he told her, offering her a glass with a bendy straw. She took it gratefully, slurped it down, grateful that it almost instantly helped clear the red and green haze at the edges of her vision. Earl was wringing his hands in the corner, feeling sick, feeling so guilty for tipping the barrel of Bliss, but what other choice did he have? If they hadn’t knocked Rook out, they would have been forced to hurt her in some other way.

“Earl,” she called, “Come here.” Timidly, Earl approached, face drained of blood, looking tired and older than his years. She grabbed his hand and clung to it. “It’s okay. I’ll be okay,” she gasped out. “It’s not your fault…it’s…it’s mine for getting so angry.”

“Rook,” he murmured. She chuckled.

“I feel like you should be on a first name basis with me at this point, boss,” she pointed out.

“Thought you hated that first name of yours.”

“I do,” she admitted. “But still. What would you have named me?” she asked him. He spooked a little at that. Earl laughed, feeling his chest unclench.

“Well, kid, I think you got lucky. Your dad wanted to name you ‘Earline,’ but your mother won that fight.”

“Thank God,” she laughed, “No offense.”

“None taken, Rook. I did actually think about this, you know. Because your mom wasn’t the only one interested in mythology.” His eyes twinkled. “My vote was for ‘Persephone,’” he admitted. Rook laughed.

“Goddess of the Underworld?” Earl looked up at the concrete above and around them.

“Fitting, I suppose,” he chuckled. “Get some rest, Rook. I’ll try and get the others on the radio.”

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“No. No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no,” Pratt was muttering under his breath, hands in his hair, eyes wild. He was breathing hard, near hyperventilating.
“Staci,” Faith said softly, “We have to go in. It’s not safe.”

“I can’t. He was right, but I can’t, I can’t, I’m weak, I can’t. I…the bunkers…he left me…I just…I can’t!”

“Shh, shh, shh, shh,” she said, pulling him close.

“We have to go now, Deputy,” Virgil said tersely, expression telling Faith that he was plainly still holding a grudge against her for her family’s part in his son’s death. Faith closed her eyes, knew what she was about to do might get her killed based on the disapproving look on Virgil’s face and the shotgun in his hands. She pulled a little vial of Bliss powder she had been hoarding out and blew it abruptly in Pratt’s face. Pratt’s eyes went wide, and then slid shut. Faith half caught him with a grunt of effort, his weight too much for her. “Young lady, what did you do?!”

“What I had to. Help me,” she said holding out a hand toward him. Virgil hesitated for a moment, and then moved toward her, helping her lift Pratt and carry him inside. They closed the door behind them, blocking out the danger outside.

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“You comin’?” Grace asked, slinging her pack onto her shoulder. Hudson was right behind her, but Jess was hesitating. The young archer stared at the nearest mushroom cloud, face pale.

“He was right. That fuckin’ psychopath was right.”

“Didn’t need a Voice to tell me that world was going to shit,” Grace told her dryly. “I’m closing the door to my bunker in two minutes. If you’re on the outside, it’s your loss.” Jess turned to her, swallowed.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m comin’.”

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“Now, Daddy, you ain’t gotta be so goddamn mean to me,” Hurk Jr. whined as he poked his head down the hatch. A gunshot went off and he yelped, jumping backwards. “Daddy!” he hollered as yet another bomb went off.

“You get outta here, Junior, you useless sack ‘a shit. Go on, git, goddammit!”

“You’re lettin’ me come down or I’m gonna shoot a rocket in there, Daddy, I swaaare to the Monkey King in Heaven,” Hurk Jr. threatened. There was a martyred sigh.

“Alright, you dumb shit. But the instant the fallout’s over, you’re gone.”

“Phew,” Hurk Jr. said, sliding down the ladder and landing on his backside. Safe.

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Wendell Redler, combat veteran, American hero and stubborn old man cracked a cold one open and sipped on it, shotgun balanced casually on his thigh.

“Good fuckin’ riddance,” he muttered as the world collapsed around him. He wasn’t going to hole up in a fuckin’ bunker and hide. He’d done enough of that shit in Vietnam. He’d meet
his death stoically and with a cold beer in his hand.

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“Well, you’ve gotta be just fuckin’ kiddin’ me,” Dutch muttered as alarms went off on all his warning systems. “The bastard was right. That motherfucker.” There was a thudding knock at the bunker door and he felt fear like an ice cube slide down his back. Hesitant, he cracked the door open, shotgun cocked and prepared to blow a hole in whoever it might be.

“Please,” Megan Maldonado was standing there with Joseph Seed, his arm slung over her shoulder, his face pale and slack. “I tried to get us to a bunker, but I had to pull over because he was bleeding out, and now there’s no way off the island. Please. Please, Dutch. We need your help.”

“The smartest thing for me to do would just be to close this door,” he told her. “Fuck,” he muttered, remembering another lost soul he had bothered to save months ago, remembering how that had turned out. Well, shit. “Get him out of those pants. We need to deal with that wound. Med lab is the last door on the right. Come see me when you’ve got his pants cut off and I’ll help you with tending the wound,” he sighed, resigned, looking once to the heavens and questioning a god he wasn’t entirely sure he believed in anymore. “Why me?” he griped as he pulled the door shut behind them. They were safe. For now.
We're Doing Just Fine

Chapter Summary

I got that furry scene between John and Sharky that literally no one asked for. Don't worry, it's not explicit. Also, lots of fluff at the end of this one.

“No. No. No! Absolutely not. When did you even have time to put that in my bunker?” John looked down with disgust pasted on his features. Sharky was holding an elaborate costume covered with white and gray fur in the shape of an enormous, humanoid wolf. It was, apparently, called a ‘fursuit’ and Sharky wanted to have sex in it.

“Please?” Sharky asked with puppy dog eyes. John scowled.

“No. It’s just…too weird. It’ll make me feel like I’m having sex with my brother Jacob,” he griped. Sharky shrugged.

“Not sayin’ I would, not sayin’ I wouldn’t but he’s not the worst lookin’ guy in the world.”

“Christ God, Sharky! I mean…” John lowered his voice when he heard someone passing the door of their room, “I mean because you want to fuck me while dressed up like a wolf, you eternal child,” he hissed. Those sad, puppy dog eyes were too much. John deflated with a loud sigh.

“If I do this…” Sharky’s face lit up, “If I do this, you have to agree to a threesome,” he told Sharky in an arrogant tone, sure that it would throw him off.

“Johnny boy, I think you have seriously misunderestimated how not jealous I am. That is in no way a hard sell for me.” John raised an eyebrow and shrugged.

“I get to name the person,” he rattled off, feeling for a moment as though he was back in a mediation room on behalf of a client.

“‘Kay.”

“And the gender. Could be male or female.” He racked his brain to remember if there were any nonbinary people in the bunker that he could add to the list before closing his mouth and meeting Sharky’s eyes aggressively.

“Alright,” Sharky agreed casually. Too casually. They stood there for a moment, John panting. He had gotten himself well and truly worked up at this, and he found that he was oddly bothered by the fact that Sharky was so okay with a threesome. John was generally not a fan of other people playing with his toys. He narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest.

“You don’t get to kiss the third person,” John added. Sharky chuckled.

“Are you jealous, hombre?”

“That is….beside the point,” John spat.

“Oh my God,” Sharky laughed. “You’re jealous.” With a flair of drama, John flicked his
airplane printed coat off and began rolling up his sleeves professionally, one eyebrow arched in irritation. They had only been stuck in this bunker for a week and already John could feel sanity slipping when he looked at that dead-eyed wolf head that was dangling haphazardly from the rest of the suit slung over Sharky’s arm. He sighed. Might as well get this over with.

“Are you going to put that on,” he turned to ask, “or have you joined the ranks of sane people and decided not to go through with this?” Sharky leapt into action, peeling his shoes and socks off, fiddling with his belt and shucking his shirt off enthusiastically before pulling his… ugh…his fursuit on. John surveyed him with an air of absolute disgust, but it was what Sharky wanted. “One more stipulation,” he said, raising an index finger imperiously. “You will do me from behind only. I’m not looking at that…getup during.”

“Doggy style is kind of the point, dude,” Sharky told him, voice muffled by the wolf head helmet he had just jammed on enthusiastically.

“Jesus Christ,” John muttered, crawling onto the bed.

“Well?” Sharky asked expectantly after removing his fursuit’s head. John rolled his eyes, but he did have a hand sitting on Sharky’s furred belly.

“It was not…as bad as I thought it would be,” he conceded begrudgingly, picking a gob of fluff from the suit off his inner thigh. “Now please, take it off, it’s time for bed.” Sharky slid from the bed and removed the costume, returning in ragamuffin boxers filled with holes. “I had hoped to show you the luxury of silk underwear before the world went to shit, but I guess that isn’t going to happen now. Pity.”


“You wouldn’t say that if you had any experience whatsoever with silk underwear.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Sharky told him, cuddling up to his side and starting to snore a few minutes later. John snuggled a little deeper into the mattress, glad that he had someone to keep him grounded. It wasn’t that he minded being in this bunker, but being in this bunker for five or so years? That did bother him. Especially since the deputy had shown up. They had never seen entirely eye to eye, and you couldn’t fault John for not wanting her in his bunker. After all, their last interaction before coming here had been her threatening to shoot him in the head. But, he thought back, remembering the grieved, agonized look on Sheriff Whitehorse’s face the day of the wreck, remembering the feeling of being picked up by the big man, John had probably had it coming. He shook himself and forced himself to close his eyes and fall asleep.

“Still no radio signal?” Rook asked drowsily, eyes still closed from sleeping.

“Not yet, kid,” Earl told her from where he sat in the corner. He hadn’t slept much in the week since they had closed the bunker doors. He spent nearly every waking moment staying with Rook protectively. He still didn’t trust that cult doctor, and for good reason. The jackass had injected Rook with a Bliss-based medication for Christ’s sake, and hadn’t that been the problem all along? Both he and Rook had thought the medication Dr. Allen had injected her with had been something commonly used in medicine, but apparently it was a variant on the Bliss healing medication they had formulated. Hopefully, Earl thought, feeling helpless, it wouldn’t hurt the
baby, or Rook.

“Doctor says I can sit up tomorrow, thank god,” Rook murmured after a few moments, breaking his reverie as she woke up a bit and stirred. “I’m constantly feeling like I’m gonna blow chunks at this angle. Doctor thinks I’ve got about five more months to go. Hopefully,” she swallowed. “Hopefully we can hear from Jacob by then.” Her voice was wavering at the end of her sentence and she fought back tears, clenching her jaw. She had been so awful to him, before the fight at Joseph’s Compound. She would do anything to take that nasty tone back, would do anything not to look at him like she had done, like he was her enemy again. She lost control of her tears and the sobs came. Earl shushed her and took her hand, stroking the back of it gently with his thumb.

“It’ll be alright, Rook,” he told her. “It’ll be okay.”

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Jacob sat alone and despondent in what should have been their room, face in his hands as he forced himself to just breathe. There was a crib assembled in the corner that made him nauseated to look at. He was supposed to be with his family here. He was supposed to have Joseph and Rook here. He wasn’t supposed to be largely by himself with only his soldiers and the Whitetail Militia, which still did not like him, for company.

There was a knock at the door.

“Come,” he said, the first he had used his voice in nearly a week.


“I’m fine,” Jacob told him, tone cold, but his stomach rumbled. Eli sat an MRE next to him and sat in one of the chairs within the relatively spacious room. Perks of being a Herald, he guessed.

“We can’t let food go to waste, Jacob. You know that better than anybody.”

“And what the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Jacob ground out, remembering the hot coppery taste of Miller’s calf muscle and feeling even less inclined to eat than he had before. Eli frowned.

“You did the food inventory, man. It’s gonna be close, even if we do trap and hunt in radiation suits. That’s if any animals survive the fallout, of course.”

Jacob hummed, forcing himself to calm. He and Eli had been close, but he had never told him about Miller. He surveyed his old friend. Eli reminded him a bit of Miller, actually. Same soft brown eyes, similar nose. And always that hopeful tone in their voice, as though nothing would ever actually go so wrong it couldn’t be fixed. Miller had sure as shit been wrong. Eli, Jacob thought, recalling his original plans, had nearly been. How would he have reacted to being killed by the deputy? Jacob sniffed. It was unimportant. Eli met Jacob’s eyes steadily, shoved the MRE a little closer with a cast titanium spork.

“Eat, Jake,” he ordered softly. “Er…Jacob,” he corrected himself, scratching the back of his neck awkwardly.

“Jake,” Jacob corrected softly, cocking his jaw to the side in an expression of deep thought. He reached a big hand out and nearly engulfed the spork, picked the MRE up with the other and cracked it open. Beef stew. Familiar. Salty. Not very good, but…edible.
“Gotta keep your strength up,” Eli told him. “Never know when we’re gonna get an opportunity to get you to your girl. We’re still checking the radios every hour on the hour. I’ll let you know as soon as anything comes through. I promise.” Jacob nodded, scooping a morsel of unidentifiable vegetable out of the stew and surveying it before he put it in his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. Eli stood and walked to the door.

“Eli.” The bearded man turned his head, listening.

“Thank you.”

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Two weeks had passed and Joseph was still weak, pale. Shuddering, he shivered on the cot, moaning a little in pain.

“He ain’t lookin’ too good,” Dutch murmured to Megan, who was washing the dishes from their meagre tuna and rice dinner. Joseph hadn’t eaten, no matter how much she had tried to get him to. He prayed, and he slept, and he shivered.

“Something’s wrong. Are you sure we got the whole bullet?” she asked, meeting Dutch’s eyes.

“Hon, you were there. I got what I could see, but I ain’t a doctor. And…I may not like the guy none, but I don’t want his blood on my hands.” He sighed and stepped into the clinic, unlocking a cabinet. “I was plannin’ on savin’ these for an emergency, more specifically I was planning on saving it after I could come out of this damn bunker, but…” He peaked his head back into the room lit by the glow of his fish tank and watched a sweaty, whimpering Joseph shiver. “I think what we have here constitutes a goddamn emergency. Here,” he said, shoving a white bottle into Megan’s hand. “You gotta get him to eat before he takes these or he’s just gonna throw ‘em up. But I think he’s septic. That’s a broad spectrum antibiotic. Can’t guarantee it’ll do a damn bit of good, but it’s better than nothing.”

“Thank you, Dutch,” Megan said, hugging his neck suddenly. “Thank you.” He hummed a little growl of acknowledgement and extricated himself from her embrace.

Megan stepped into the room with a little dollop of watered down rice on a plate. She helped Joseph sit up. There were dark circles under his eyes and he didn’t look the right color, even in the odd blue-green light of the fish tank.

“Hey sweetheart,” she greeted him.

“My love,” he murmured. He had lost a bit of muscle mass from not eating much since they had arrived at the bunker and she worried. He looked suddenly so small, felt so much thinner though realistically he had probably only lost about five pounds. She offered him water, which he took weakly, swallowing with a click and a little moan.

“I need you to eat this, Joseph,” Megan whispered. “Please. I’ve got some medicine for you.”

“God will heal me,” he said stubbornly, looking nauseated at the thought of eating.

“Joseph,” she started, tone firm. “I need you alive. I need your help raising our child. Please.” Joseph’s eyes flickered open, looking more alert than they had in days.

“What?” he asked, sounding flabbergasted. Megan smiled gently, stroking his sweaty
“I think I’m pregnant,” she admitted, pulling him closer. “And I can’t lose you. Please. Eat.” It was as though life had flowed back into him. He struggled upwards and she helped him eat the rice, handed him the pill when he had finished. He swallowed it painfully, but kept it down.

“The Lord provides,” he murmured, tone filled with wonder as he put a hand on Megan’s abdomen. “And the Lord keeps his promises,” he said, voice nearly breaking as happy tears gathered in his eyes. Megan laughed happily.

“Yes. Which means you have to keep yours. You have to be the Father. You have to take care of yourself.” She kissed his forehead sweetly, taking his thin face in her hands. “I love you, Joseph Seed.”

“I love you,” he murmured, beginning to look tired again.

“Holy shit, it’s finally working!” came a crow of excitement down the hall. Joseph and Megan looked at one another and Megan stood to investigate. She walked into Dutch’s radio room and heard what he was hearing faintly.

“…stand…me...stand by me…”

Every evening, like clockwork, the broadcast would try to come through, weak and stuttered, and every evening they would try to pick up a stronger signal. They couldn’t be sure of the thing for another week, but once they were, Sharky and Randall, another of the deputy’s former hired guns, sprinted down to her room, knocking loudly on the door. She answered sleepily, a soft robe given to her by John as a sort of peace offering bundled around her and her slightly swollen belly.

“What?” she asked through a yawn.

“I’ve got something you’ll want to hear,” Sharky told her, a smile huge on his face.

Quizzical, she followed him back to the radio room.

“Listen,” he told her, increasing the volume. It was staticky, but unmistakable.

“...stand by me, oh stand by me. If the sky that we look upon should tumble and fall, or the mountains should crumble to the sea…” Rook was shaking, but she grabbed the microphone and pressed the button to broadcast, singing shakily.

“I won’t cry, I won’t cry, no, I won’t shed a tear, just as long as you stand, stand by me.”

“Hey darlin’,” came Jacob’s gravelly voice, slightly warped by static.

“Hey baby,” Rook choked out.

“Speaking of…” he let the thought trail off.

“Doing great,” she murmured. “We’re doing just fine.”
On the Radio

Chapter Summary

Jacob and Rook talk. Jacob has a plan.

“I bet you didn’t know that about me,” Jacob said sleepily into the receiver, a silly smile on his face as he laid back on his mattress, one arm crooked behind his head. He heard her laughter over the radio and it gave him life.

“That your favorite animal is a wolf? No,” she laughed from miles away, “I had no idea.”

“Well, you never asked me,” he countered with another little smile, flipping his lamp off and lying comfortably in the darkness. If he could ignore the sound of static, with the light off, he could pretend she was next to him, talking to him. They had been spending a couple of hours every day talking, trying to fill the gaps, making up for lost time. They had only known each other, only been intimate with one another for a few months and now they were in a long distance relationship with a child on the way. He needed to know her. She needed to know him. He was about to ask her what her favorite movie was, but she cut him off before he could do so.

“Your son was acting up again today,” she whispered, voice soft even over the crackly radio.

Rook held a hand to her stomach and pushed on the child she could feel squirming inside, trying to persuade her baby to move his heel out of her bladder. He responded with a firm kick, but she made herself hold it, wasn’t going to cut her time talking to Jacob short.

“My daughter’s gonna be a tough one,” Jacob laughed, as always teasing Rook about the potential gender of their baby. She honestly couldn’t tell which he would prefer, if either. She only knew that if it was a boy, it would be a junior. She thought maybe she could go with Persephone for Earl if it was a girl.

“She’s going to give her father hell when she’s a teenager,” Rook agreed with Jacob after giving another little chuckle, poking a finger into her abdomen and receiving a swift internal kick for her effort.

“What did the doctor say?” Jacob asked her, knowing Dr. Allen had made sure he had both an ultrasound and a radiograph machine in his clinic at John’s Gate.

“I told him not to tell me if it’s a girl or boy until you were here,” she whispered, swallowing a hard lump at the reminder of their separation. There was silence over the radio for a long time. “Still there, babe?” she asked. He sounded tired.

“If you wanna know…”

“What, so I can paint a room pink or blue?” she teased him. “It doesn’t matter. I’ll love them regardless. And I want you here when we find out.” A sigh came over the radio.

“Eli wants me to wait another month.”
“You should listen to him,” she agreed urgently, lips almost touching her receiver. “I want you safe.”

“I need you, pup. I miss you.”

“I miss you too,” she told him breathily.

“You in bed already?” he asked her. She nodded, but then answered aloud.

“Yeah. Just lying here, talking to you. Pretending you’re beside me.”

“Hmm,” came his purring voice. “If I was there, I’d hold you next to me. Pull you into my chest.”

“Nearly suffocate me with your body heat,” she teased. He chuckled.

“Then I’d put my hand on your chest. Run it down your side, down between your legs…”

“And here’s the point where I’m gonna remind you two this is a public channel,” came the voice of Virgil Minkler, sounding deeply affronted.

“It’s not like the FCC still exists, Mayor,” Jess griped from somewhere in the Holland Valley ten seconds later.

“Well, so much for that,” Rook said, reddening where she lay, thinking of Jacob touching her and then cringing at the thought of everyone listening to their conversation.

“If I can interject,” came Dutch’s gravelly voice. “Kid…I don’t think Joseph can make it another month here. Whenever Jacob’s comin’, he’s gotta come soon.”

“Put him on,” came Jacob’s voice again. It sounded tense, dangerous. Like he might kill Dutch with his mind if he didn’t obey. There was a long pause, then:

“Brother?” came Joseph’s tired, weak voice.

“Joseph,” Jacob breathed into his receiver, sitting up. “How are you?”

“God’s grace still shines upon me, Jacob.” Jacob pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. Joseph and his fucking ‘relationship’ with God. He sighed.

“How is your wound?” Jacob asked dryly, clarifying what he meant specifically.

“It’s not healing,” Joseph said frankly. “Mr. Roosevelt believes it’s septic. I’m inclined to agree.”

“I’m coming to get you,” Jacob said.

“Jacob!” Rook cut in, clearly flustered.

“In a week,” he finished, tone firm, unyielding. “I’ll leave for Dutch’s Island in a week. If I drive south down the highway through the Henbane River valley I can take a break at Faith’s Gate, check on everyone there. Then I can make it west and then north to pick up Joseph and Megan. Then I’ll drive until I get to John’s Gate. And then we’ll all be reunited.”

“As it should be,” Joseph whispered over the air. “Are you sure you want to risk it, my
“I have to, Joseph.” He cleared his throat. “How’s Maggie, Rook?” Jacob asked. There was another long pause.

“She wouldn’t come into the bunker,” her voice answered, sad. He nodded.

“She’ll be alright, pup. I will be too. I gotta get some sleep,” he told her, feeling his eyelids begin to droop, laying back down now that he had spoken to his brother, now that he had a plan said aloud.

“Me too,” Rook agreed. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”
Yes, sir, Deputy

Chapter Summary

Jacob reaches Faith's Gate, and Pratt reaches resolution.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has a bit of Pratt/Faith smut, so I'd consider it NSFW.

Faith calmed her deputy with a soft touch of her hand on his cheek, stroking his jawline with her thumb. He still had nightmares about being here, trapped underground again, still panicked at the occasional loud bangs the water pipes made. There were still Bliss tanks, of course, Rook had seen reason, had seen what it could do when formulated into a healing drug, but Faith couldn’t access it. It was carefully guarded from her, and she found she wanted to gain access to it less by the day. Nevertheless, she wanted to help Pratt, wanted to soothe him, to comfort him. He was only recently beginning to recover from the psychological torment Jacob had subjected him to, had only recently stopped murmuring “must cull the weak,” and “empires rise, empires fall, they’re all the same, we’re all the same,” over and over again.

The first time she had touched him, before they knew one another, he had flinched like a dog threatened with a rolled up-newspaper or a baseball bat. He had winced, shutting his eyes as she had cupped a hand around his soft, handsome face, had whimpered when she had gently brushed her lips to his. Unfazed, she had willingly gone to her knees in the office she had approached him in at the jail. She had unzipped his fly and had her way with him with her mouth, him groaning little stuttered objections and writhing in the chair, all while tangling his fingers frenziedly in her hair. Faith had always enjoyed comforting others. She had a weak spot for the hurt, the downtrodden, the broken. And if Pratt was not broken then he was most certainly bent.

When, at last, Pratt believed her when she told him, eyes wide and pupils dilated from the weed they had been smoking, that she wanted him, that she savored his touch, a fire had come back to his eyes, a blazing inferno that had once been nothing more than an ash-covered spark hidden in sweet brown eyes. The first time he lifted her dress and pressed his mouth to her wet warmth, she thought he might literally eat her alive. He had picked her up and tossed her onto the table in the corner of the 8-Bit Pizza Bar, face contorted with the effort and with sudden zeal. For just an instant, she wondered if Jacob had changed him irrevocably, but he had still been gentle. Staci’s movements against her were enthusiastic, rising to the occasion hesitantly at first, but then with more confidence as she clawed at his back and told him he was sweet, he was good, he was kind, and most importantly, he was strong. He’d clung to her then, growling softly in her ear as he buried himself in her, muscles tensing and sweat dripping from his back as she encouraged him with her words, with the canting rolls of her hips into his.

Faith remembered, with a small smile, the rhythmic jingling of Pratt’s belt buckle from where he had barely bothered to shove his jeans off his hips to plunge himself into her. She remembered the surprised, embarrassed look on Nick Rye’s face when he had walked in to the
otherwise empty bar to see them fucking one another senseless. He had fled and Faith and Pratt had received an urgent request from Rook not to have sex in places where they might be seen by those who weren’t interested a free show. Faith would be lying if she said that such acts hadn’t played right into her voyeuristic side.

Faith’s teasing, encouraging courtship of Staci had finally, finally brought him out of his shell…and then the bombs had dropped and she’d had to drug him to get him in a bunker. He had spent the first week furious at her, handcuffed to his bed so he wouldn’t rush out into the radioactive air. She had come to him, murmuring gentle words to him, calming him. And he had finally succumbed, finally understood and recognized that he had to stay here, and that here was safe, with her.

And so it was imperative that she keep Pratt here, in his room, with her for the next two days. Because her brother Jacob had just arrived.

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Jacob stepped into the bunker and shed the radiation suit, gasping in a massive breath now that he had escaped the stifling heat of the thing. His lead painted truck had been driven through the front gates and hosed off in the containment area, and now it was his turn.

“Sorry about this,” Tracey Lader told him, but she didn’t actually sound that sorry. She turned on a stream of frigid, stinging water and hosed his naked body with what seemed like entirely unnecessary thoroughness. She had tossed him a towel and a change to poorly fitting clothes while the ones he had been wearing beneath the suit were washed. He dried himself, shivering in the cold of the bunker’s halls, red hair standing on end on every surface of his skin.

“I just don’t understand what the fuck you’re trying to do, Faith,” came a familiar voice. Jacob steeled himself for the inevitable. “I don’t want to stay in my room, goddammit!” came a yell and then the sound of something clattering violently across a room. Pratt stormed out of a doorway down the long hall Jacob was standing at the end of. The smaller man looked up, met Jacob’s piercing blue eyes and seemed to collapse on himself. His shoulders dropped and his head drooped, looking immediately away and refusing to make any more eye contact with Jacob. His hands came together to cling to one another shyly. He looked for all the world like a beaten dog given human form. And it made Jacob sick…at himself. “Sir,” Pratt greeted him, voice small.

“Deputy Pratt,” Jacob said, keeping his tone deliberately neutral. “Staci.” Pratt was silent, still except for the full-body trembling that threatened to shake him to pieces. “Look at me, Pratt.” Slowly, as though it was painful for him to do so, Pratt looked up and met Jacob’s eyes shyly. Jacob stepped carefully forward. “I’m sorry,” Jacob murmured once he had stepped close enough for the soft whisper of his voice to be audible to Pratt. “I’m sorry, kid,” Jacob told him. “Can I…can I touch you?” Jacob asked, wanting to put a reassuring hand on Pratt’s shoulder. Faith walked up behind Pratt, took his hand. He glanced at her, saw her kind face and Jacob saw his jaw clench. He looked back up at Jacob, with confidence in his gaze this time. His chin tilted up arrogantly and the muscles around his mouth tightened into a look of disgust and authority. He put his hands on his lanky hips and cocked them to one side slightly. Pratt looked more like a police officer now in sweat pants and a dirty t-shirt than he had since the night of Joseph’s arrest.

“No.” It was the first time he had ever told Jacob no, not since Jacob had tormented him. Jacob nodded.

“I’m proud of you, kid.”

“I don’t give a fuck,” Pratt told him. Jacob chuckled.
“Good. I won’t bother you any further, Deputy. I just need to get down the hallway.” Pratt moved to the side to allow him to pass, face aggressive.

“Just don’t make any trouble,” Pratt told him, reminiscent of the time he had pulled Jacob over for speeding two years ago.

“Yes, sir, Deputy,” Jacob told him, tone sincere. He tipped two fingers to his forehead respectfully, and walked away.
For Such a Time as This

Chapter Summary

Earl muses about Rook and her leadership. A storm is coming.

Chapter Notes

I promise this is the last chapter before you get a major Joseph and Jacob update. Everything will be fine. Breathe. :)

Earl was, by no means, a scientist. But, he knew how basic genetics work. Mom and Dad combine their genes, kid (usually) looks like some blend of the two. So he never did quite understand how Rook’s green eyes could look so much like Richard’s. They shared no genetic material, but when she fixed her green eyes on Earl’s face, it was like looking right into Richard’s eyes. Maybe the love of a parent, even a parent who didn’t actually father you, was enough to change a person. Earl certainly hoped so, because god help the little fella Rook was carrying if he came out looking anything like Earl, he thought sheepishly.

Earl had commented about Rook having her father’s eyes for years, and once she knew about their little secret, she had asked him about that. He had given a massive shrug and told her sometimes things just work out that way. There’s only so many variations on human facial features, right? But as she talked imperiously over the radio, as she gave orders and directed people, as she drew her eyebrows together in a little cringe of pain and popped her back to relieve it from carrying her growing belly, Earl thought that God must have done them all a favor and put a little of Richard’s goodness in his daughter after all. Perhaps God, Earl thought, had reached out a hand of Providence to make sure that Rook was just so, to make sure that she had the kindness of her mother, the bravery of her father, and the friendly disposition of one Sheriff Earl Whitehorse. At least he had contributed something positive, he thought with a small smile as he lifted his cup of coffee to his mouth and took a careful sip, making sure not to burn his lips or wet his mustache. What was that phrase in the Bible? He thought back to his childhood, to a religious upbringing he had largely blocked out.

There was a passage in the Bible that specifically talked about one woman making the right decision to save her people...he remembered it suddenly as Rook smiled kindly at Sharky, as she put a reassuring hand on John’s shoulder and apologized for earlier behavior. “Who knows…perhaps you have come to this place for such a time as this.” Rook had, almost miraculously, prevented bloodshed, had started to bridge the gap between cultist and Resistance members. She had been almost supernaturally good at getting people to forgive one another. Pride swelled in Earl’s chest as he sat back and continued to watch her give orders over the radio, as she worked almost endlessly to establish communication with every bunker on her list, as she tallied names and assigned jobs to others in the bunkers.

Earl saw her strength begin to flag finally, and stood, putting a hand gently on the small
“Alright, Rook?” he asked her. She gave him a tired smile.

“Just trying to keep my mind busy. Jacob left Faith’s Gate about an hour ago. He said the roads are rough. He sounded tired, even after staying for two days there. I’m worried about him.”

“I’m sure he’ll be alright, Rook,” Earl told her with more confidence than he felt. You couldn’t pay him enough money to go out in this, even with a radiation suit. They had watched from a few cameras that had survived as a large portion of the valley was destroyed with fire. Fortunately, there was a rainstorm rolling in, Wren had told them, using weather gear the cult had installed outside the bunker. Unfortunately, with rain would come massive bouts of radioactive particles. The storm would stop the fires, yes, but it would bring death in its wake to most things exposed to it. Jacob had left Faith’s bunker a day early to try to beat the storm. They all had their fingers crossed that he would be successful. While in his truck, he had no way to communicate. The entire vehicle except for a small slit in the windshield had been covered in lead paint to add an additional layer of protection, but unfortunately between that and the fact that the antenna on a truck radio is only so powerful, they had to wait for him to reach another location with a radio before they could get an update on his status.

Hopefully, Jacob would make it all the way to Dutch’s Island and his bunker to pick up Joseph, but in this new world rocked by God’s wrath, there was nothing to do now, but wait.
Jacob carefully steered the truck to the right, squinting to see through the tiny slit Eli had left through the paint on the windshield. He would give anything right about now to be able to wipe the sweat from his forehead, to swab the inside of the radiation suit’s mask so he could see better, but at least it was better than dying of radiation poisoning or cancer. He felt the truck slipping to the side as he forded the shallow area of water that lead to Dutch’s Island and felt his heart skip a beat. Jacob had never been afraid of dying before, but now, now that Joseph’s life and the welfare of his unborn child were at stake, he was terrified of failing them. He released some of the pressure on the gas pedal and let the truck gain traction again, thanking a God he wasn’t sure he believed in when it finally did and pulled him up onto dry land.

The burnt remains of trees scattered around the island created sharp, eerie points on the horizon where they stood in stark relief against the blurry sun behind them. It gave the rise of hill on the center of the island the odd, stilted appearance of a skull’s mouth with many gaps between its sharp teeth. Jacob felt a shiver run down his spine as he carefully took the left turn that would lead him to Dutch’s Island. The fact that “The World’s Gonna End Tonight” was playing on Wheaty’s bootleg radio station, now broadcasting from Jacob’s Gate, struck Jacob as decidedly not funny, so he flicked the staticky radio off. There was a sudden jolting drop in the road that made the truck’s suspension grind and whine and made Jacob’s teeth clatter together uncomfortably as it landed and skidded on the sandy road. He hit the brakes as he saw a massive tree across the roadway. It was a good thing no one had been driving here when it had fallen… It looked like it had gone down hard and fast. As it was he barely managed to grind to a stop before the front bumper of his truck touched it. He would have to walk the remaining fifty feet or so to the bunker doors. He grabbed the duffel bag that had been rattle-can painted with ugly gray lead paint and contained three rad suits and slung the strap over his shoulder.

Knocking at the bunker door, Jacob was relieved to hear the door unlock and stepped inside as soon as he could tug it open.

“Containment is the key,” Dutch said over an intercom. “Strip and wash off at that shower there.”
“I know the drill,” Jacob called, remembering with a shiver the unkind treatment he had received at the hands of Tracey Lader. It had reminded him of the shower scene from Rambo, the look of pleasure on her face reminiscent of the one on the prison guards faces in the old action film about a homeless, hapless veteran mistreated by the system just as Jacob had been. He was not interested in being known as ginger Rambo and had already decided he would snap the neck of anyone who suggested the moniker as a nickname. He wondered absently how many of his former enemies had watched from the safety of a hiding spot, sniggering as Tracey pinned him to the tile wall with the powerful stream of water in the decontamination area of Faith’s Gate. Relieved to be washing himself this time, he peeled off the rad suit and set it on a hangar right at the door, stepping into the hallway that doubled as a shower area. He saw scratched into the wall the words “don’t drop the soap” with the “don’t” scratched out and chuckled. Lathering up with a bar of harsh soap, he allowed the cold water to drench him, standing under it and scrubbing every nook and cranny of his body in an effort to rinse off any radioactive particles that might have made their way through the suit and onto his skin. Once clean, he toweled his hair off, letting the orangey locks on the top of his head stick every which way.

Honestly, Jacob hated this stupid hipster haircut John had forced him to get, but he had insisted it would make his followers more confident in his military abilities than the long scruffy mane he had allowed it to grow into when he was homeless years before. He remembered with a chuckle the first time John had forced Joseph to pull his fine brown black hair back into a “manbun.” Personally he thought Joseph would look much more approachable with his previous look. With his long hair down and brushed, combined with his slightly scraggly beard, Joseph had looked like a Caucasian reincarnation of Christ himself, and really, what better image to put forth when you’re trying to convince the world you’re on a mission to save humanity from God’s wrath?

Speaking of Joseph, Jacob wrapped a towel around his loins and stepped forward, he hoped his brother was okay.

“Oh. Oh wow.” Megan had stepped out into the hallway and was surveying Jacob, who was scratching the back of his neck where he stood, clothed in nothing but a clean white towel. Jacob felt his cheeks redden and he jutted a thumb back toward the shower area.

“There, uh, wasn’t a clean pair of clothes,” he muttered, putting one hand on the towel to ensure it wouldn’t fall. Megan laughed.

“Sorry, I was just coming to bring you some. Sorry. I just wasn’t expecting…”

“Yeah, sorry,” Jacob said, feeling self-conscious. Megan wasn’t staring at Jacob’s toned and tight pectoral muscles, nor his lats or his large, thickly muscled thighs. Her eyes had skirted over the slight belly he had let himself gain in preparation for less food after the Collapse. Her eyes lingered instead on his scars. Her “oh wow” was not one of admiration, but of horror. A large puckered scar altered the silhouette of his otherwise muscular waist, the remnants of a chunk of shrapnel from an IED. The burns on his arms covered not only his shoulders and up the right side of his neck and head, but continued down his right pectoral and wrapped around to his back. There was a stark white circle on his left of his ribcage where a bullet had been dug out. Warped, purple-red skin covered much of his abdomen, the result of being lit on fire by an insurgent.

There was very little skin below his collarbone that didn’t have some scar or other on it. Even on his back there were several slashes from when he had been ambushed in juvie. Big kids were always seen as a challenge by the smaller ones, were seen as something to break, a conquest if they could be brought down. Only they hadn’t brought Jacob down. He had killed for the first time as only a boy, had slammed the face of one of his attackers into the edge of a toilet bowl until it was no longer recognizable as a face. It was what they got for trying to kill and violate him. He
never got attacked after that, but he was given a choice after juvie…go to the military, or go to prison for the “murder.” It wasn’t a hard choice to make, but he wondered now if it had been the wrong one.

The staring was now uncomfortable. Jacob sighed, shifting his hips.

“Would you like me to turn around so you can count the ones on my back too?” he asked Megan dryly. She started.

“Oh, my god, I am so sorry. Here.” She turned away quickly after she had thrust the tank top and a pair of cargo pants into his hands. He pulled the shirt on, looking down at the black text on the white material. “Trouble Maker.” Well. It wasn’t wrong. The cargo shorts were a bit too tight and gave him one hell of a wedgie, especially since he was being forced to go commando, but there was nothing for it. He would just have to be very careful when bending over or everyone was going to get a look at his pale, freckled backside when the pants split at the seams.

“How is my brother?”

“He’s touch and go,” she admitted softly, eyes watering. Jacob nodded. He followed her down the hallway and to the room where Joseph was staying. Jacob felt nauseated. He had only ever once seen Joseph this sickly. Joseph had been no more than five or six and was coughing badly, the rough whooping sound tearing Jacob’s heart out each time he made it. He had lost weight, struggled to eat or to sleep he had coughed so hard. Their parents hadn’t bothered to get Joseph vaccinated and he had picked up whooping cough. It had very nearly killed him. Barely nine years old himself, Jacob had carried him to the local clinic, had stood in line holding his little brother while Joseph muttered odd things to himself, his thin body feverish and trembling. How child services hadn’t visited their parent’s home after that event was beyond Jacob, but he suspected it had something to do with the neighborhood they were from. No one really cared about the poor unless they were forced to. “Out of sight, out of mind.” Hell, Jacob should have gotten a tattoo of that across his forehead just to save people the trouble of remembering the phrase.

Jacob shook away the terrible memory and leaned down to kiss his brother’s forehead gently. It wasn’t a sign of affection he allowed himself often, but Joseph was snoozing and Megan hadn’t followed him into the room. He allowed himself this tenderness for the first time in years.

“Joseph,” he murmured, shaking his brother’s shoulder gently. Joseph’s blue eyes rolled open.

“My brother,” he said softly, struggling to pull himself upright.

“Don’t sit up. It’s fine,” Jacob told him. “We don’t have much time,” he told him, glancing to Megan when she walked into the room. “There’s a storm coming. A bad one. We have to go in the next hour or so.”

“Do I have time to make him some food so he can take his medication?” Jacob glanced at the clock on the wall.

“I’ll do it,” he told her. He greeted Dutch placidly. “Are you coming with us?”

“Nah. Figure I’ll wait things out on my own,” Dutch told him in a gravelly voice. “Don’t know that I’d ever get a good night’s sleep locked in with any of you.” Jacob rolled his tongue in his mouth but said nothing, just nodded. “Take these,” Dutch told him, putting a white pill bottle in his hand. “I know you’ll have access to other things where you’re going, but he’s used a lot of them anyway, so you might as well have the rest.”
“Thank you,” Jacob told him, voice sincere. “Got anything I can warm up for him to eat?” Dutch showed him. He dumped the can of beanie weenies into a microwavable bowl, once again reminded of their childhood. He had scrimped and saved money to try to buy his brothers more wholesome foods. He had stolen food when necessary, had scavenged in the trashcans of restaurants and grocery stores when needed. Anything to keep his brothers fed. He was surprised he had turned out so large himself, given his self-inflicted malnourishment to make sure they had enough food. There were many days he would be dizzy and nauseous from lack of food and lack of sleep. John, he remembered with a hot lump forming in his chest, would often feed him some of his own food, those little baby blue eyes and that thin little face earnest as he insisted that Jacob eat some of what he had made for them both. Jacob gripped the edges of the countertop to steady himself and swallowed a sob.

This could have turned out so much worse.

Rook could have killed them all. He could have lost his brothers, could have died himself. She could have taken revenge for all the nasty, hateful things they had done in the name of God. What they had done had seemed justified, but the ends, he recognized once more, giving a heavy sigh, did not justify the means. He had moved from one pointless war to another, only this time he had been the one giving orders. The microwave beeped and he shook himself, stirred the protein and fat rich meal and carried it to Joseph, helping him eat it as he had when they were kids. Joseph slowly but surely finished off the meal, thanking Jacob for it, as he always had. Annoyed with how his hair was falling into his eyes, Jacob ripped the end off the shirt he was wearing and tied his hair back with a headband made of the material. His orange hair stuck wildly up from the top of his head, but at least it was out of his eyes now.

In a hurry now, hearing thunder outside, Jacob bundled Joseph up in warm clothes, and then layered a radiation suit on top of them, handing Megan one too, which she donned gratefully. He picked up Joseph carefully, cradling his brother in his strong arms as he had done years before. He tipped his forehead down to bump it against the side of Joseph’s affectionately.

“Are you ready?” Jacob asked.

“So long as God gives me strength,” Joseph told him, voice muffled through the layers of their rad suits.

“Then let’s go,” Jacob told them, and opened the bunker door.
Into the Bliss

Chapter Summary

Jacob is desperate to get Joseph and Megan to John's Gate

To have gotten so far and failed. Jacob had already had to avoid at least five washed out bridges between Dutch’s Island and John’s Gate. He had finally found one intact, had finally gotten down West 224 and was nearly to the kalachi road that lead to John’s Gate. He was only about a mile away from safety. And the last bridge was out. They sat, or rather, Jacob and Megan sat, staring at the bridge, Joseph breathing hard in the back.

“No. No, no, no, no, no, no, no,” Jacob was muttering under his breath, his knuckles white beneath the rad suit where they gripped the steering wheel in a death grip. An odd, purply-magenta-tinted streak of lightning crackled across the sky, followed a moment later by an Earth-shaking rumble of thunder. Small droplets of rain began to fall softly on the whitened windshield.

“No,” Jacob whispered, feeling hopeless. “Please. Please, God,” he prayed, really prayed for the first time in at least two decades. “Please.” His voice grated. His eyebrows were pulled up in the middle, his face a mask of pain, of fear, of despair. “Please.” For a moment, Jacob couldn’t decide if he wanted to weep, or if he wanted to rip this vehicle into atoms with his bare hands. Neither would accomplish anything. They would have to walk. Steeling himself, he set his jaw and opened the driver’s side door. He met Megan’s eyes through their rad suit masks. “We’ll have to go on foot,” he told her. She looked very frightened. “The suits aren’t airtight, but they’re better than nothing. We’ll have to go as quickly as possible. We’ll ford the creek and then climb the hill to the road that leads to John’s Gate. You go ahead of me.” Jacob looked away from her, to his brother. “I’ll carry my brother.”

Jacob picked Joseph up tenderly, one hand behind his suited head, tipping him up and over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry. He heard Joseph groan, but had no choice. They had no choice. As quickly as possible, they walked down to the creek, trying their best to avoid puncturing their suits with any of the burnt undergrowth. Jacob kept a steadying hand on Megan’s shoulder as they forded the creek, helped her up as they scrambled up the other side after scurrying to an area that wasn’t just sheer granite. He was already panting, his thighs burning from the exertion of moving quickly with nearly two hundred pounds of extra weight on his shoulders. For such a wiry frame, Joseph was muscular, lean and dense. Jacob panted, knowing he was probably pushing the air filters on his suit too far, knowing he was probably inhaling death with each desperate breath.

As they walked, Jacob felt himself growing light-headed, felt his skin burning, felt his lips chapping as though in fast motion. He stumbled, faltered, felt his arm feeling like it was on fire. He glanced down. Something, probably a branch, had torn a hole in his suit. Staggering, he went down to one knee with a groan of pain, barely keeping himself from dropping Joseph. Megan looked back, face desperate.

“Get…” Jacob panted, “get help.” He sat back on his haunches, absently felt the borrowed pants beneath his suit tear, thought absently that it was just one more injustice in a long line of injustices that he would die with his ass exposed if they pulled the rad suit off him when they recovered his body. It was a small comfort to know that his body would probably be so radioactive that they wouldn’t bother to recover it before it rotted away. Megan tried to tug Joseph
away from Jacob, but he clung to his brother. “If you try to take him you’ll just slow yourself down. You’ll hurt your child. He wouldn’t want you to do that. He’s lost enough. Go. Bring help. Please.”

Jacob was too tired to argue, could only hope she would obey. The wind picked up and through his failed suit, he could smell a familiar odor. Like gardenias and vanilla. It smelled off, smelled oddly electric and the mist he could see was purple, not green, which was weird. He laughed as red and green light danced at the edges of his vision. Leave it to Faith to spread her Bliss throughout the county…or maybe the storm had swept it all here. He swallowed, feeling ecstasy flood through him when he inhaled it. It didn’t feel like it normally did, wasn’t just a jet of utter pleasure. There was guilt. And anger. And pain. He shook his head, looked over at Joseph, who stirred. Jacob saw that his helmet had been pushed to the side as well. He weakly reached for it, tried to right it, but Joseph pushed his hand aside.

“God will provide,” Joseph rasped out, voice sure. Jacob laughed bitterly.

“God is a joke. The only salvation I need is from myself,” he chuckled, a last morbid joke. “Brother,” he called to Joseph, “Brother. Brother…” Jacob felt himself losing consciousness.

Joseph’s eyes glazed over with green and the two slumped together in a storm that finally broke, kicking up the irradiated Bliss around them both.

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The wolf before him had his own eyes. It was unsettling. He could feel its anger, could feel its pain. Its side was blistered with burns, its red hair was scorched away on its ribs and front legs. It lunged for his throat and he fought it off barehanded, pushing it back with a cry. It charged him and grabbed his wrist, drawing blood. He punched out hard, made contact and the wolf’s head was flung backward, except it wasn’t a wolf’s head, it was his own.

Desperate to overcome, he pushed aside anger, pushed aside hate, pushed aside all the guilt and fear balled up inside him and kicked the wolf back roughly.

“Who are you?” he asked himself as he picked his body up off the ground, forming back into a wolf. The wolf spoke.

“I am you. I am your sin. I am your wrath. I am your doom.”

“No,” he whispered. “I’m done with all that. I’m done with self hatred.” He sighed, shoulders dropping. “Stop. Just stop.” The wolf stepped forward, shoulders taut, face intent, blue eyes so terribly familiar. The wolf reached Jacob and he reached a hand out, touched it on the head, a tender motion. It closed its eyes and folded its ears back before standing on two legs, and again it was him. He pulled himself into an embrace. “I’m done with it. It’s not worth fighting myself anymore.”

“Good.”

Jacob felt the wolf licking his face and he peeled his eyes open, took a deep breath. Everything seemed brighter. He didn’t feel as tired. He pushed the wolf back gently. It was Maggie. It was Maggie, but she was fine, she wasn’t radiation burnt, wasn’t injured. She whined and laid down on the concrete floor when he pushed her away again.

Jacob sat up, realized he wasn’t wearing his radiation suit anymore, but also realized he was inside. He looked over at Joseph, who was lying on a cot next to him. He was deathly still. Jacob’s heart skipped a beat. He reached a hand out and shook Joseph’s shoulder. He flickered his
eyes open and looked over at Jacob.

“Jacob. You're finally awake.”

“You woke up before me?”

“Yes, I did. Dr. Allen wanted us to spend the night in the clinic to make sure the medication halted any damage from the radiation.” Jacob realized now, yawning, that Megan was lying in a cot beside Joseph, still asleep, or asleep again. He didn’t know how long he had been unconscious.

“Megan?”

“She is well. We all are, it seems.”

“Hey stranger,” came a soft voice from the doorway, and then a giggle. Rook took in Jacob’s rough appearance, looking at the cargo pants, the tank top and the homemade headband. “You look like ginger Rambo.”
Chapter Summary

The Seeds are not entirely redeemed. They all need to do penance. They all need help.

“Hey, you ’member that time I tazered you?” Sharky asked with a giggle as he shoveled canned peaches into his mouth. John looked up from where he was pushing his around on his plate, blue eyes cold.

“Vividly, yes,” John said, tone thick with acid. “Remember that time you lit a quarter of the state park on fire, peed in the sheriff’s car and then tried to hire me as your lawyer but couldn’t afford me?”

“What? Your billboards were very persuasive.” John rolled his eyes. “But nobody is worth that much per hour,” Sharky told him, finishing his peaches and crossing his arms over his chest.

“You know that’s not true, my dear firestarter. You’ve had your dick in my mouth,” John responded with a lascivious little grin and wetting his lips with his tongue. Sharky swallowed.

“Keep it in the bedroom, boys,” Whitehorse told them dryly as he walked past, Wren’s arm in his.

Sharky reddened but John seemed to take this as a challenge. Beneath the table he slung his leg into Sharky’s lap and moved his foot against the heavy thickness he could feel in Sharky’s jeans. The pyromaniac gave a little grunt and sat back in his seat, moving his crotch out of range of John’s seeking foot. John arched a brow.

“Don’t, uh, don’t waste food,” Sharky commented, looking significantly at John’s plate. John let out a noise of disgust, but scooped some of the chopped peach pieces onto his metal spork.

“I used to eat at five star restaurants at least twice a day,” John muttered as he surveyed the limp orangey-yellow pieces on his utensil.

“Hey, at least that will make your spunk taste good,” Sharky chirped.

“That’s pineapples,” John griped, wincing at the sickly sweet taste of the peaches as he rolled them around in his mouth. He shoveled the rest of them down just to get the experience over with.

“Oh. Right. Is there any canned pineapple?” Sharky asked, hopeful.

“Ugh,” John said in reply, grabbing their plates to stick them in the washing area. “Come on,” he ordered. “I need to let off some steam. Dr. Allen says my brothers are still sleeping and I need something to keep my mind off it.”

“After you, amigo,” Sharky agreed cheerfully, swatting John playfully on the ass before John snatched his hand – and held it.
“Let me see you,” Jacob purred, pulling Rook up onto the cot with him. He ran a large hand over her full abdomen lovingly, swallowing hard. He looked into her eyes, his own unusually soft.

“Hey, you okay?” Rook asked, taking his face in her hands.

“Never better,” he told her truthfully. “I don’t know what the hell the radiation did to the Bliss, but Joseph and I are fine. Some of my scars even seem more faded than they were.”

“I know the feeling. Dr. Allen gave me some sort of medication with Bliss in it and I feel great. I just hope there aren’t any long-term effects,” she told him, worried.

“Faith would be able to tell you more about it than I could,” Jacob admitted. “Her family were world-renowned horticulturalists. The flowers she made the Bliss from are so far removed from anything else that has existed that I wouldn’t even know where to begin to explain why they do what they do. But they were useful,” he said darkly.

“Only You” tinkled nauseatingly through Rook’s mind for a moment and she remembered the sickly sweet smell of Bliss from when he had used it to weaken her mind. She pulled away from him for a moment, climbing off the cot but he caught her arm. She smiled tightly at him.

“It’s alright, I just…don’t like being reminded.”

“We still have much to do penance for,” said a soft voice from the next cot over. Rook nodded at Joseph, but did not respond immediately.

“The first thing to do is to get you all some help,” she told him seriously. Neither Jacob nor Joseph argued.

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Sharky let out a sharp pant and wiped his mouth as he came up from his work, surveying John’s pert white ass where it jutted upwards from the bed. For such a snarky, prideful dude, John could be the biggest, whiniest slut and Sharky loved it.

“Yes! Yes!” John cried out, tipping his hips back as Sharky pressed his thumb inside him, biting his bottom lip at the image before him.

“Geezzus fuck!” Sharky exclaimed as he replaced his thumb with his cock, reveling in the tight warmth. He sank balls deep and then pulled almost all the way back out, his toes curling with the effort not to finish in one stroke. John looked cockily over his shoulder and Sharky responded by slamming back in, making John let out a little moan of ecstasy and bite down hard on the pillow in front of him. Unable to resist, Sharky slapped him hard enough on the ass to leave a red handprint.

John leapt out of the bed with a snarl, grabbing Sharky by the throat and slamming his shoulders and the back of his head against the wall their bed was against.

"Do…not…" John ground out a moment later, voice low and feral, “strike…me…ever…again…or so help me I will end you.” He took a shuddering breath, the furious expression dropping to one of horror as he released Sharky and dashed across the room in a flash. Sharky was shocked where he still knelt on the bed, his brow quirked, erection jutting almost
comically upward, the condom half yanked off it by John’s sudden flight, his head light from the
strike against the wall. John was breathing fast, taking shallow, desperate sucks of air and glancing
anywhere but Sharky’s face, like a bird that has been caught inside and can’t find its way back out.
He stood in the corner, buck naked, erection flagging, arms crossed protectively over his chest.
Sharky let out a small breath, forced himself to calm, forced himself not to get angry at such a
visceral, aggressive reaction to what he considered a normal behavior in the bedroom. *The abuse*,
he realized. Sharky stood, crawling off the bed and instead sitting on the edge of it.

“Alright,” Sharky said softly. “I’m sorry. I’ll be sitting here, whenever you’re ready to
come back over. I can go get you a glass of water, if you want?” John had turned away from him,
shoulders still rising and falling quickly, one arm raised and its palm flat on the wall to steady him
where he had planted himself. There was a red welt in the shape of Sharky’s palm already rising on
one of his muscular ass cheeks. Sharky looked at John’s back, really looked at it this time.
Previously he had just noted the corded muscles there, the soft lines of skin stretched over bone,
the scattered tattoos that John had persuaded Jacob and Joseph and a few trusted Chosen to help
draw on him. Beneath each tattoo, Sharky realized belatedly, was an odd slick line of skin that was
shinier and smoother than the rest of the flesh beneath the tattoo. Sharky’s face went pale with the
realization of what they were: scourge marks. They were the flattened, bleached evidence of
dozens of lashings.

Restless, no longer able to sit still, Sharky grabbed John’s glass and filled it with water,
setting it on the bedside table before he approached the corner where John was still standing, jaw
clenched, blue eyes resolutely closed.

“Can I touch you?” A beat, then John nodded tightly. Sharky put a hand on his shoulder,
applying gentle pressure until John was facing him, head tilted down to look at the floor when his
eyes finally peeked slightly open. Still gentle, still slow, Sharky pulled him into a loose hug and
held him while he collected himself.

“I have something to show you,” John told him in a dull monotone a few moments later.
He glanced up and met Sharky’s soft grey-blue eyes with his own intense ice-blue ones.
“Something to confess.”

They dressed and John led Sharky down, down, down, deep into the recesses of the
bunker, using a key that he kept around his neck, a different key than the one that had opened the
bunker. A chill crawled up Sharky’s spine as they descended and he wondered for a moment if he
was in danger. He swallowed, gripping the knife he kept in his pocket for reassurance.

They stepped into what appeared to be a modified art studio. The first thing Sharky
noticed was the scent of old blood and rotting flesh and fear. The next thing he noticed was the
body, hanging upside down from a metal frame with antlers and flowers fixed where loins should
be.

“Jesus Christ,” Sharky whispered, blood draining from his face. He saw other bodies
slung haphazardly around the room and smelled preservatives, though they didn’t completely
prevent the overwhelming scent of rot, and of terror. He turned to John, who was quite pale, his
face blank and his shoulders rounded in defeat.

“I need help, Sharky,” he whispered, brows drawn tightly together in guilt and anguish.
“I need help.”

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After he had persuaded John that no, he wouldn’t tell anyone, and yes, he would get him
help, Sharky waited until John had finished speaking with his now conscious brothers, waited until he was sure that John was steadied again, waited until the frenzied, mad-eyed haze that had sat on him like a storm cloud had somewhat dissipated before he left him alone in their room, sketching new tattoo designs. He crept as quietly as he was capable down the hall to Dep and Jacob’s room, knocking timidly.

Jacob answered, looking irritated.

“Boshaw? What do you want?”

“I-I’m a little over my head, to be honest, hombre.” Sharky scratched the back of his head awkwardly, heart pounding. Looking at Jacob’s impatient expression, he braced himself, and spit it out. “I hear you’ve got experience burning things down, destroying evidence… I need your help.”
Reunited and It Feels So...Hnngh

Chapter Summary

Jacob and Rook are reunited...it's been a while.

Boshaw was lucky he had not interrupted the previous ten minutes or so of activity. Jacob was still a little red-faced about how short it had been, but Rook hadn’t seemed to mind too much. It had, after all, been nearly two months since they had held one another close. It had started with her showing him their room. Boshaw, idiot though he was, had built them a new crib from repurposed box pallets and some of the building supplies that had been stored in each of the bunkers. She had then showed him their closet, their bathroom…their bed.

Jacob had pushed her down onto her back, kissing her roughly on her neck hard enough to bruise, biting and then kissing away the sting. He had cradled her slightly swollen belly in his hand and had gasped into her mouth as she grasped him through the soft cotton shorts he had donned before leaving the infirmary. In moments, they had both stripped off their clothing, desperate to touch, to feel, to know skin to skin, to reassure one another, that yes, they were reunited, no this was not a dream. He had pushed her knees up into her chest, her shins and calves cradled around the precious cargo in her belly. He had used one hand to grasp her wrists, holding her arms above her head as he sunk into her with a rough growl of pleasure. The warm tightness felt like going back to a home he hadn’t known he missed until now. He paused for a moment, collecting himself, taking a deep breath in through flared nostrils. Rook grinned and squirmed under him.

“What’s the matter, big boy? Having trouble staying in control?” Jacob clamped a hand over her mouth to silence her but she just wormed her tongue between his fingers, making it even harder to focus. He pulled out and then pressed back in, eliciting a soft moan from Rook’s open mouth. Her cheeks reddened when he met her eyes and grinned.

“What’s the matter, pup?” he asked her, voice gravelly with lust. “Having trouble staying in control?” Jacob mocked…and just like that it was a competition. She shook her wrists loose from his grip and grasped his shoulders, sinking fingernails into his skin just enough to prick, not enough to draw blood. Rook arched her back up into him as he slammed down into her and they each fought to obtain control, each fought to set the pace until their movements were nothing but frenzied desperation to press each other close until the other lost control. With a growling purr, Jacob pressed, pressed, pressed into Rook, feeling sweat trickling between his shoulder blades, feeling her fingers grasping at him, feeling the hot, wet ecstasy that was the warmth between her shapely legs. He felt her clench around him, heard her cry out in pleasure and wanted to do it again, wanted to bring her to that inexorable precipice and toss her over time and again until she was blissed out and shaking with pleasure.

But, with one final long growl, that really sounded something more like “Hnngh!” Jacob’s eyes snapped open in surprise as the orgasm he had been trying to delay snuck up on him, making him spill himself abruptly into Rook.

“Oh, oh fuck,” he muttered, catching himself on his fists against the mattress so he didn’t collapse on top of her.
Rook laughed out loud, patting him on the back like someone offering consolation to a kid that lost a game.

“I guess that was to be expected,” she teased.

“Don’t start,” he purred, intentionally collapsing on top of her now, pinning her down while being careful not to smash an elbow into her belly. She squirmed and extricated herself, lying down next to him now and looking at him adoringly

“Good to know I still get you going even after you’ve knocked me up.” Jacob raised a brow.

“If anything it makes me want you more,” he admitted with a little twist of his lips. He glanced down at her abdomen with a look of adoration. He once again cupped her belly.

“Hey, I’m up here too,” she griped, cupping his chin and tugging his face upwards, seeing that he was clearly already enamored with his offspring.

“I know,” he told her, leaning in and kissing her gently. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” she murmured, brushing her fingers through his red hair.

There was a knock at the door.

“Look away, Deputy, there’s a fair chance I’m going to murder whoever that is,” Jacob told her, nostrils flaring with annoyance as he stood and pulled pants back on.

“I’m not on duty,” Rook responded, eyes twinkling as she pulled the sheet over herself to cover her nudity.

“Boshaw? What do you want?” Rook heard her friend’s voice at the door for a few moments, and then Jacob glanced over his shoulder to her.

“I’ll be back.” And then he was gone.
It is an unfortunate fact that good police officers are quite nosy. Being nosy helps them get clues and information, helps them assess a situation fully. Which was why Rook had quietly dressed, slunk out of her room and crept down the hallway after her lover and her best friend. She followed them silently, feeling only a little bad about the fact that she had strapped her sidearm to her side. Better safe than sorry. Several times Jacob turned his head, clearly straining to listen for pursuit. Rook had paused, balanced behind beams or in shadows, waiting until he continued forward and then following him like a ghost. She thought, had things been different, that she could have killed him not through brute force or through perfect aim with her rifle, but simply by sneaking up on him and slitting his throat from behind.

Rook had imagined it, had played it out in her mind when Pratt was still captive, when she kept having to clean up the evil things Jacob had orchestrated and encouraged. She was glad it hadn’t had to be that way, was glad they had joined sides. Still, Jacob and Sharky were acting very suspicious. They finally got to the depths of the bunker and stepped into a side room. Rook peeked in very carefully and felt her stomach drop.

"Where did these even come from? Did John kill all these people? I didn’t want to ask him," Sharky admitted.

"John never killed anyone," Jacob told him. "He hired others to do the dirty work for him. He’s not a killer. But he always thought of himself as an artist." Jacob murmured, stroking a finger down the side of one of the hanging corpses delicately. "He thought he could give purpose after death if he made the corpses beautiful." Jacob turned away, blinked. "I suppose they are in a morbid way but he was wrong. All we are after we die is meat." Jacob sniffed, putting his hands on his hips. "If anyone sees these they’ll eat him alive. You’re right. Burning is the best option. We’ll have to be careful with the ventilation systems. Can’t have everyone smelling barbeque and wondering where it came from."

"Ugh, Jesus, dude, gross. Burnt humans don’t smell like barbeque." Jacob turned to Sharky seriously.

"I can assure you they do, Boshaw." Sharky went a little pale at that.

"Okay, then," he muttered. "So, what do we do first?"

"First we dump the preservatives. The filtration systems that the drains down here lead to should be able to deal with it with no issues. This silo was built to deal with dangerous waste. It will handle these kinds of chemicals with no problem. Next, we need to cut up the bodies, transport them to the organics digester."

"Where the shit flushes to?" Jacob sighed at the choice of wording, but nodded.

"Yes, Boshaw, where the shit goes." He looked up at each of the bodies, surveying them,
jaw working as he thought. “We can’t let Rook know about this. She won’t understand.”

“Too late,” Rook told him, stepping into the room at last. “Just what the fuck is going on here, Jake?” From her tone he could tell she hadn’t shortened his name through any sense of endearment, but from anger. Her balled left fist was trembling with contained rage and her right hand was on her gun, though she hadn’t pulled it yet. Jacob held up his hands placatingly.

“I didn’t want you to see this,” he started.

“Obviously,” Rook cut him off, eyes burning with fury. “Why?”

“Because…because you’d want to lock John up.” Rook swallowed, rubbed her forehead with her left hand, clenching her jaw hard.

“I haven’t locked any of you up since the jail, what makes you think I’d start now?” she asked, tone hollow. Jacob’s shoulders dropped and his eyebrows rose.

“Because you’re a deputy, pup.” Rook laughed. No, she didn’t laugh, she cackled. She cackled, hands going to her knees as she let out the loud guffaws of laughter. Jacob and Sharky looked to one another, taken entirely aback. Rook collected herself and shook her head at her damn fool lover. She really hoped the kid got her brains and Jacob’s brawn, not the other way around.

“Jacob. You idiot. Do you think that matters at all now? We’re going to have to make our own laws down here, and I’d like to think they’re pretty obvious. No killing, no stealing, no rape, etcetera. These…pieces, they were done before John sided with the Resistance, yes?” Jacob shook himself and nodded. “Well, then we’re going to have to consider him pardoned for these crimes. But you’re right. The other Resistance members will not be as understanding. And I think John needs some serious help. He needs to talk to someone about all the abuse he went through. No, don’t look at Sharky like that, Jacob, he didn’t tell me anything. I know because I read Joseph’s copy of his Book. It had information about all of you that he left out of his final version. Anyway.” She paused and sighed again. “I’ve got just the person for him to talk to. But John has to agree to it. Otherwise I’ll let the Resistance members with a grudge have him, are we clear?”

“Perfectly,” Jacob agreed, his tone much more akin to what it had been when they were still enemies, but to be fair, she had just threatened his little brother’s life.

“Alright. Let’s get started. Who’s got a knife?”

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“Step into my office,” the slightly taller and significantly older man joked. His room was tasteful, simple. It was clear from clutter, but had a bit of décor and the way the pillows on the bed had been stacked artfully suggested that a woman lived here too. There were two chairs taken from the cafeteria facing one another. John glanced at him uncomfortably, feeling ill-at-ease. “Have a seat.” John complied. “Want some coffee?” John shook his head. “Alright. Well, I’m going to have a cup. Not so good for the old ticker, but I figure with everything that’s happened I’m living on borrowed time anyway,” he chuckled, tone light and welcoming.

After he poured himself a steaming cup of black coffee in his kitchenette, Earl Whitehorse walked back into the room and sat heavily in the chair across from John, crossing his legs into a comfortable position and leaning back.

“Son,” he said, no judgment in his tone, “I’m here to listen and provide advice should you need it. You might be wonderin’ why Rook recommended me of all people.” John shrugged,
hands sitting stiffly on his lap, prim and proper as though he was being judged by the kindly older man in front of him. “Relax, John. Can I call you ‘John’? Good. No one’s in trouble here, we just want to help you. But I figure you’re owed an explanation for why Rook thinks it would be good for you to talk to me. Before we begin, allow me to tell you a story.”
Sympathy for the Devil

Chapter Summary

Jacob and Rook find out the sex of their baby.

“I still can’t believe you didn’t trust me with that,” Rook muttered under her breath, lips tugged into a scowl, pulling her hand away from Jacob’s as they walked down the hall toward the infirmary for their appointment. Jacob grabbed her hand again, insistent, swallowing it in his big paw.

“I’m sorry,” he told her earnestly, kissing the back of her hand, which he brought to his mouth as they walked.

“You’ll be making it up to me with a foot rub,” she informed him, still annoyed with him. “This isn’t going to work if we don’t trust each other, Jake.” He sighed, rubbing his thumb across hers where he still held her hand.

“I know,” he murmured.

They looked at one another before they stepped into the room, Rook taking a deep breath and Jacob looking a little pale.

“You ready?” Rook asked him. He smiled a bit.

“I don’t think anyone’s ever ready to be a parent, pup,” he admitted.

“Well, too bad,” she laughed, “you already are. Come on. I don’t want to keep the doctor waiting.”

“Good morning,” Dr. Allen greeted them with a friendly smile. He was a handsome man, Rook couldn’t help but note, all long limbs and sandy blonde hair. His green eyes were piercing and intelligent and he gave off an air of quiet confidence. He had a well-kept beard, similar in style to John’s, though the hair clearly was not as frequently oiled and brushed. It didn’t shine in the clinical lights of the room the way John’s would have. The only thing that gave Dr. Gregory Allen away as a cultist was the small Eden’s Gate cross that hung around his neck.

“Doctor,” Jacob greeted, friendly, but reserved. His social skills had come a long way since Rook first met him, she thought, remembering his impromptu performance a few months ago with a grin.

“Have a seat on this bed and then lie back. You’ll need to pull up your shirt,” Dr. Allen instructed. Rook obeyed, holding her shirt up with one hand and propping her head up with her other arm as Jacob moved close to her. He was leaning into her slightly and she could feel him shaking, trembling with nerves, or excitement. “I tried to get this a little warmer,” Dr. Allen told her apologetically, pulling a tube of ultrasound jelly out of a container of warm water. It wasn’t cold, but it certainly wasn’t pleasant. It was sticky and smelled vaguely like alcohol. Dr. Allen turned the ultrasound screen toward them and in a moment, they could hear the rushing, shushing sound of the thing as he searched for her baby. In a moment he had found it, and he pointed to a
tiny, fast fluttering spot on the screen, similar to the first time Rook had seen it. “Here’s the heartbeat,” he said softly, almost reverently. “That’s an arm,” he pointed, and a sweet smile spread over his face. “There’s two legs. Ooh, they’re kicking like crazy.”

“You don’t say,” Rook said dryly, feeling the fluttering sensation inside of her like she had swallowed a jar of butterflies.

“You two ready to know the sex?” Dr. Allen asked, turning toward them.

“Yes,” Jacob blurted. Rook chuckled.

“Yes, please.” Dr. Allen moved the probe a bit and smiled again.

“It’s a boy,” he told them. With a heavy, clattering thump, Jacob hit the floor.

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Once Rook had managed to stop laughing, only after they had ensured Jacob was alright of course, she had taken his hand. He shook his head, face still pale, but cheeks beginning to redden with embarrassment. She felt a little bad for the big red-headed idiot. He would have bruises tomorrow from passing out on the hard concrete floor. Disadvantages of being tall and massive. Sympathy for the devil, she supposed with a smirk.

“You locked your knees, didn’t you?” Rook asked him.

“Shut up,” he mumbled, rubbing his knee where it had hit the examination bed on his way to the floor.

“So,” she began softly, “It’s a boy. He’s a boy. Congrats, ‘Dad.’” Jacob’s eyes shot to her face.

“I’m a dad,” he said humbly, “to a boy.” Rook took his face gently in her hands, rubbing a thumb over his grizzled cheek, putting fingers atop and below his just-slightly-too-big-for-his-head ears and butted her forehead against his.

“Yes, you are. So, you still wanna call him Jacob Junior?”

“Yes,” he admitted, almost looking embarrassed.

“Good, that’ll make it easier when you’re both in trouble. I’ll only have to yell one name.” He chuckled.

“You hungry?” he asked her.

“Starving.”

---

Though the bombs had gone off barely two months ago, people were already starting to get restless. Rook had helped with organizing activities and games, and since Joseph was in the bunker and back to normal, he had begun writing and delivering sermons which were broadcast over the radio so that all of his followers could hear them. Still, many people were already despondent, already tired of being underground, especially the few children who had been brought down with their parents. It was a hard adjustment.

So it brought Rook great pleasure, and great relief, when Jacob picked up an acoustic
guitar that had been stored in the bunker to play hymns, and walked to the common area, strumming and tuning it. He smiled beatifically at Rook, who blushed a bit. No one had ever looked at her like that before.

Talented fingers moved over the strings and Jacob cleared his throat, smiling to himself as though he had just treated himself to a private joke. Rook braced herself for something silly, but was both amused and perplexed over his choice of song, but the crowd loved it.

Joseph didn’t look particularly impressed with the choice of song, but Megan prodded him gently in the ribs and dispelled the skeptical look on his face. He glanced to her and then put an arm around her, fingers lingering on her belly. Rook needed to talk to her, was curious if she had confirmed her pregnancy. She rolled her eyes at Joseph, who, even in the cold of the bunker, was not wearing a shirt.

“Hippie motherfucker,” Rook muttered under her breath, but she turned her attention back to Jacob, who was clearly enjoying himself being the center of attention. He had to be in the mood to perform, was usually recalcitrant and preferred sticking to the corners, but when he decided he wanted to be the center of attention, he always was.

“Please allow me to introduce myself,” Jacob sang with a little smirk, “I’m a man of wealth and taste. I’ve been around for a long, long year, stole many a man’s soul to waste, and I was ‘round when Jesus Christ had his moment of doubt and pain; made damn sure that Pilate washed his hands and sealed his fate. Pleased to meet you! Hope you guess my name!” Someone let out a whoop and that was all Jacob needed to play late into the day, taking requests before finally passing the guitar to someone else. He was sweaty and wild-eyed when he finally returned to Rook’s side. He grabbed her, leaning her back in a dancer’s dip and kissing her madly. She grabbed at his shirt, fisting her fingers into the material and letting herself melt into the kiss.

“We’re having a baby boy,” he told her after he had pulled her effortlessly back up, still delighted, still almost manic in his excitement. Rook giggled.

“Yes, we are.”

“Then I think we’d better get some sleep while we still can,” he murmured, voice dropping low as he nuzzled her neck.

“I’ve got something better we can do in bed besides sleep,” she told him in a husky whisper, biting his earlobe.

“Lead the way.”
John continues to try to be a better person, but sometimes Resistance members don't make it easy.

“There exists, for everyone, a sentence - a series of words - that has the power to destroy you. Another sentence exists, another series of words, that could heal you. If you're lucky you will get the second, but you can be certain of getting the first.”

-Philip K. Dick

“I swear the only people who love that psychopath are the people who are required to. His brothers. Probably his parents. I don’t know, though, what kind of parent raises someone to be like that?”

John clenched his fingers tightly on the cafeteria tray he was holding. He was trembling. It was hardly the first unkind thing that had been said to him, and it wasn’t even the beginning of this particular unkind conversation. The Resistance members talking about him in muttered tones either didn’t know or didn’t care that he could hear them quite clearly. He made eye contact with the cook named Casey, who surveyed him mildly with a ladle in his hand, clearly wanting to stay out of it and mind his own business.

“Potatoes?” he asked in a neutral tone. John forced himself not to fling the tray into the wall. He walked out of the cafeteria, fighting back rage. He wanted nothing more than to snatch those simpering cretins by their collars and drag them to his inquisitor’s chair. He wanted to cut them and slice them and mark them and…he chuffed out a breath, putting a hand over his eyes, his other still clenching the tray absently. What he really wanted to do, he realized with embarrassment and another spark of rage, was cry. He wanted to cry. Those words hurt his feelings. Feelings he had carefully shielded from the world. He hadn’t known that shielding had collapsed over the course of his personal growth. He hadn’t cared what people thought of him for years. What the fuck had happened to him?

John took a shuddering breath, remembering what Rook had told him, remembering what his brothers had told him, remembering what Earl had told him. He needed to talk to someone. He couldn’t internalize his feelings. That’s how he had become the monster he had been in the first place. In the past he would collect little hurts, little jabs and judgments until they rotted in his chest and exploded in a fit of rage as he carved sins into another human being, or he snorted a long line of coke, or he let a man whose name he didn’t know ram his dick in his ass or in his mouth to delay the explosion for another day. He couldn’t live like this anymore. He turned stiffly and stalked down the hallway, sucking in a breath to stop himself from crying or screaming. As he recalled hearing a story far too similar to his own from an unlikely role model nearly a month ago, he knew who he needed to talk to.

John knocked at a familiar door and a moment later there was an answer.
“John?” Earl asked. John opened his mouth to say he needed to talk, but all that came out was a rough sob.

“I—”

“Come here, son,” Earl said, face softening, not waiting for argument before pulling John into an embrace. It was fatherly, like nothing John had ever in his life experienced, not even from Joseph. He stiffened for a moment, resisting the touch, but then felt himself relax, felt something like the weight of the world fall from his shoulders. He realized absentely that he was still holding the cafeteria tray, so he dropped it with a clatter. Slowly at first, but then with more confidence, John slid his own arms under Earl’s and moved his hands up to Earl’s shoulder blades, accepting the hug. He allowed himself to cry for a minute, and then collected himself, tugging out of the hug. He met Earl’s eyes, embarrassed, sniffing, cheeks red and eyes still watery. He didn’t want to wipe his nose on his sleeve, but it was running. Earl helpfully offered him a handkerchief. John accepted it and blew his nose softly, pocketing the cloth to wash and return later.

“Thanks,” he ground out. He cleared his throat and started to walk off.

“Now hang on a minute, son,” Earl objected, putting a hand on his shoulder. John’s first instinct was to fight, to strike out, to lash out, to scream, to hit, to hurt. But he did not. He stopped and turned back to Earl. Earl glanced at the hallway clock. “J’eat yet?” the former sheriff asked John, with a glance at the abandoned cafeteria tray, one brow arched in a concerned expression.

“No,” John whispered.

“Tell you what, I’ll go grab us some grub if you want to stay here. I’ve got a few books I managed to scrounge if you want to read while I’m gone.”

“Alright,” John said primly, still feeling awkward.

Earl returned with two plates, heavy on the vegetables, light on the meat, the way John preferred his meals. He took a hesitant bite of potato, but found that though they had been resurrected from a flaky powder stored in a plastic bag instead of being freshly peeled and boiled, the mashed potatoes actually weren’t half-bad.

“I’m going to assume the unkind conversation I encountered in the cafeteria is why you’re here,” Earl said softly. John made a little noise of affirmation in his throat. “You know, you can’t let what other people think of you get you down. Don’t take criticism from someone you wouldn’t go to for advice, anyway. What was it got you so bothered, if you don’t mind my asking?” John didn’t meet his eyes, and when he answered he mumbled, something he had been beaten for as a child, so he was prepared to speak up and repeat himself, to talk louder or else...or else what? It wasn’t as though Earl was going to strike him, he thought to himself, calming a bit.

“They...they said the only people who love me are the ones who are obligated to do so,” John explained in soft tones, wiping his mouth delicately with the napkin Earl had provided to try to hide his pained expression. Earl nodded, was listening closely enough to understand John's muttered explanation, didn't tell him to speak up or sit straight or be sorry for his sins. Earl was fatherly but he reminded John of his own fathers not at all. He was neither a drunkard nor a cruel, capricious zealot.

“And?” Earl prompted him, breaking him from his reverie.

“And what? ’And how does that make me feel?‘” John asked sarcastically, his tone acid. "Christ God, what is this, therapy?"
“If that’s what you need it to be, then that’s what it is,” Earl told him seriously. It took the wind out of John’s sails entirely. He deflated, huffed out a breath of surprise, eyebrows raising.

“I…oh.” John Seed was, for the first time in a very long time, at a loss for words.

“Why does the opinion of a stranger matter to you so much, John?” Earl asked him carefully, taking a bite of his meal and chewing it studiously while he waited for John to respond. John thought for a moment.

“Because…because, despite what everyone might think…I want people to like me.”

“Okay. So you want to be liked. It’s not a bad goal. It’s certainly not where you should derive your own self-worth, but it’s a respectable goal. What do you think y’ought to do to achieve it?” Earl asked. John barked a laugh at how remarkably well Earl was emulating an understanding therapist.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. Earl chuckled and put a hand gently on John’s knee.

“You learn how to be a likeable person, John.”

---

John stood stiffly and popped his back as Earl gathered their dishes and Wren walked in the door, kissing Earl on the cheek and nodding to John.

“Ma’am,” John acknowledged her in his soft Georgian drawl. He glanced at his watch. Jesus, he had been here talking to Earl for nearly two hours.

“I’m glad you came to me, John. I know we’ve been chatting twice a week, but feel free to come by anytime you need to. And John?”

“Yeah, Sheriff?” Earl gave him a closed-mouth smile and patted him on the shoulder as he stepped out into the hallway.

“I am in no way obligated to like you, and I certainly am not required to love you, but hell, I’m starting to view you damn Seeds in a better light now that things have settled out. The people who love you love you because to them, you are lovable. You can’t force somebody to love you, but you can appreciate those who do, and you can try to be a better person for the people who have invested themselves in your life.” John nodded once, swallowed, and started to walk away but Earl spoke again. “You do that and you’ll go a long way in being happier. And try not to hold a grudge against those damn fool Resistance members. It’s going to take them a long time to accept that you’ve changed.” John nodded, gaze going distant before he snapped clear blue eyes back to Earl’s kind face.

“Thanks, Sheriff.”

“If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a dozen times, kid, call me ‘Earl.’”


“Anytime, John.”
Rook gives Sharky access to fire and finds it may have been a mistake.

It was like an itch burning in his soul, haunting and pushing his tender grasp on sanity to its breaking point, a Stygian urge that would devour his mind if he couldn’t act on it, if he couldn’t soothe the restless craving that threatened to overwhelm his very being. Well, that’s not how Sharky himself would have described it. His version would sound something more like “it’s like when your asshole really itches and you aren’t supposed to scratch it because you’re in public.” Flames. Fire. He wanted it, no – he needed it. He flicked his fingers together rapidly, snapping thumb against middle finger over and over in a *popsnappopsnappopsnap* of nervous movement, hoping against hope that the flick of flesh against flesh might somehow prompt a spark.

“Come here, Sharky,” Rook said in a beleaguered tone. “I have something for you, but you have to promise me you won’t let it get out of control. You can watch it, and you can play with it, but it stays on the table, understood?” Sharky nodded enthusiastically. He hadn’t gotten to interact with his first love – fire – in over a month and he knew they would be down here for years. Bunkers were not a place for fire.

“I promise,” Sharky blurted, not really paying attention to what he had just agreed to, instead hopping happily in place as they stepped into the abandoned art studio to see a lit candle sitting innocently on a table.

“How’d you light it, Dep?”

“Don’t worry about that,” Rook said dryly. “If you blow it out before you’re done, let me know. I’ll arrange to have it relit.”

“What, Dep, don’t trust me?”

“Do I not trust a pyromaniac arsonist who burned down a trailer park, half a state park and parboiled at least forty Eden’s Gate soldiers in front of me? No, Sharky, I don’t trust you with a source of flame.” Sharky gave her sad puppy dog eyes, but she had no patience for it, was grouchy. Her back hurt and she needed to take a piss for the fiftieth time that afternoon. She was hungry and Jacob Junior was dancing on her bladder and punching her intestines. Rook turned toward the door. “I gotta pee and I’m going to grab some food. Don’t, er, try not to do anything stupid, please?”

“You got it, Dep,” Sharky told her, but his eyes weren’t on her. They were instead focused on the dancing flame in front of him. He watched it with fascination, hands on the table, chin resting on his hands, his gray blue eyes lit merrily by the tiny warm flame.

Sharky really did try not to do anything stupid. He tried. Very hard. But he didn’t see the harm in feeding the little flame a sheet of paper. It licked at the paper hungrily, tearing through it like a starving dog given a steak. The paper blackened, cooled to gray and the little portion of flame that had left the candle to consume the paper died with a trickle of black smoke. What harm, Sharky reasoned, could another piece of paper be? Or better yet, a few pieces of paper? Or what about that smelly flammable liquid they were trying to get rid of bit by bit?
“You can stay a little longer and eat with me, pup,” Jacob objected as Rook started to pull away. She had an MRE in her hand.

“No, I really can’t. I left Sharky with an open flame.” Jacob chuckled.

“I didn’t know you wanted to make sure we all got slow roasted in the bunker, pup.” Rook shot him a look.

“I was trying to be nice. The guy has a…thing about fire. I think he had an erection by the time I left the room.” Jacob growled deep and low at that, a jealous look crossing his features. It was Rook’s turn to laugh.

“The erection was for the fire, dear. And I’m not interested in it, regardless.”

“Stop talking about my boyfriend’s dick,” John ordered as he walked by with an MRE open on his tray, his lip curled in disgust at the contents.

“Well, then maybe you should go do something about it,” Rook replied sassily, still making her way toward the exit to go check on Sharky.

Too late.

The fire alarm went off with a piercing scream followed shortly by a resounding BOOM.

“Just be patient,” John told a blindfolded and naked Sharky who was lying on his back on their bed, torso propped up on his elbows, wrists tied to the bedframe to prevent him from getting up. There was the flick of a lighter and Sharky’s erection twitched at the sound, at the scent
of lighter fluid, at the soft flickering noise of a tiny flame. He heard movement rustling and then
the lighter shutting. Then, abruptly, he felt something liquid and very, very hot dribbling down his
chest. Sharky groaned.

“Oh, oh fuck, what the fuck is that?” he asked, shuddering as John’s hand brushed his
cock. John tugged the blindfold off, revealing that he was holding a lit candle in one hand. Sharky
immediately tried to reach for it but was caught by the bonds on his wrists. He let out a little noise
of frustration.

“Ah, ah, ah,” John chided him with a mischievous smile. “You get to enjoy it, but you
don’t get to control it. That’s my job.” Sharky let out an almost angry-sounding growl from deep in
his throat and John’s eyebrows arced upwards. That sound was hot.

“John, you better give me that fuckin’ candle right now,” Sharky ordered, cock dribbling
precum in his excitement.

“This candle?” John asked, tipping it and pouring more hot wax over Sharky’s chest.

“I – oh fuck,” Sharky purred out as the hot liquid crawled down his skin and hardened.
“John, please, please, I need it.”

“You need the heat?” John prompted.

“Yes,” Sharky told him, eyes pleading.

“The warmth,” John narrated, eyes meeting Sharky’s as he dripped a little more wax onto
him.

“Yes!”

“The burn,” he flicked the candle’s flame briefly across Sharky’s chest. The
pyromaniac’s hips snapped up in arousal, his mouth open and panting for the flame. John couldn’t
find it in himself to be jealous of flames because the lust on Sharky’s face was satisfying enough
for them both. Careful to keep control of the candle and not tip it, John held the flickering flame
close to Sharky’s lap as he leaned down and swallowed Sharky’s cock in one smooth motion.
Sharky cried out hoarsely, pumping his hips up into John’s mouth. John had plenty of experience
sucking guys off, but Sharky’s rambunctious jabbing was too much even for him. He backed off
with a little gag, the candle tipping to the side, dumping more hot wax on Sharky’s belly, running
down around the base of his cock and making him groan.

“Fuck it,” John muttered, and he reached for the bottle of cheap whiskey he had found
just for this. He had intended for this session to last longer, but Sharky was already getting out of
control, was already leaking rivulets of precum all over himself now that John had pulled his
mouth off his cock. John poured the whiskey into a wide metal bowl and extinguished the candle
in it. The effect, of course, was that the bowl lit merrily on fire, burning slowly and brightly.
Sharky let out another wild growl, hips snapping up into air as he stared at the purple-blue flames.
John dumped lube into his hand and stroked his own erect cock, pushing Sharky’s legs up so his
ankles were at his ears, sinking in with a little pleasured gasp.

Sharky jerked his wrist out of one of the soft restraints and, to John’s horror, dipped his
fingers into the whiskey. Unfazed, Sharky let the liquid and flame dance along his hand, dripping
down to his tattoo, engulfing inked fire with real flame. John kept up a steady rhythm, pumping in
and out of Sharky while also keeping a very close eye on the extremely flammable bedsheets just
inches beneath Sharky’s flame-covered arm.
“Don’t worry, Johnny boy,” Sharky told him, voice husky and low, eyes dilated with pleasure, “I’ve got it,” he whispered roughly, watching the fire reflected in John’s eyes and finding sudden revelation in blue irises the same color and intensity as the flames dancing merrily on his arm. John stroked Sharky in time to his own thrusts and in only a few minutes, just as the flames on Sharky’s arm were beginning to flicker out as the alcohol was consumed, they came together, Sharky with a tearing cry, head thrown back as he looked desperately at John’s face. “Thank you,” he ground out, “thank you, thank you, thank you,” he said over and over, a litany as he watched the bowl of flames slowly flicker away.

John leaned down and kissed Sharky passionately, their tongues battling as he slid from inside the pyromaniac, reveling in their joint warmth.

“Now that was more fun that nearly burning the bunker down, right?” Sharky chuckled.

“Usually when I cum around fire I’m flying solo, so yes, that was…yes.” John laughed quietly, kissing Sharky again and undoing the restraint from his other wrist.

“We can’t do that often…but…I figured it was better than no access to fire at all.”

“What are you talkin’ about, babe?” Sharky murmured, pulling John back to him and cupping his jaw with a hand that still smelled vaguely of whiskey. “I’ve got all the fire I need in your eyes,” he told John, who smiled, reddening a bit at the sudden and uncharacteristic affection. Sharky was usually more reserved about his feelings toward John. “You really, uh,” Sharky grinned, showing white teeth and a mischievous look, “You really light my fire.” They both laughed at the terrible pun and laid down side by side watching the last of the flames in the bowl consume the whiskey and flicker to nothing.
Birthdays and Proposals

“If you pass out like your brother did, I want to have a recording of it,” Megan told Joseph as she gripped her cell phone, now useful for nothing other than taking pictures and listening to music. He pushed his glasses up his long nose and sniffed.

“We will no longer have a need for such things in the New Eden,” he told her stuffily, but she just laughed and kept the phone’s camera trained on him.

“Go ahead Dr. Allen,” Megan laughed. Obligingly, Dr. Allen pressed the ultrasound probe to her belly.

“Now, as I mentioned, I won’t be able to tell you the sex at this time. You’re only about four months along, but I can show you the heartbeat and you can see him or her moving arms and legs, and depending on…ah, yes, here, it’s facing just the right direction that you can see the face.” Megan smiled at Joseph.

“Our baby has a face.”

“Well, I would certainly hope so,” Joseph said dryly, but he looked some combination of amused and incredibly pleased. Strong emotions rarely showed on his face. He took Megan’s hand and set her phone aside. It had all but been forgotten as soon as the fetus was on the screen.

“I love you,” Megan told him, looking raptly at the ultrasound screen. Joseph wasn’t entirely sure if she was speaking to him, the doctor, or the child, but nonetheless, he responded with,

“I love you too.”

A month passed and at last Megan and Joseph found out the sex: a boy. They spent the next months discussing names, never quite agreeing on one. Today, Megan sewed a onesie from an old t-shirt while Joseph read his Bible, running through possible names in her mind. She looked up from her work.

“What about ‘Ethan’?” Joseph thought for a moment.

“Meaning ‘strong and enduring.’” He hummed. “It’s a good name for a son.” She smiled and then cupped her belly which was just beginning to really swell noticeably.

“Ethan Seed.”

“His mother would have to be married to me for him to take my name,” Joseph told her softly. For a moment she was insulted, thought Joseph was calling his son a bastard, but then she realized as she saw the look of anxiety on his face.

“Oh.”

“Megan…”

“Yes. Yes.”
“No,” Rook griped. “Absolutely not. It’s too soon.” Jacob pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Pup, you’re carrying my child.”

“I’m carrying my child,” she said obstinately, arms crossed over her chest. Jacob looked at her with a furious expression.

“Fine,” he snapped. “Stubborn woman, have it your way.” He stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him. Rook stood, surprised for a moment, eyebrows high.

“What the fuck just happened?” she whispered, looking at the carefully crafted ring of coiled wire Jacob had offered her. She sat on the edge of their bed with a sigh, picking up the ring and spinning it in her fingers, wincing when she felt a cramp run through her. She ignored it and looked more closely at the ring. Jacob had used wire to make the ring look like entwined vines, one coil of wire jutting upwards in the shape of a rose. Jacob must have worked on this for hours, she realized, must have thought about this for a long time. She felt a little ashamed, but also felt fear trickle through her. Even without the commitment of a marriage license, even without the publicity of a ceremony, the thought of marriage terrified her. She was twenty-eight, but she had never felt a rush to get married, had never liked the idea of being bound to one person until death…until now, she realized, flushing. “Shit.”

Rook went to the door and peeked out, wondering which direction Jacob had taken off to.

“Have you seen Jacob?” she asked Rue, a Resistance member with soft brown eyes.

“Not lately. Everything alright? You look really pale.”

“Well, no sunlight, you know,” Rook joked, again ignoring a cramp, more concerned about finding Jacob than acknowledging yet another Braxton-Hicks contraction. “Everything’s fine, Rue, thanks.” She turned the other direction, painfully climbing the stairs up toward the cafeteria. Jacob was an emotional eater, much as he might try to deny it.

Jacob was not in the cafeteria.

Jacob was not in the library.

Jacob was not in the chapel.

Jacob was nowhere to be found.

For a split second, Rook considered calling for him over the intercom, but she didn’t want to make a scene. She spent the rest of the afternoon in quiet contemplation, reading and propping her swollen feet up, impatiently rubbing her abdomen each time a false contraction ran through her, waiting for Jacob’s return.

Jacob did not come back that night.

Well and truly concerned now, Rook went in search of him in earnest. It was obvious where she should have looked once she found him in the large storage area where Maggie was allowed to roam. Rook rounded a pallet of MREs and saw the big gray and white wolf lying there, Jacob using her ribs as a pillow where he laid, deep in thought. Maggie let out a low growl until she recognized Rook and then she started wagging her tail, whacking Jacob in the face with it in her enthusiasm.

“Hey Maggie,” Rook greeted, bending down and patting her. Jacob surveyed her
wolfishly, looking angry and hurt. “I don’t suppose I could get you to ask me again?” Rook questioned, thrusting her hand out, showing Jacob the ring she was holding. He frowned.

“I don’t ask serious questions twice, pup,” he growled.

“Don’t pout,” she told him, but her shoulders dropped in defeat. “I’m sorry.” He glanced back up at her, still looking churlish, but the effect of his fierce gaze was somewhat lessened by Maggie getting up so she could snuffle curiously at Rook’s outstretched hand, leaving him to lie on the ground or get upright. He stood, one knee popping when he did so and he grunted.

“Well, I’m obviously not getting down on one knee,” he told her stubbornly. She laughed.

“But will you ask?” Jacob stepped toward her, putting a hand on her shoulder and yanking her toward him, towering over her intimidatingly.

“Only you could push my buttons like this, pup,” he growled. She smiled up at him.

“You love it,” she said confidently and he quirked a brow upwards, but finally cracked a smile.

“I love you, which is why I asked you in the first place.”

“So, ask me again.”

“No,” he said with finality. Rook scoffed.

“Oh for Christ’s sake.” She jammed the ring on her finger. “YES you absolute ass, I will marry you.” Jacob sniffed.

“You didn’t ask me if I wanted to marry you still,” he pointed out. Rook barked a laugh and, carefully, went to one knee, being very dramatic about it.

“Jacob whatever-the-fuck-your-middle-name-is Seed, will you do me the honor of giving me your hand in holy matrimony?”

“Shut up, pup,” he laughed, pulling her back upright effortlessly. “And it’s ‘Matthew.’ My middle name is Matthew.”

“Well, now I…ow! Now I, ow, fuck,” Rook cried holding her belly, eyebrows going up in shock at the sudden piercing pain and pressure.

“Are you okay?” Jacob asked her, deeply concerned.

“I’m fine, I’m sure it’s just…ow! Oh shit, that hurts,” she whined, almost going to her knees with the sudden cramp.

“Isn’t it almost time?”

“Well, I don’t know when exactly you knocked me up, so, ooooh shit, oooowwww!” She actually did sit now, heavily, breathing out hard. Her jeans were suddenly soaked with a clear, seeping fluid. She looked down at her crotch, and then up at Jacob. “I think you need to go get Dr. Allen,” she gasped out.

“No can do, pup. I’m taking you to the clinic myself.”
“But your back,” she protested, but then she was being carried, one of Jacob’s arms behind her shoulders, the other under her knees. His muscles bulged with the weight of her, but he moved easily. She put an arm around his neck to help him carry her and put her other hand on his chest. His heart was thundering madly.

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“You did this to me,” she growled at him and for the first time in his life, Jacob was terrified. She looked like a little demon where she laid on the clinic bed, face red and hair a mess, teeth clenched as yet another contraction tore through her. “You motherfucker! You piece of shit! You keep your goddamn penis away from me because I am not doing this ever again, oooh fuck, that hurts!”

“Pup,” he started.

“And that’s another thing,” she shrieked at him after the contraction had passed, “you better find another nickname for me or so help me God I’ll cut your balls off, mountain man! Oooooowww! I don’t want to do this, I don’t want to do this anymore, this really, really hurts!” Her face softened suddenly and fear was apparent on her face. Rook started crying, tears falling in rivulets down her face. Without hesitation, Jacob stepped forward and took her hand.

“You’ve got this, pup. You’re strong. Take a deep breath.”

“I can’t, I can’t, it hurts so bad, Jacob, it hurts, it, aaaah! It hurts! Why did I have to get knocked up by a six and a half foot tall giant with no access to a hospital, holy shit this hurts!” Rook did not think she had emphasized the point enough of how fucking badly this hurt. There were no epidurals to be found in this bunker and right about now it felt like she was being split in two at the legs.

“Only you,” Jacob sang suddenly, right next to her ear, tucking sweaty hair back behind it out of her face, “can make all this world seem right,” he felt Rook shudder and kept singing, “only you, can make the darkness bright…” Her body relaxed and she looked at him dazedly. “Just relax, pup. You’re doing great.” He started singing again, a crooning lullaby that he knew he hand imprinted on her, that he knew could hypnotize her enough to make this bearable.

“That’s a good way,” Rook gasped out, still looking dazed, “to almost make your fiancée kill everyone in the room,” she teased, slurring her words a bit.

“Fiancée, eh?” Dr. Allen asked, pointedly ignoring the implied death threat. Jacob shrugged.

“It uh, happened recently.”

“Like about five hours ago just before you carried her into my clinic recently?” the doctor asked, looking amused. Jacob reddened.

“Will you both just shut up?!” Rook demanded, bearing down hard through another contraction.

“You’re almost there, deputy,” Dr. Allen told her with a winning smile.

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Almost there, as it turned out, didn’t happen until about three hours later. Dr. Allen had helped Jacob roll the clinic bed to their room shortly afterwards and transferred an exhausted Rook
and their baby to their own bed. Rook was now lying, fast asleep, blankets piled around her and Maggie lying protectively at the foot of the bed. Jacob Junior was nestled on her chest, suckling quietly. Wild copper red hair stuck haphazardly up from the baby’s head. Jacob stroked it gently, swallowing, looking wondrously at his son.

Rook stirred, awakened, yawned, looked down in surprise at the tiny creature balanced on her abdomen.

“He’s real,” she whispered, eyes wide as she touched his cheek softly and smelled the top of his copper head. “He’s beautiful.”

“You’re beautiful,” Jacob rumbled, taking in her matted, sweaty hair, the dark rings under her eyes, the white streaks of tears down her cheeks, the stretchmarks on her breasts and down her sides. “You’re beautiful,” he told her again, leaning down and kissing her. She scooted over, to the snuffling protest of her son, who lost his grip on her breast before finding it again. Jacob laid down next to her, pulling his shirt off so he could be skin-to-skin with his fiancée and child.

“He got your hair,” she laughed, stroking the achingly soft puff of red-gold hair.

“And your eyes,” Jacob murmured, seeing green color already tinting the gray blue of the newborn’s eyes.

“Earl will love that,” Rook smiled. There was a very timid knock at the door. Rook arranged a sheet over her chest and nodded to Jacob, who said,

“Come in.”

John, Joseph, Sharky, and Megan all peeked in from the doorway. Jacob smiled at his brothers.

“It’s alright, you can visit for a few minutes, just be quiet.” Almost reverently they stepped inside the room. John peered in wonder at the tiny infant, as did Sharky. John watched Sharky’s face undergo an odd series of emotions and took his hand, frowning a bit. Sharky swallowed and smiled at him, but said nothing. Joseph gently brushed his nephew’s head.

“Children are a blessing from God,” he assured Rook, eyes bright as he looked over at Megan, who looked a little scared.

“I heard it was bad without an epidural.”

“I’m having Jacob scheduled for a vasectomy so I don’t have to do it again,” Rook said dryly. Jacob glanced at her sharply and she laughed. “Kidding. Probably. I don’t know, we’ll see.”

“Well, that’s comforting,” Megan chuckled, holding her belly.

“It’s worth it, though,” Rook assured her, smiling down at her son. “Where is Earl?” she asked.

“He thought you’d want to rest,” Sharky answered. “We couldn’t wait.”

“Well, go get him. A grandfather has a right to hold his grandson.”

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Earl Whitehorse swallowed a lump in his throat as he held the tiny bundle in his arms, remembering a time nearly thirty years before when he had held another tiny bundle. The baby grabbed one of his thumbs with strong little fingers, letting out a hiccup and nuzzling into his chest.

“He’s…” he swallowed another lump that had formed behind the first, “He’s beautiful, Rook,” he told her, looking at her proudly. She grinned up at him.

“It’s a good thing he’s got some of my dad’s good looks,” she teased. He went a little still at that and Rook’s smile faltered a bit. They both knew who she meant. “I wish he could be here,” she whispered. “Mom too.”

“I’m sure they’re watching from somewhere, Rook,” he told her solemnly.

“You know you’re only the third person to hold him, not counting the doctor,” Rook said, lightening the mood.

“I’m honored, Rook.”

“Yeah, well, be ready to serve as free babysitter for the foreseeable future,” she chuckled.

“That won’t be a problem,” he promised her, grinning when baby Jacob released his finger and jammed his fingers into his own mouth, making a happy little gurgling noise. “I think it’s time for him and you to get some rest, Rook. I’ll bring y’all both some breakfast in the morning.”

“Thanks, Earl,” Rook told him, taking the baby from him carefully.
Fever and Fire

“I do not want to have this conversation with you right now!” John hollered, cursing when shampoo ran into his eye, burning.

“Well, then when are we going to have it?” Sharky demanded. He was standing outside the shower, arms crossed protectively over his chest. “Because as far as I’m concerned, it’s a deal-breaker, hombre.”

“We haven’t even been dating a year! We’re locked in a bunker for the foreseeable future and we’re both men!” John responded, rubbing a hand against his eye and trying to rinse the soap out. He finally did and stepped out of the shower, looking like a draggled rat with his hair stuck in rivulets around his ears and forehead. Scowling, he slicked it back and met Sharky’s eyes for a long moment. Sharky’s jaw was working stubbornly. The birth of Jacob Jr. and Joseph’s son being close on the way had lit a sudden fire under Sharky’s ass about having kids. “Even if we could find someone willing to carry a child for us, I am not prepared to be a parent, Sharky. I don’t know if I ever will be,” he finished softly, staring at the floor. With that, John snatched his towel off the bar and stormed out of the bathroom after tying it around his hips. He tried to ignore the shocked, grieved look on Sharky’s face as he left.

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A howling wail split the night.

“Ugh,” Rook groaned, rubbing the heel of her hand into her eye. “Can’t we just let him cry for once?” she asked as Jacob got up without hesitation.

“He’s hungry,” Jacob whispered, picking up the squirming, wailing child and handing him to Rook, who nestled him on her chest and allowed him to feed.

“So what was all that about culling the weak?” she teased. Jacob went quite still in the profound darkness. Rook could hear that he was not moving at all, was barely breathing.

“That is not funny,” he told her, tone dangerous and harsh.

“Jacob…”

“That…” She heard a strangled sound, like he was swallowing hard around either a sob or a growl, she wasn’t sure which. She heard him shift as she held her son close, felt him sit down on the bed and put a hand gently on her thigh. “I overreacted. I’m sorry. It’s just…I spent the first half of my life trying to keep my brothers safe, and I spent the second thinking I had failed them. I just want the rest of my life to go better. I want to keep my family safe. I want to be together. I can’t…I can’t joke about it, pup.”

“It’s alright,” she told him softly, freeing a hand to take his in the dark. “I love you, Jacob, and I love our son. I would never do anything to hurt him, you know that, right?”

“Yes,” he sighed, kissing her hand gently. “Yes.”

Jacob stayed awake until their son was done feeding as Rook stilled in the darkness, presumably falling back to sleep. He placed Jake back in his crib, and crawled back into bed to go back to sleep.
Rook actually stayed awake for a very long time, thinking, reflecting. She would keep their family safe if it was the last thing she did.

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“Hey baby,” Rook greeted, approaching Jacob from behind and wrapping her arms around his waist. “How’s your day going?”

“Not bad,” he told her distractedly. “Just doing food inventory.” Rook looked around the room, frowning. There was a little bundle of blankets in a small depression made of arranged boxes of canned tomatoes.

“Where’s Jake?” Rook asked casually. There was no cause for concern. Yet. Jacob’s head snapped up.

“He’s right…” The color drained from Jacob’s face. His skin was usually very pale, the curse of being a ginger, but now he was white as a sheet, even the color of his many freckles had gone dull gray. “He was right here,” Jacob told her, tossing blankets aside, panic in his voice. “He was right here.”

Jacob was glancing frantically around the room, terror etched on his usually stoic features. He started scratching at one of the many old burn wounds that he still picked at and made bleed when he was anxious or angry.

“Hey, it’s alright,” Rook told him, grabbing him by the arm, but he had already managed to rip a scab off, already looked pained and afraid at the thought of his son being missing. “It’s a bunker, there’s only so many places he could be and he’s not, you know, ambulatory. Someone probably offered to carry him around for a bit and you didn’t hear because you were working,” she suggested amicably.

“Are you implying I let my son be taken?” he growled ferociously in response. Rook blinked once and then her temper snapped.

“First of all, do not take that tone with me. Secondly, I’m not implying anything. So settle down. We’ll find him, but panicking and arguing aren’t going to help anything. Now. You calm down, I’m going to ask around. I’m sure someone is just holding him. It’s fine. We’ll be fine. Get a bandage on this, please?” she asked, holding his forearm gently and indicating the injury he had done to himself which was slowly oozing blood. With that, she turned on her heel, not waiting for any argument. “Hey Cheryl,” Rook greeted, trying not to sound panicked. The kind woman who had once unwittingly sold Rook the pregnancy test that told her of the existence of Jake smiled brightly at her.

“Here to pick up your baby, I take it?”

“Yes, actually, do you know who has him? We, er, lost track.”

“Losing sleep will do that to you,” Cheryl told her conspiratorially. “Last I saw your friend Sharky had him.”


“One and the same,” Cheryl assured her.

“Huh. Okay. Thanks, Cheryl.” The thundering of Rook’s heart slowed a bit, but she was still confused. Why would Sharky, of all people, be holding Jake? It was usually the women in the bunker who bickered and fought over who got to hold the baby now that he was old enough to be passed around.
Sharky was not in the commons, or the cafeteria, or the game room. No one had seen him for at least an hour. Rook knocked on his and John’s door, but there was no response. She knew John spent a large amount of his time in the gym, so she went there next.

“Hey, John, do you know where Sharky is?” she asked, trying to seem nonchalant, especially in the face of John Seed wearing nothing but tight running shorts. They left little to the imagination, and much as she generally found him grating, even in the midst of her panic over her missing child, she couldn’t help but appreciate his physique and the moving art painted on his arms and chest and legs. He was poetry in motion, she thought as she watched him slowly move through a Tai Chi form before accelerating his actions into a Tae Kwon Do maneuver and slamming his foot hard into a punching bag. He hopped back lightly, shaking his legs out and wiping sweat off his brow.

“Haven’t seen him since lunch,” he told her, panting a bit. “Said he had something to do.” John frowned, looking at Rook’s face finally. John Seed was a master at reading faces and he read hers with frightening accuracy. “Is everything alright? You look…troubled, Deputy.”

“I…I’m sure everything’s fine, it’s just…Jacob and I don’t know exactly where Jake is. Cheryl said she saw Sharky with him.” John’s eyebrows rose and he got an odd expression on his slim face.


“Yeah, that was my first thought too.”

“I’ll help you find him,” John told her, pulling a gray t-shirt and black sweatpants on. Together the unlikely pair walked down the hallway, asking anyone they encountered if they had seen the resident pyro. “There is one place he goes sometimes when he wants to be alone. It’s down this hallway.”

“What’s it used for?” Rook asked, frowning. John smiled back at her.

“It’s the garden,” he told her. “It will take a few more months for it to really be established, which is why I hadn’t told anyone about it, but given enough time it will grow lettuce and herbs for us.” He stepped lithely into a small, blue-lit room off of a large storage area. The glow of grow bulbs gave the room an almost ethereal atmosphere.

“Really?” Rook said dryly when she spotted a healthy-looking pot plant. John shrugged.

“It’s not like we have access to Prozac anymore. It works great for anxiety.” Rook rolled her eyes and continued stepping forward. They heard soft singing and Rook could see Sharky’s arched back where he sat on top of a crate marked “SOIL.” He was back to wearing his old hoodie, which someone had painstakingly added a zipper to where it had been torn by cultists. Rook suspected it was John, but didn’t want to make him defensive by asking. No one lived in Montana and had clothes that well-tailored without knowing how to sew themselves.

When Rook heard Sharky’s rough voice singing an old song as a lullaby, she stopped the furious ‘Where the fuck is my baby?’ that she wanted to blurt out.

“I fell in to a burning ring of fire, I fell down, down, down, and the flames went higher,” Sharky sang, off-key and flat, but with genuine affection in his voice. Jake gurgled happily as Rook and John approached. “And it burned, burned, burned, the ring of fire, the ring of fire…”
“Sharky?” John asked first, hands on his hips. Sharky jumped and turned to them with a guilty look. Jake was bundled comfortably, and quite safely against his chest, tiny cheeks red and a precious smile on his face as he reached up and grabbed a handful of Sharky’s goatee. Sharky went very red himself, sniffing and starting to stand.

“Oh, uh, hey. Hey Rook.” He pointedly did not greet John.

“Sharky…why do you have my baby down here?” she asked him. He was clutching Jake protectively, possessively and he turned his body half away from her.

“I, uh, no reason,” he said, but it did not assure her.

“Give me my baby, Sharky,” she commanded, tone reasonable, but firm. He looked at her with sad eyes, his brunette hair plastered flat to his head in the warm room.

“I…” He stepped back when Rook stepped toward him, her protective motherly streak nearly at the end of its patience for the day. If she didn’t get her baby back in her arms in the next ten seconds, heads were going to roll.

“Sharky, give me my baby, right now!” Tears, Rook realized, were gathering in Sharky’s eyes. Thrown off-guard at the sudden show of emotion, she tried a different tactic. “Sharky? Please just tell me what’s wrong. I want my baby to be safe. I know he’s probably hungry, and tired. I’m tired. I just want to go get some dinner, and I want my baby. Please.” Sharky opened his mouth and a shuddering gasp came out.

“I’m sorry, Dep,” he told her, voice wobbling with tears, stepping forward and handing her Jake carefully, wiping his nose and his eyes with a sleeve, deliberately not looking at John. “I just…”

“Oh fuck,” John muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose tightly and closing his eyes. Rook turned to him, frowning.

“Are you responsible for this?” she demanded, holding an outstretched hand to indicate Sharky’s dejected appearance. John hissed in a breath through clenched teeth.

“Partly,” he admitted with a sigh.

“It’s nothin’, ‘s not important,” Sharky said through a throat rough with emotion. He wiped angrily at his eyes again, clearly embarrassed. Rook stared imperiously at John.

“Explain.” John glanced at Sharky, then at Jake, then at Rook.

“I told him…we discussed…he said…I don’t…” He huffed out a sigh and his shoulders rounded in defeat. “Sharky wants to have a baby and I told him I didn’t want to, okay? That’s the big mystery. That’s why he’s so upset, and it is, apparently, why he kidnapped your child.”

“Sharky, is that true?” Sharky nodded his head miserably, looking for all the world like a child that has been informed that their favorite toy has been destroyed. The broken look on his face made tears well in Rook’s eyes, which upset Jake, which… “Oh, please, please, no,” Rook begged, rocking her baby frenetically to try to stop the tears, but Jake let out a piteous wail and…her shirt was stained. “Goddammit,” she griped, looking down at the two concentric wet circles now on her shirt. She looked heavenward, or ceilingward anyway and sighed. “Sharky,” she began, “you and John have not been dating long enough to have that conversation yet.”

“Thank you!” John blurted, but Rook cut him off with a cold look.
“I understand why he wants to wait or…” Rook glanced at John to make sure a baby in future was actually a possibility before continuing. He shrugged noncommittally, looking conflicted. “Sharky, if I could have it all to do over again, I would not have had a baby this soon. Don’t get me wrong, I love Jake and I love Jacob, but children are better off when they’re planned for. It puts a lot of stress on a relationship. On you. And...if you haven’t noticed, you’d have to have a willing surrogate. Take a breath, bud. Look, you can take Jake anytime you want, but you have to tell us first. I’m fine with you babysitting. Hell, it’ll help you both make up your minds about having a kid if you do. So, um, that’s the extent to which I’m going to butt into this relationship. I’m gonna go change my shirt. You two should probably, I don’t know, talk or something. Anyway. I’m going to take Jake to my room before Jacob has an aneurism.”

“Hey Dep?” Sharky asked, voice still rough.

“Yeah, Sharky,” she called back from where she was already walking out of the room.

“Can I have him again tomorrow morning?”

“You can have him all night if you’ll wake up to feed him,” she told him drolly. He have John an excited, joyous look. John just glared at him.

“Absolutely not,” he told him, giving Rook a nasty glance. With that, Rook left, wanting no part of the conversation, or, more likely the argument, that was about to happen.

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“Give me a year, at least,” John pleaded. “Please. I want time, just you and I. We’ve got all the time in the world, seven years down here, guaranteed. I know it’s important to you and I don’t want to lose you over this. Don’t you just want to enjoy getting to know one another?” His bright blue eyes were achingly sad as he put a gentle hand on Sharky’s elbow.

“Well, yeah,” Sharky said sheepishly, “But you made it sound like you didn’t want a kid ever.”

“I…I don’t think I’d make a very good father,” John admitted a little sadly. Sharky bumped his fist into John’s shoulder, mood lightening.

“That’s the thing, man, I could be the father and you could take the role of mother if you’re worried about being the father.”

“I am not going to be anyone’s mother,” John assured him with a look of annoyance, but his eyes were twinkling. “If anything you should be the mother, what with your baby obsession.”

“You say that like I wouldn’t totally rock being a mom,” Sharky said proudly. John chuckled.

“I’m sure you will. But not right now, okay?” He leaned over and kissed Sharky on the forehead tenderly.

“Okay,” Sharky agreed.

“Besides,” John continued with a wide, toothy grin. “We’ve got nephews to spoil before we have a child of our own. Rook said she’s fine with you babysitting Jake, so you’ll get your baby fever sated with holding him.”

“You’ve got me there.”
“Come on,” John persuaded, tugging Sharky deeper into the garden room and tugging at his hoodie with sudden passion. “I’ve got something for you to hold,” he murmured into his ear suggestively, biting it gently, “and it’s definitely not a baby.”

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Rook found Jacob where he was still scratching nervously at his burns, face taut. He ignored her and took Jake from her immediately, holding his son close and muttering little affectionate things in his ear as his huge hand enveloped the back of Jake’s head. He closed his eyes for a moment and tilted his head up, and Rook thought she could hear him mutter, “Thank you,” either to God or to fate or to someone else. Regardless, she wordlessly grabbed antiseptic and bandages.

“You alright?” she asked him, recognizing from that haunted look in his eyes that he had been fighting off a panic attack. He placed Jake gently in his crib and held his arm out tamely so she could wrap it.

“I’m okay now,” he told her in a strained voice. “Where was he?” Rook laughed.

“You won’t believe me if I tell you.”

“Try me,” he growled. She met his eyes and cupped a hand on his face.

“You have to promise me not to kill him if I tell you, wolf man,” she teased. “Sharky’s got baby fever. Wants a kid so bad he almost cried about it. He and John got into it, so he took Jake to have some time with a baby. Joke’s on him, he’s now made himself our official lead babysitter.” Jacob rolled his eyes. “Oh, come on, he’s harmless. You should have seen the way Jake looked at him when he sang to him,” she told him. Jacob looked profoundly jealous.

“The boy needs to stay with his parents,” he pouted, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Not when his parents have work to do and there’s free babysitting available. Come on. It’ll be good for John, too.” Jacob chuckled.

“I’m having a hard time imagining John holding a baby.”

“That’s because he hasn’t yet,” Rook laughed. “I think he might be a little scared of them.”

“I think he might be scared of breaking them,” Jacob muttered, expression going distant.

“I think he’ll do fine,” Rook smiled, cuffing Jacob lightly on the jaw. “He just needs time. After all, you did alright.” He kissed her hand and bumped his forehead against hers.

“Thanks, pup. I love you.”

“I love you too.”
I'm Sorry

Chapter Summary

John encounters enemies in the bunker.

Chapter Notes

Alright folks, I've pretty much got Jacob patched up, though I may do one more character developing chapter for him, and Joseph is one I will be tackling in a couple of chapters since he's quite an enigma, but this chapter and the next ones are meant to finalize John's character development so he's not just an enormous asshole like he is in the game.

Which means bad things have to happen to him. This chapter is about as far from wholesome that's not smut as you can get without there being outright torture.

So, be advised of the following:

TW: physical violence
TW: description of injury
TW: chasing/tormenting of main character
TW: attempted murder of main character

You've been warned.

“All concerns of men go wrong when they wish to cure evil with evil.” -Sophocles

Studies as recent as 2018 have shown that the first and best thing to do in the event of a disaster, especially of a particularly horrifying or apocalyptic nature, is to throw a party. It shores up morale and creates stronger community bonds. Which was why a beleaguered Joseph and Jacob Seed were helping make tacky decorations from empty cans and string. Though they had not thrown a party straight after the bombs falling, six months into their captivity below ground seemed as good a time as any. Rook and Megan were directing the whole operation, rearranging tables in the common area and planning for food to be made especially for the party. The whole thing was a celebration of life, a baby shower and collective “hooray we’re all still alive” party rolled into one event.

There were only between fifty and seventy-five people in each of the Gates, and on average five per smaller private bunker, so not much life was left in Hope County, but the fact that there was any left was cause for celebration. Each of the Gates had planned a party as well, Faith’s Gate to celebrate (or mourn depending on one’s opinion of him) the fact that Hurk Jr had somehow made it out of his dad’s bunker and to the gate safely using a radiation suit that had been duct taped
and sprayed with lead paint in places. It was crude, but it had worked.

Jacob’s Gate, though missing its namesake, had colloquially become known as Wolf’s Den 2.0. This group of survivors celebrated the fact that, much to everyone’s surprise, Eli and Mary May were expecting a child. They had kept their whole affair very hush-hush, though it turned out they had been talking to one another before things had gone south and the cult had turned violent. Trapped in a bunker together with nothing but time, feelings that had been ignored for months resurfaced and soon there was a secret, but blossoming romance and…with no reliable form of birth control readily available in the bunker, one thing led to another and Mary May was due to have a child of her own four months from the day of their party.

People were happy and many of those who once had refused to get along had settled their differences, had set aside prejudices and the sins of the old world and each celebration was, largely, a success.

But, unknown to Rook, there were still a few bad apples in the barrel that was John’s Gate. Some sins, it appeared, were too severe to forgive.

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John Seed was not much of a partier. At least he wasn’t anymore. There was a time when he would have stayed out until three in the morning getting drunk, high and laid as part of his normal operations, but then Joseph had found him and, for the most part, tried to save him from himself. He had sworn off all that, stopped using the drugs, stopped letting himself be used or using any willing body and instead chosen to fill himself with God. He had tried to, anyway. Religion, the same as drugs, or alcohol, or relationships or chocolate, was just one more temporary cork with which human beings attempt to plug the hole in their souls. No one really knows if humans are born that way, or if they carve the hole out on their own with their sins, or with the pain inflicted by others, but regardless, there is a bone-deep void in every human that they will always, always feel compelled to fill.

Lately John’s hadn’t felt so gaping, even though he had stepped away from his religion a bit. Nonetheless, he carefully avoided the loud party happening down the hall and was instead in the gym working on his biceps. He could hear the booming of the bass where music was being played enthusiastically in the commons and rolled his eyes and chuckled. Of course Sharky would make sure some disco was played. He curled the weight he was holding back up and held it for a moment before letting out a breath through his teeth and relaxing his arm.

“You’ve got good form,” said a small, familiar voice.

“Melody, right?” John asked as he smiled and turned to greet the person who had addressed him, setting down the dumbbell. He recognized her. Of course he did. She was his dirty little secret. He loved Sharky, but Melody was very, very nice to look at, and she knew it too. She spent much of her time in the gym as well, and always made a point of setting up her yoga mat just in front of wherever John was working out. She and he had shared flirtatious gazes, had chatted once or twice. John had originally intended to proposition her for the threesome Sharky had promised him, but the selfish part of him wanted her for his own, didn’t want to share her company. The dirty, greedy side of him didn’t want to admit to Sharky that he’d like very much to have his way with Melody with Sharky nowhere near the room.

But he loved Sharky. So it would never happen. He cleared his throat as her eyes glanced appreciatively over his body.

“You remembered my name,” she commented with a little smile. She had been a
Resistance member, he recalled, one he had captured but that Rook had freed before he had ever diagnosed her sin. He suspected he knew which it was, regardless. She eyed him lustfully and smiled, approaching him and touching his arm, squeezing the muscle gently. Her hand was warm. John swallowed. “You know you’re missing the party.” He chucked and raised and lowered his eyebrows in a facial shrug.

“I don’t party so much anymore. I figured I’d show up the last few minutes, just to make my partner happy.”

“Oh? That’s disappointing.” John cocked a brow, unsure of her meaning. “I heard you celebrate very enthusiastically,” she purred, running her hand from his bicep to his chest and down, down, down to his groin. He stood abruptly to remove her touch, his cock silently screaming at him in frustration when he did so. He felt it twitch with interest so he stepped back, adjusting his shorts.

“I, uh,” he laughed nervously, “I think you may be misunderstanding my intentions, I…”

“Oh I understand perfectly,” she told him, tone and expression going cold, dangerous. John startled when he realized that she had slipped a knife from somewhere and was now holding it threateningly toward him. “I understand that you’re an evil, prideful son of a bitch who hasn’t paid for his crimes. I understand that your men killed my little sister.” John heard footsteps behind him now and his heart began to thunder loudly in his ears. He looked over one shoulder and recognized the angry, hateful faces of the Resistance members who had insulted him with their conversation a couple of months ago. “And I understand,” Melody continued harshly, face drawn into a snarl, “that you have to pay for what you’ve done. You’re a monster, John Seed.”

“Now look,” he started reasonably, hoping his silver tongue could save him the way it had so many times before, but the men and women were closing in on him, five in total. He held his hands up, palms out in a placating motion. “I know you’re angry, but I’m trying to change. I’m really trying. I…I understand if you want to hurt me, beat me,” he told her, softening his gaze to attempt to gain pity, “But hurting me just brings you to my level.”

“Don’t you dare preach to us about hurting others, you rat bastard.” Out of nowhere a fist struck John hard in the jaw, knocking him off balance and to the floor. He accepted that he was about to get the beating of his life, knew that they wouldn’t be happy until he was lying on the ground, black and blue and sorry for what he had done. He was already sorry, but perhaps they thought that hurting him would make them feel better about it. Arrogant to the last, he chuckled bitterly until one of them stomped on his ribcage. He curled in on himself, wincing as blows began to rain down on him. A foot slammed into his guts and he wheezed, the breath knocked out of his lungs. Like a lamb led to slaughter, John didn’t cry out for help, didn’t scream, just let them beat him, let them take their anger out on him. He deserved it, he figured absently in a small part of his mind he had walled off from the pain. It was hardly the first time he had been beaten.

Another blow broke John’s nose, another shot pain deep into his being as a foot or a fist made contact with his groin. He took the beating, repeating “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” over and over again until his teeth were slick with his own blood and one eye was swollen shut. They all stepped back and John flopped onto his back, gasping for breath through his mouth, agony coursing through him. He held up a hand to stop them, to keep them at bay.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, trying to suck in a full breath and feeling something flutter painfully in his chest. They stared down at him with disgust, their fists stained red with his blood, but they didn’t hit him again. He felt relief flow through him.

It was over. They were done.
“Hey Sharky, where’s John?” Rook asked her friend with a smile as he bounced Jake on his knee happily.

“Eh, probably in the gym. He said he didn’t want to come. I talked him into coming up toward the end of the party though, so we should see him eventually.”

“How. Well, we’re still missing a few people. Rod, Tanner. And have you seen Mike and Lauren?” Sharky shook his head. Rook’s stomach flip-flopped. Something was wrong. Those four had consistently stayed to themselves, refused to eat or drink with former cultists, and preferred the company of themselves to other Resistance members with few exceptions. Still, they had started to warm up lately, weren’t so averse to being in the same room as cultists. Maybe they just didn’t want to deal with the crowds. Rook shrugged. Hopefully they were off enjoying themselves somewhere. She’d have to save them some cake.

Ten minutes or so later, Earl approached Rook, looking worried.

“Where are Rod and Tanner?” he asked her. Her stomach sank again, sensing trouble. Sometimes she hated having cop instincts.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Why?”

“Because I don’t see John here either and they hate him. I’m fairly certain they want him dead, though I don’t know that they would act on it. I’ve been keeping a close eye on them, but them and him not being here is making me nervous, Rook.” Rook’s expression went dark.

“You don’t think they’d hurt him, do you?” she asked. He met her eyes seriously and then scanned the crowd, hoping against hope to see John walk in, all toothy smiles and charming witticisms. Earl sighed.

“I don’t know.”

---

Someone grabbed John under the arms and he gasped as he felt a cracked or broken rib shift with the movement. They drug him toward the door of the gym and he tried to grab the frame.

“Where are you taking me?” he slurred painfully, tongue thick in his mouth. He desperately scratched at the doorframe as they yanked on him to make him release it. He felt a nail tear, but what was one more injury in the midst of all the others?

“To atone for your sins,” one of them said cruelly, to the laughter of the others. Someone grabbed him by the ankles now and they jerked him upstairs, his head hitting the metal edges of each step dully, his clothing torn by the non-slip tread on the surface of each step until it started to scratch his skin. Weakly, he plead for mercy.

“We’re going to make sure you don’t hurt anyone else ever,” one of them promised him. He realized now, as he had not before when they first started hitting him, that they were not out for his blood. They were out for his head. They weren’t sated with hurting him, they were going to kill...
them. Frantic now, sudden adrenaline pouring through his veins, he screamed and shrieked, crying for help as they clawed and grabbed at him. Before they could get him up to the top level, John managed to escape, throwing a barrel of cleaning liquid in front of the group before he slipped and tumbled haphazardly down the stairs, feeling his ankle shatter. A sob racked out of him and he grabbed the stair railing, dragging himself back down. If he could just reach the party, if he could just get in earshot, if he could just call out to Sharky, or Jacob, or Earl or Rook.

“Help me!” he screamed, stumbling with a little huff of air. He hiccupped and kept trying to run one-legged, using the railing for support, “Sharky! Sharky!” he screamed. He heard the footsteps behind him, heard them all muttering to one another, knew they would catch up to him. He spared a glance over his shoulder, felt horror rush through him. Melody snatched his wrist and twisted it in a sudden jerk, forcing him to the ground to prevent his wrist from being broken. “Melody,” he gasped out, “please.” But the cold eyes staring into his had no mercy to spare.

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Sharky heard or felt a distant scream and his entire being being shuddled.

“Shit,” he muttered under his breath. He looked up and met Rook’s eyes. “I think somebody walked over my grave,” he said as he looked at the goosebumps forming on his arms.

“Yours or someone else’s,” she said breathlessly as she grabbed him by the arm and tugged on him. “We have to go. We have to find John right now. Something’s wrong.”

---

They drug John inexorably back up, up, up the stairs, ignoring his cries for mercy, muffling his screams for help with their sweaty, bloody hands. He struggled like a wild animal, kicking and thrashing, terrified.

John knew exactly where they were taking him, knew exactly how they intended to kill him. Joseph’s words echoed through his mind like a mockery.

“I’ve seen you die young. I’ve seen you die old…”

“Please,” John sobbed on his knees as one of them yanked his key off his neck and turned it in the door. “Please, don’t do this.”

None of them said anything as they threw him outside into the terrible, waiting arms of the nuclear apocalypse of Hope County, and slammed the door behind him.
Let The Water Wash Away Their Sins

Chapter Summary

John realizes he has always had a choice about who he can be.

Chapter Notes

Alright, this finishes up John's character development, so I shouldn't be doing any more mean things to him. :) It's Joseph's turn next, but his character development takes a different path than violence.

TW: mention of sexual assault
TW: mention of abuse
TW: drug-induced hallucination/dissociation

John scratched desperately at the cold metal door, banging and screaming until his throat was hoarse. He slumped with his back against it finally, defeated. The snippet of sky he could see beneath the concrete awning that covered the bunker’s entrance was eerily bright, though it was clear it was nighttime. Stars twinkled dimly through the brightness of the atmosphere where charged atomic particles put on a colorful dance of light across the sky, tearing through it like scissors through paper. It was beautiful, John thought as he breathed in air he was sure would kill him.

Wind kicked up suddenly and he coughed when sand blew into his face. He shielded his eyes with his arm and coughed again when he smelled the sickly sweet scent of Bliss. Jacob and Joseph had told him about this. John did not think he would be lucky enough to be saved by it, but at least the euphoria would let him sleep. Perhaps he would die of the radiation poisoning before he died of thirst or starvation. The fallout would still be toxic, but not skin-melting as it would have been right after the bombs were dropped.

John sucked in a lungful of the purplish magenta haze and collapsed, unconscious, against the door.

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“What the fuck is going on down here?” Rook demanded, pulling her sidearm on five very guilty-looking people. Earl followed after her closely.

“Where is John?” he asked, face going pale. One of them that he hadn't even suspected of hating John, Melody, scoffed and glanced at the bunker door.

“He’s dead.”

“Get that door open right now! Jacob, go get Joseph and Sharky, let Dr. Allen know we’ll have someone coming in who got forced outside. Oh Christ, John, I’m coming,” Rook
whispered, using her copy of the key to unlock the door after she quickly yanked a rad suit on.

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The hallucinations from the Bliss made John relive every horrifying memory of his life. Being beaten by his father. The dead-eyed stare of his mother. Being taken from them. Being given to another set of monsters. Being separated from his brothers. Being given to yet more monsters. He learned at a young age that humans and monsters were one and the same. The endless beatings, the tortures. Self-flagellation, and memorizing Bible verses. Sobbing to a God he hadn’t been sure he actually believed in when he was sexually assaulted in a back alley in college. Hardening himself, thinking that perhaps if the abuse was his choice it wouldn’t make him feel so empty inside. Endless nights spent sleepless, using drugs and alcohol and sex to numb his pain. Every slight, every injustice replayed like a movie in his mind and he realized that it was still him who made the choice to be evil. He had convinced himself he only had the capacity to be a monster. He realized now, at death’s door, that it was not his only option. He had changed completely.

John found himself sitting in his parlor chair, trembling, strapped in place, terrified. He blinked in confusion and then met his own eyes, cold, merciless. Monstrous.

“I’ve waited a long time to get you in my chair,” he told himself, smiling and picking up his tattoo gun. “You know, I’ve thought long and hard about what sin to carve into your flesh. Sure, you claim ‘sloth’ on your chest, ‘lust’ above your cock, but what is your sin, really?”

“All of them,” he whispered, hands gripping the arms of the chair tightly enough to make the leather squeak. His other self laughed, but the smile on his face was cold and uncaring.

“Luxuria, gula, avaritia, tristitia, ira, invidia, superbia,” he rattled off, caressing the tattoo on the back of his hand. He chuckled coldly. “Those and more. So much more, John. ‘There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to Him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers.’ It’s all right there in Proverbs…Tell me, self, which of those are you innocent of?”

“None,” he muttered truthfully. John met his own eyes and smiled gently, feeling a sense of peace suffusing him. “But there is one power that reigns over all sin, one force that can wash away guilt, one divine state that has set me free,” he told himself from where he sat in the chair.

“What?” his other self asked, face snarling, brows furrowed together, knuckles going white on the tattoo gun.

Standing, John pulled free of his bonds, taking the tattoo gun from himself and tracing a word across his own chest.

LOVE.

“You have to love them, John,” came a soft voice and he closed his eyes tightly, inhaled, feeling euphoria filling him.

John looked up and stepped into himself, shaking away the hatred and bitterness he felt come with the sensation. With love came forgiveness, and mercy, and grace. And he would need it all.

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“I’ve got his head, you get those clothes off, we need to rinse him off, now!” came
“Make sure those assholes stay right there, Earl. Here, Sharky, throw that away, it’s contaminated.”

“Lord, please grant him your strength, and your healing. Put your righteous hand on him and pull him from the mouth of death,” came Joseph’s soft voice, praying aloud. John groaned softly, head lolling. He felt hot water spraying him, felt someone holding him up.

Sharky was getting soaked, his clothing sticking to him as he held John upright. His jaw was clenched hard and his fingers dug desperately into John’s shoulders.

“You’re alright, you’re alright, you’ll be alright,” he was muttering into John’s ear, kissing him occasionally as he let the hot water rinse contamination off John’s skin, heedless of his own safety in being in contact with him. John shook himself, realized his body didn’t ache as badly as it should for the beating he had received. He prodded his own ribs and realized that the wound was already starting to heal.

“Murder is not allowed in this bunker,” Rook declared to the five detained men and women. She glared at each of them and Earl kept his gun in his hand, ready to shoot one of them if they decided to turn violent. They looked frightened, glancing to one another. They hadn’t considered the consequences of their actions.

Rook looked to John suddenly.

“I don’t know about you, John, but I’d like to chuck all of these fools outside just like they did to you.” She turned back to them and finished her thought. “An eye for an eye,” she threatened nastily. John put a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“No,” he murmured and she looked at him in surprise. “No.” He met his brother Joseph’s eyes. “There is no God like my God, he who pardons sin and forgives the transgressions of his people. He does not stay angry forever, but delights in showing mercy. He has compassion on us, he treads upon our sins and hurls all our iniquities into the depths of the sea,” John quoted, a verse he had long had memorized but had never truly embraced.

This was not, Rook realized, John Seed standing in front of her. This was a new man. This was a reborn man, a man made not of hate, and anger, and pride, but of kindness, and mercy, and love. The man he was supposed to be.

“We must celebrate and be glad,” Joseph said with a soft smile that reached all the way to kind blue eyes as he put a hand on each of his youngest brother’s shoulders, “This brother of ours was dead, and is alive again. He was lost, but now is found.” John smiled at Joseph and patted his shoulder, freeing himself gently from his grip. He met the eyes of his attackers and saw shame there.

“Let them live. I have already forgiven them. Let the water wash away their sins,” he whispered, looking pointedly at the showers. “They all need to be decontaminated anyway. They were all by the door.” With that, he turned, and walked away, his footsteps lighter than they had been in years.

John Seed was a new man.
Jacob comes down with a cold.

Rook was awoken by violent coughing next to her. She startled, on edge ever since John had been attacked six months ago. Sure, they had sent the five perpetrators in rad suits and Jacob’s truck over to Faith’s Gate to prevent any more incidents, but still, she worried for her family.

“Hey, you okay?” she asked in the darkness, shaking Jacob’s shoulder.

“Ugh,” was his only response. She flipped on the bedside lamp and looked over at him. His eyes were partially pasted shut with yellow goo and his nose was bright red. She put a hand on his forehead. He was warm.

“How on Earth did you manage to catch a cold in a bunker?”

“I dunno,” he griped nasally, looking cross. Rook stood and opened a drawer, handing Jacob an old t-shirt.

“Blow your nose,” she told him.

“I don’t want to, I just want to go back to sleep,” he snapped.

“Well, I’m gonna go get you a glass of water. You should talk to Dr. Allen in the morning.”

“Megan has an appointment with him for Ethan tomorrow. I don’t want to get their kid sick,” he said roughly. Rook poured him a glass of water and returned, pushing sweaty red hair out of his face tenderly.

“Well, you shouldn’t get ours sick either. No baby until you’re feeling better, ‘kay?” Jacob looked crestfallen for a moment, but nodded.

“Here,” Rook told him tucking another blanket over her fiancé, propping her pillow under his head so his sinuses could drain. He grabbed her arm.

“It’s two in the morning, darlin’. Where are you gonna sleep?” She kissed his forehead gently, palming her hand over his scars affectionately before tapping her forefinger lightly on his bright red nose.

“On the couch. I’ll move Jake into that area with me so he won’t wake you. Get some sleep. I’ll make you some tea in the morning. Love you.” She flipped the lamp off after pushing the crib into the cramped “living room” area that was included in their little section of the bunker.

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Jacob was bundled up to his ears in blankets when Rook awoke and walked into their bedroom the next morning. There were dark bags under his eyes, his nose was an even brighter
shade of red and he looked like a very angry, very snotty grizzly bear where he huddled, shivering, in the warmth of the room.

“You’re burning up,” Rook whispered when she touched his forehead.

“Hmm,” he answered, a noncommittal, grouchy noise. He felt like hammered dogshit. His ears were throbbing, his head ached and he could currently only breathe through one nostril, the right one. No, scratch that, it was stopped up too. He gave a little miserable groan and burrowed down more deeply into the blankets. Rook bustled around their little space and Jacob heard water pouring and then the sound of their microwave. She returned a few minutes later with a hot mug of tea she had poured powdered lemon into. It was hot and tart and burned Jacob’s chapped lips when he took a sip. He grimaced and coughed. “Shit, pup, are you tryin’ to kill me?”

“The vitamin C’s good for you. I know it’s not as good as actual lemon, but you need to drink it. Stay hydrated. I’ll tell you what, I’ll go by Dr. Allen’s clinic and see if he has anything for a cold.”

“Well, even if Dr. Allen thinks it just needs time to run its course, I’ve got something that will help,” Rook told Jacob, who was curled up in the commons area playing a videogame with Sharky, who was also sniffly and had been evicted from John’s space because of it.

“I am not getting sick,” John had told them imperiously when he had dumped Sharky off with Jacob an hour ago. Sharky had pulled him in for a kiss and he had winced, pulling away so that it landed on his cheek and not on his lips. “I love you, but I do not want your germs,” John had insisted. No amount of personal growth on his part would stop him from being a diva.

“What is it?” Jacob asked suspiciously as Rook approached with a bowl of questionable-looking lumps of brown in a yellow-tinted liquid with a spoon resting uneasily in it. She handed Sharky a spoon and went to pour a bowl for him as well, holding up a finger as an indication he should wait.

“It’s an old family recipe,” she confided proudly. “Well, with some modifications, obviously.”

“Hmm,” Jacob said in answer, tasting the soup and pasting a smile on his face. “It’s good,” he assured her. “It’s awful,” he muttered to Sharky who reached his spoon into Jacob’s bowl to try a bite.

“Ugh, Dep, what is in this?” Rook looked genuinely hurt.

“It’s an old family recipe,” she insisted again and Jacob took her hand with a small smile.

“It’s great, sweetheart. Thank you.” He waited until she turned away and punched Sharky hard in the arm, making him spill his soup all over his lap. “Don’t tell her it’s bad, asshole.”

“Shit! Well, at least I don’t have to eat it now,” Sharky muttered darkly, but he gave Jacob a nasty look as he wiped up the mess.

“I gotta get back to work with broadcasts, but I’ll check back with you later today, love,” Rook assured Jacob, kissing him lightly on the forehead.

“Where’s my kiss?” Sharky teased.
“Up your ass, Boshaw,” Rook responded as she sauntered away. Jacob and Sharky sat in silence, playing the videogame together dispassionately.

“So,” Sharky began finally. It was the first time he and Jacob had shared any amount of time together alone. “What’s your story?” Jacob turned his head malevolently toward the lanky firestarter, who ignored the look and blew his nose loudly into his hoodie sleeve. With a huff of disgust, Jacob finally decided that answering would probably lead to less of an annoyance than trying to ignore Sharky.

“What do you mean ‘what’s my story?’”

“As in, how did you manage to go from what I assume was a pretty normal ex-soldier to a psycho brainwashing monster to…well, uh, a dad and a fiancé, I guess.” Jacob had to chuckle at that.

“How much time do you have?” Sharky leaned back comfortably, propping his legs up on the coffee table in front of them and tucking his arms behind his head.

“Tell you what, you tell me something about yourself until your throat’s too sore to keep talkin’, then I’ll have a turn.” Jacob surveyed him for a moment, silently impressed with the confidence of this bizarre man that his little brother and his wife-to-be had both taken a shine to.

“Alright,” Jacob grumbled. “I guess I’ll start with the time I burned down our foster parent’s house…”

“Now that sounds like my kind of story, amigo.” Jacob glared at Sharky for a moment and the smaller man indicated that his lips were now sealed and locked with a motion of his hand before indicating that Jacob should continue.

An hour or so later, once the two were well and truly acquainted with one another, their discussion turned to other things.

“You know, shitty as that soup was, don’t argue, hoss, it was terrible, I gotta admit, I’m jealous.” Sharky got a chagrined, somewhat sad look on his face. “John’s not the lovey-dovey type. Doesn’t make soup when you’re feelin’ sick, doesn’t tuck ya into bed.” Jacob looked at him skeptically.

“Are you kidding me, Boshaw? What do you mean he’s not ‘lovey-dovey’? I have never seen John sew anything for anyone other than himself. I know he fixed your sweater for you, only after giving you, freely, a sweater that cost more than what most people make in a year. My brother…he’s still not the best at expressing himself, but he loves you, Boshaw. He needs encouragement. I, ugh, I can’t believe I’m telling another man this, but, you need to make the effort. Hold his hand. Do something nice for him. He’s scared of doing it still, but if you show him you want it, he’ll give you all the love you could ever want and more. Anyway. I don’t wanna talk about this crap,” Jacob grumbled uncomfortably, having reached his limit of talking about emotions for the day.

“Hey, did I tell you about how Rook and I blew up Joseph’s statue?” Jacob laughed out loud.

“No, but I’d love to hear it. Fuckin’ thing was an eyesore. I told John not to commission it, but Joseph loved it once it was up. He talks a lot about being humble, but that stupid thing really got his dick hard,” Jacob groused with another laugh.
“Well, first we stole one of John’s helicopters, which was a feat in and off itself, but then we gotta meetup to get the explosives where they gotta go. Here I am in my Jeep, driving up while Rook tries to set this thing down, John’s screamin’ over the headset ‘you give me my godam helicopter back or I’m gonna rahrahrahrah’,” Sharky mimicked John’s red-faced expression of anger almost too well and Jacob cackled through a chest-deep cough, “And I’m just prayin’ she don’t hit the Jeep with one of the rotors cuz I’ve got about three hundred pounds of TNT in the back passenger’s seat, and twenty gallons of gas in the back, so shit coulda gone bad quick, you know what I’m sayin’? Anyway, she lands the fuckin’ thing off-kilter because she’s laughin’ so hard at the shit John’s screamin’ at her and it nearly tips over cuz she tried to land it on a hill…”

Rook returned to the common area to the sound of boisterous laughter.

“The kids had never seen so many American soldiers up close, but we started bringing ‘em candy so they wouldn’t be so scared of us. Well, one of ‘em finally works up the nerve to start asking us questions and Santos is loving it, he was great with kids. Well, of course one of the kids asks him ‘have you ever killed a guy?’ and Santos gets all quiet and solemn. Finally he says, ‘Probably. I’m the cook,’” Jacob finished with a good-hearted smack of his hand to Sharky’s shoulder once he delivered the punchline. Jacob and Sharky both cackled at the story, Sharky breaking into a coughing spell as Jacob handed him a glass of water.

“Well, look at you two, thick as thieves,” Rook commented, raising a brow.

“Hey Dep, turns out,” Sharky told her, his usual jovial self as he slung an arm over Jacob’s shoulders to a squawk of protest, “Jacob and I should have been best buddies this whole time. We both love lightin’ shit on fire and gettin’ in fist fights. Hell, if we had Nick and Hurk here, we’d be a whole team.”

“If we had Nick and Hurk here, you would have destroyed this bunker a long time ago, Sharky,” Rook told him with a martyred shake of her head. Sharky still had an arm slung over Jacob’s shoulders and Jacob, amazingly, hadn’t broken it yet. “Huh, you two really are friends now, huh?”

“Why wouldn’t we be, pup?” Jacob asked in a voice rough with sickness and talking too much. He pursed his lips and gave Sharky an irritated look before shaking his arm off. Rook chuckled.

“I guess now that you mention it, it makes sense. Feeling any better?” Jacob shrugged. She put a hand to his forehead. “I think your fever broke, that’s good.” John came out of hiding from around a corner.

“I heard you laughing, thought perhaps you were feeling better,” he said sheepishly. Sharky crossed his arms over his chest.

“Maybe,” he said stubbornly, to a muffled punch from Jacob. Sharky growled at the man, but turned back to John. “I’d maybe feel better if you brought me something to eat?” he asked experimentally. Rook opened her mouth to offer more of the awful soup, but Jacob held up a hand, exchanging a significant look with her.

“I…sure,” John replied, obviously taken aback. “Why don’t you meet me in our room?”

“Alright,” Sharky agreed, standing and untangling himself from the blanket he had burrowed himself into while he and Jacob had talked.
“Oh Christ, Boshaw! You weren’t wearing any pants that whole time?!” Jacob demanded, clearly horrified.

“Hey, nobody said pants were required for hangin’ out,” Sharky told him before slinking down the hallway. Rook’s laughter followed him.

A few minutes later, John entered the room with a tray. On it was a reheated and reseasoned MRE containing chicken noodle soup, crackers and a generic brand chocolate bar. John had also snuck down to the garden and added a fresh sprig of parsley.

“I really hope that’s not an old family recipe,” Sharky told him dryly as he dipped his spoon experimentally into the soup.

“What?” John frowned, confused.

“Nothin’,” Sharky laughed and took a bite. It wasn’t great, but it wasn’t awful. John handed him a glass of fruit flavored punch, which he drank with gusto. “Thanks, babe,” Sharky said softly. John tucked a strand of Sharky’s short brown hair behind his ear tenderly.

“Feeling any better?”


“I…well, yes,” he answered, smiling a little. “I love you too. I’m sorry I didn’t kiss you earlier. I just didn’t want to…” he stopped, wiggling his nose for a moment. “I didn’t want to…” He pulled a handkerchief out and blew his nose delicately. “I didn’t want to get…” John sneezed explosively. “Fuck. I didn’t want to get sick,” he finished lamely. Sharky grinned.

“No worries, Johnny Boy. I’ve got just what you need,” he said, and he shoved his spoon, full of chicken noodle soup, into John’s mouth.
Revelations 22:20

Chapter Summary

Joseph and Megan "explore" the Common area of the bunker.

Chapter Notes

My apologies to anyone religious who may take offense at this chapter. I was raised religious but am atheist now, so it was nice to use my knowledge of the Bible for a bit of banter in the "Biblical" context :D

Also fluff alert. This chapter is entirely Joseph/Megan fluff and very little else.

“We are not,” Joseph laughed as Megan made a grab for his belt buckle, “having intercourse in the chapel, love.”

“Come on,” she goaded him with that perfect smile of hers. “Ethan’s finally old enough to be left with his uncles and aunt. Sharky agreed to keep him all night. He’s got plenty of bottles to feed him with. Loosen up, have a little fun,” she prompted him, pulling him in for a kiss and tugging his hair out of the careful bun he’d put it in as she was wont to do. He gave her a stern look, though its effect was lessened by the fact that his hair poofed out in all directions once freed from the hair tie.

“The chapel,” he told her succinctly as he wrenched the hair tie from her grasp and tucked his hair back into place, “is a place for God. A place to worship Him.”

“I thought we already agreed that God is everywhere,” she taunted, tickling his neck. He eyed her suspiciously, feeling her hand wandering back up his skull toward his…

“Dammit, Megan,” he griped, but she was gone, racing off with his hair tie and giggling.

“Oh, I made you curse!” she called back gleefully. Joseph reddened and automatically pushed a finger up the bridge of his nose to readjust his glasses before he remembered she had absconded with those as well and hidden them somewhere, telling him he had such lovely blue eyes he ought not to hide them behind, what was the descriptor she had used? Ah yes “piss glasses.” He felt a flare of anger and forced himself to calm, flicking a strand of hair that had been freed from the stolen tie to a place firmly behind his ear. She was the only woman in the world who could get him so thoroughly riled up. Well, she was the second anyway. He smiled gently, looking heavenward. He had been sent two angels in his lifetime, and for that he should be grateful. Perhaps, he tried to persuade himself, their union in the chapel would be holy enough not to be disrespectful? God must surely approve of their pairing, or he would not have allowed it, he reasoned.

Joseph pulled another hair tie from his pocket and tamed his wild locks back into another bun. He stepped into the chapel, fingers seeking nervously for the small leather corded
whip he had worn on his wrist for self-flagellation though he knew it was no longer there. Megan had thrown it away more than a year ago now, before the bombs. He still felt so unworthy in the presence of God. Looking around the dimly lit chapel (it was well after ten at night, after all), he sought for Megan, but did not find her. Forehead crinkling, he stepped out the opposite entrance of the large chapel and padded down the hallway in bare feet. Cocking his head to the side, Joseph began to climb the stairs, hearing soft footsteps fleeing. He called for her softly.

“Megan?”

“'The man and the woman heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the breeze of the day, and they hid themselves from him,’” came Megan’s melodious, teasing voice from somewhere nearby. She had minored in religious studies and had memorized many passages of the Bible. Joseph smiled again, chest warming as he bit his bottom lip, affection for Megan flooding him. He responded with the next verse from Genesis three, knowing it by heart.

“'So the Lord God called out to man, 'where are you?'”

“I heard Your voice in the garden,’” Megan answered breathily, “'and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid myself.'” Joseph approached, following the sound of her voice like a lamb follows its shepherd, stepping up the last stair to the fifth floor where the Commons was located.

“I don’t like where that chapter of Genesis ends,” Joseph told her softly. He heard Megan’s soft laughter nearby.

“Come and find me,” she murmured.

From the steps, Joseph ghosted past the door of the gym and down the hallway to the Commons. It was a huge area, the largest in John’s bunker. It took up nearly the entirety of the fifth level. One portion of it was a huge kitchen, complete with ovens, microwaves, an industrial dishwasher, cabinets and sinks. Most of it, however, was a massive open section where tables and chairs were set up in the mornings and it served as a cafeteria. Off the central round hub, however, were nodes for activities, each about twenty by twenty feet. One had several soft, deep couches and televisions, complete with game consoles, another had excellent lighting, with easels, paintbrushes, sewing machines and other objects to allow bored residents to create. Yet another was a cozy nook with upright chairs and bookcases full of books. Another nook could be closed with a double set of doors and was quite soundproof. It contained several instruments, including a drum set and a bass amp, and the walls were padded with soft eggcrate insulation. One more nook, again with a double set of doors, was a small movie theater, complete with every movie and television show John could get his hands on before the Collapse.

When Joseph finally located Megan, she was sprawled, quite naked, on one of the couches in the game area. “How about this verse instead?” Joseph suggested as he sank to his knees in front of her. “'The Lord God said, “It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.'”

“'Then the Lord God made a woman from a rib he took out of the man, and he brought her to the man,” Megan murmured, pulling Joseph closer to her. He kissed the inside of her thigh, running fingers unselfconsciously over stretchmarks, seeing them as things of beauty, though Megan blushed. He met her eyes and pressed his mouth to her slit, lapping his tongue there and tasting her as he pushed his pants off.

“'The man said,’” Joseph murmured into her thighs and kissed her warmth again, “'This is now bone of my bones,'” he sunk his fingers into her hips, “'and flesh of my flesh,'” he
pressed into her warm wetness with a groan of pleasure and pressed his forehead to hers as he bent over her on the soft couch. “I love you,” he whispered.

“‘The man and his wife were both naked,’” Megan quoted, sinking her fingers into the globes of his buttocks, pulling him closer, deeper inside of her, “‘but they felt no shame.’” They kissed one another, tongues pressing into one another’s mouths, competing for entrance. It was a distraction, Joseph realized belatedly, as Megan tugged his hair tie out and flung it across the room, sinking her fingers into his dark brown hair and smiling through the kiss.

Joseph grabbed Megan’s face suddenly, urgently, staring deeply into her eyes.

“Wife?” he asked. She smiled and cupped a hand at his sharp jaw.

“You don’t exactly need a marriage license anymore. I don’t need a ceremony, don’t need a party.” Joseph shuddered as she moved against him, closing his eyes tightly in reverence before looking up again.

“Do you,” he pressed in and then out of her gently, gripping the couch cushion tightly, determined, focused, “Megan Maldonado, take me as your husband?”

“I do,” she whispered, running her fingers lightly down his ribcage. “Do you, Joseph Seed, take me as your wife?”

“I do,” he told her, voice gone thick with emotion and he flipped them so she was sitting in his lap, riding up and down like a conquering angel, come to earth to rain God’s glory upon him.

“You know it’s a sin to worship anyone but God,” Megan teased as she saw the stupefied way he was gazing up at her as though she was the only god he needed. She leaned down and pressed a kiss to his forehead. The edge of Joseph’s mouth tugged upward, and Megan sensed another quotation of scripture coming, which bothered her not at all. Finally, a useful way to use her religious studies minor, she thought with amusement.

“Behold, you are beautiful, my love, behold you are beautiful! Your eyes are doves behind your veil. Your hair is thick as wool, leaping down the slopes of Gilead…your lips are like a scarlet thread, and your mouth is lovely. Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate, your breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle that grazes among the lilies…’” Laughing, Megan clamped a hand over Joseph’s mouth to stop anymore of Song of Solomon from pouring out of it.

“I like Shakespeare and Keats too, you know,” she teased. Removing her hand gently, Joseph finished the portion of the verse he had been quoting.

“You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you. You are perfect.”’” He’s a stubborn one, Megan thought with a grin. She quoted a poem that was not from the Bible.

“Our love it was stronger by far than the love of those who were older than we, of many far wiser than we, and neither the angels in Heaven above, nor the demons down under the sea can ever dissoever my soul from the soul of the wonderful Joseph Seed,’” Megan modified a poem with a breathy laugh. Joseph quirked his brow as he smirked up at her, hands still on her waist as she rode him lazily up and down.

“I think you butchered Poe’s iambic pentameter in that one, my love,” Joseph confided. She chuckled.

“Oh, so our Father reads poetry,” she commented, half-surprised, half-amused.
“One doesn’t need a college education to appreciate the beauty of words,” he muttered, a little embarrassed for a moment at his lack of any formal education. He knew she had a degree in English Literature, so felt himself a bit out of his element. She soothed the feeling with a soft kiss.

“Well, if God gave mankind dominion over all the Earth, I think that includes the entirety of the common area,” she told him, brushing her fingers through his soft hair. “What do you say we claim all of it?” Joseph chuckled, white teeth showing when he smiled.

“I would chide you for delighting in sin, but I doubt it would make a difference in your behavior,” he scolded.

“You’d be correct,” she agreed, pulling off him and scurrying to the next nook.

The two spent the better part of the next four hours claiming every surface of the common area loudly and enthusiastically. Joseph laid, panting, on the floor of the small movie theater, an arm slung over his eyes as Megan petted his sweaty chest and belly, her cheek rested on his inner thigh. She started laughing suddenly, uncontrollably, sitting up. Joseph tilted his head up, confused, his expression only making her laugh even harder. She shook her head, laughing so hard she was struggling to draw in loud gulps of air and then cackling even harder, making him laugh at her laughs.

“What on earth are you laughing at?” he finally asked. She collected herself, but then dissolved into a fit of laughter again before finally stilling enough to answer his question.

“We were quoting Bible verses during sex…and…” she lost herself to a giggle fit again, tears starting to gather from laughing so hard, “and as you were warning me and then cumming into my mouth, all I could think of was the first part of Revelations twenty-two, verse twenty.” With that answer, she started cackling again, holding her stomach as she laughed uproariously. Joseph ran Revelations twenty through his mind until he recalled the specific verse and he turned bright red, but also couldn’t help but laugh.

“He who testifies to these things says, ‘Yes, I am coming soon.’”
Earl and Rook have an idea to make Jacob feel better about being inside.

The cold that seemed to originate with Jacob unfortunately made its way through almost the entirety of John’s Gate. Joseph, nose running and eyes puffy, insisted that he was not sick, that the Lord would protect him from adversity, and spread the virus by sneezing on his assembled followers in the chapel. The immune systems of the huddled masses in the bunker were low. Their only access to sunlight was in a solarium, which allowed them to see the sun, but did not allow them to feel it on their skin. Dr. Allen began pushing vitamin supplements, but supplements could only go so far in replacing being outside.

People, now one year into their stay in the bunker, were beginning to get restless, particularly Jacob.

The inability to be outside, to feel the wind on his face or hear the trees rustling in the wind was slowly driving Jacob mad. Maggie whined next to him when he was feeling particularly restless, shoving her head under his hand and nuzzling them gently. He rocked Jake on his lap and closed his eyes, trying to calm, trying to relax and accept that he was going to be trapped here for a very, very long time. When he thought about it too long while holding Jake, the baby would sense his unease and begin to wail, grieving for a place he didn’t even know existed yet.

“I’ve got something that might help,” Earl told Rook conspiratorially.

“Oh my god, I remember this!” she exclaimed, holding the book excitedly in her hands. “You and dad used to play first edition!”

“Well, I could only find this version,” Earl told her, sounding a bit disappointed.

“Still,” Rook said, eyes twinkling. “I remember being a kid and feeling like I was standing in the forests and castles and dungeons that you or dad described. Your descriptions – it was like I was there.” Earl winked.

“Exactly.”

And so it was, after quite a lot of argument and persuasion, that a ranger (Jacob), a paladin (John), a rogue (Rook), a wizard (Sharky), a fighter (Wren), and a dungeon master (Earl) all sat around one of the tables in the common area moving plastic toy soldiers around on a grid. Several others gathered around the table to watch, including a begrudging Joseph, who still insisted that the game was witchcraft and should therefore not be played, but was clearly too curious to put an end to it.

“You can’t play a paladin as an evil alignment,” Rook argued with John. He gave her a look and raised his eyebrows.

“I pride myself on being the very embodiment of lawful evil, Deputy,” he informed her prettily, wiping a hand over his hair, which was beginning to get unruly. Jacob threw himself into
the game, listening intently as Earl described towering trees, dark forests, shaggy, rustling monsters made of vines. He moved his character confidently around the board, his wolf familiar close by his side both on the board and off. Maggie watched curiously from the side. She had been scolded for chewing up one of the plastic soldiers they were using for their characters and had to be content with watching. Earl as dungeon master was ingenious, taking time to describe the surroundings so that, for a little while, they could exist somewhere that was not the bunker. Even when descending into dark dungeons, the little party at the table, and the gathered onlookers were having fun.

Sharky, of course, was ridiculous, and his usual pyromaniac self, even as a wizard.

“I didn’t ask how big the room is, Earl, I said I cast fireball.” Earl shrugged and rolled some dice.

“Your funeral,” he muttered.

“My character only takes half damage,” Rook blurted quickly.

“And my character would like to leave this room before the fireball goes off,” Wren chimed in.

“Too bad, it’s not your initiative,” Earl told her sweetly.

“Ah fuck. Dammit, Sharky.”

“Sharky? Roll your damage.” There were collective groans at the table as massive numbers of hit points were taken due to Sharky’s carelessness.

“I’m tapping out,” Wren griped. She spent the rest of the game massaging Earl’s shoulders and glaring at Sharky.

“Alright, anyone else want to roll up a character?” Earl offered their audience. Joseph had his arms crossed over his chest, but he stepped forward, still looking skeptical.

“Is it possible to play a preacher?” he asked, to collective eyerolls from everyone in attendance.

“You can play a monk,” Earl suggested, “but you’ll have to let me know which god your character worships.” Joseph looked personally affronted at that, but he sat down at the table and John helped him roll up his character. He ended up being remarkably good at playing, and it was highly entertaining watching the thin preacher play himself as a Dungeons and Dragons character.

They played until late into the night and they were all yawning. Ethan and Jake had long since been tucked in. Jacob shook himself as Earl suggested they stop for the night. He was, he realized, still in the bunker, but it didn’t feel quite so bleak as before. The time, for him, had flown. He felt as though he had only been sitting at the table for an hour or so, but they had been playing for nearly six hours. Earl’s voice was hoarse and raspy and he looked exhausted.

“Alright gang,” he grinned to them all, “Same time next week?”


“Maybe next week we can hook up the radio while we play, let other bunkers listen in, or start one big game?” Sharky suggested. John put his arm gently around his waist and pulled him
in for a kiss on the forehead.

“I cannot believe you got me to play Dungeons and Dragons, you fucking nerd,” he teased.

“That’s not what you were saying last night when you were pretending you were Legolas and I was Gimli,” Sharky answered back cockily.

“Shut up, that is not true! That did not happen!” John hissed, but Rook heard and cackled.

“That’s alright, John, we all know you’re more into the whole werewolf thing,” she teased him.

“You did not tell anyone about your fucking fursuit?” John demanded. Sharky reddened. “Oh Christ.”

So, forest guardian,” Rook purred after Jacob closed the door of their apartment behind him, “Did you have a good time?”

“The best. Was that your idea?” he asked.

“Nope. That was all Earl. Turns out for a old cowboy, he’s actually pretty nerdy. He and my dad played D&D in college and kept playing it even when I was a kid. Tonight was really nice.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, curling next to her in bed and pulling her close. “Really nice.”

When Jacob dreamed that night, he didn’t dream of violence, or being buried alive or any other of his usual nightmares. That night, he dreamed of the forest.
Trouble In Paradise

Chapter Summary

Wren and Earl are arguing a lot lately.

Chapter Notes

So I haven't written a lot about Earl and Wren's relationship because I know very few people stan Whitehorse the way I do, but I may write more about them if I get more interest. This came from my notes and playing out various scenarios in the bunker as I'm working on the overall "plot," which is currently a work in progress.

While most of the couples formed in the various bunkers existed in relative harmony since there were no bills to pay and very few romantic competitors to be jealous about, there was still occasionally trouble in paradise.

“Oh yeah?! Well, maybe you should go stay with Adelaide then, since you like talking to her so much!” came a yell from down the hallway. Rook and Sharky exchanged glances.

“Maybe we should come back later?” Rook suggested.

“That’s a big ten-four, Dep.”

“Well, I’m sorry that I have a sexual history with her, Wren, but I can’t help that the woman is a flirt over the radio.”

“I could have lived the rest of my life without hearing Earl say the words ‘sexual history.’ Let’s get the fuck out of here, Boshaw.” The two scurried back down the hallway away from Earl and Wren’s small apartment within the bunker.

Earl had his hands on his hips, furious. Boomer was looking from him to Wren and whining unhappily. He shoved his nose into Wren’s hip to try to distract her, but she just absentmindedly patted him and kept griping at Earl.

“It would be one thing if it was just flirting, Earl, but you flirt back! And then she has the audacity to ask me what I think of your tattoo!” Earl reddened, spluttered.

“I wasn’t flirting back, I just…responded to her questions.”

“Oh, uh huh, her questions like if your back was still bothering you because if so she could happily do cowgirl position during your next rendezvous?” Earl’s mouth flapped open and shut.

“Christ, Wren, even if we weren’t separated by a nuclear wasteland I still wouldn’t be interested in another roll in the hay with Adelaide Drubman. She’s…a lot of woman. Too much for me, frankly,” he muttered and instantly knew it was a Mistake™ based on the affronted look on
“Oh really,” she began, but Earl puffed out a breath and looked deeply apologetic.

“That came out really, really wrong,” he admitted, holding his hands up palms out in defense. Wren crossed her arms over her chest, but she was listening, skeptical. “I’m not interested in Adelaide Drubman,” he promised her, stepping forward and enveloping her tiny hands in one of his own large ones. “I’ll tell her she’s out of line the next time she makes…inappropriate comments to me on the radio.” A nervous laugh bubbled out of him. “Lord knows that’ll mean she won’t be able to talk at all. Most of what that woman says is inappropriate.” Wren relaxed, but still looked distrustful. Jealous, she knew, did not look good on her, but Earl’s last transmission with Adelaide had really pissed her off. Wren and Earl had been arguing a lot lately, always behind closed doors, always in their apartment, and she knew her insecurity was only deepening the problem. But she and Earl had been together for nearly two years now and he still hadn’t said them. The words. Eight letters. Stubbornly, she had refused to say them too, was still old-school enough to believe that the man ought to say them first.

But Wren had still communicated them in her own way, with little actions, little expressions of affection. She’d said them with her fingers when she massaged his shoulders when he was stressed. She’d said them with her cooking when she took the time to add her own twist to their food. She’d said them with her body when she had curled up beside him at the end of every day, cleaving to him. She’d said them in every way but words and she just couldn’t take it anymore.

Wren didn’t know where she stood with Earl, not really. He was a private man, stoic and not a fan of sharing or talking about feelings. Which left her to wonder if he was only with her because she was a warm hole attached to a fairly attractive body and his options were limited while stuck in a bunker for the next five or so years.

Earl sighed deeply, taking his hat off and running his fingers through his remaining hair, which had gotten significantly longer. He’d begun to grow a full beard too instead of just a mustache. It suited him, even with the silver and white streaks growing in it.

“I…I don’t know where we keep going wrong, you and I,” he admitted softly, not meeting her eyes. “We argue so much recently, and I don’t understand what I did to make you so angry.” The tired, pained tone of his voice nearly killed Wren. She made a choked nose and waited for him to continue. He looked up at her, met her eyes softly, his own tortured. “I…I can’t live without you, Wren,” he admitted gently, hat in hand, looking eternally sad, like a beaten dog. “But I don’t know how to make you happy again. I…I try so hard with John and Jacob and the others, but I don’t know how to help us anymore. If you don’t want me, if you don’t want me around,” Earl stammered, looking anywhere but her face, expression miserable, “I’ll go stay in the main dormitories. I’ll understand.” His voice was rough and his hands were shaking where he held his battered hat. His glasses had long since shattered and were gone, leaving his blue eyes fully visible and vulnerable.

Wren let out a broken bitter breath, choking back a sob.

“I don’t want you to leave, you big dumb bastard,” she told him, her voice just as rough as his. He looked up hopefully, one caterpillar brow quirked. “I want you to tell me you love me,” she explained simply. He blinked.

“Of course I love you,” he whispered, bringing a hand up to cup her cheek suddenly. “Of course I do! Hell, haven’t I, didn’t I…I’ve shown you I love you, Wren. Every time I pull you in close to me. Every time I read through your latest papers even though I don’t understand a word of
‘em, every time I share a meal with you, or hold your hand, or make love to you…of course I love you. Didn’t you already know that?’ Earl’s voice sounded deeply hurt.

“You never say it,” Wren defended herself, cheeks burning, feeling foolish and feeling younger than her many years. Earl stepped forward again, dropping his hat somewhere and cupping her face in both of his big calloused hands, meeting her eyes directly, earnestly. “All those years you stayed with a woman you cared for knowing you had left behind a man you loved,” Wren said, voice dejected, “I thought I was just the same.”

“I love you,” he promised her. Earl kissed her. “I love you.” Earl pulled her in close. “I love you. Rook’s father will always have a special place in my heart, but you’re here, and alive, and wonderful. You’re smart, hell, you’re way smarter than I am. God knows you’re better looking. I never said the words ‘I love you’ because I thought I made it clear that I do, Wren. I love you.” Embarrassed now, Wren tried to break away from him, but he didn’t let her. She looked up at him, eyes still swimming with tears.

“I love you too. You dumb ox,” she added as an afterthought, unable to leave the moment serious. Earl chuckled.

“I love you, you stubborn, ridiculous woman. Can we please stop fighting?” he murmured.

“So long as you know that I’ll punch Adelaide Drubman if she so much as turns an interested eye toward you next time she sees you,” Wren snarked. “And for the record, I think your tattoo is ugly.” Earl chuckled, replacing his hat on his head.

“Yeah, well, you’re one to talk. Most normal people don’t get tramp stamps of mathematical proofs.”

“I never once suggested I was normal, Earl Whitehorse,” Wren responded. “Now that we’ve got all that sorted out,” she said, scratching the back of her head in an embarrassed manner, “what do you want for dinner?” Earl smiled.

“Surprise me.”
Valley of the Shadow of Death

Chapter Summary

Joseph encounters an enemy in the dark.

Two years passed in the bunker in relative peace. The only significant event, aside from the births of Jake and Ethan, was John’s attack, but the community at large had bonded together and moved past it. Jake and Ethan were now trying to walk and babbled happily to one another as they were passed around from resident to resident, beautifully socialized and best of friends. Joseph beamed proudly as Ethan took his first unaided steps and he twisted his mouth wryly when he looked at Megan, who was adamant about only having one child. Hesitant, but determined to keep his wife happy, Joseph had sat in Dr. Allen’s chair, cringing as the doctor did what needed to be done to ensure that Ethan was an only child. He held Megan’s hand tightly, his face white and his hand sweaty. She met his eyes and caressed his jaw gently.

“Thank you,” she murmured, leaning over to kiss his forehead. A few minutes later it was all over, and though Joseph felt lightheaded and sore, he insisted on walking out of the clinic unaided. He spent the next two weeks on a couch with an icepack to his crotch looking testy. Only his most devoted followers dared approach him for conversation, and even those left quickly. Now, a month later, the only residual pain was an odd tugging sensation if he lifted something too heavy, or if he stretched too high. He had been assured that would go away in time. Restless, Joseph asked for a task, wanting something to do. Jacob shrugged.

“Well, we’ve got a bunch of food in the basement that needs checking, if you’re up to dealing with a lot of stairs. We need to make sure no pests have gotten into anything.” Joseph nodded, running fingers through his beard to clear the tangles there absently.

“I can do that,” he said.

“Alright,” Jacob agreed, finding and handing him a clipboard that contained about forty pages of food inventory and a pen. “Take a flashlight. We never did fix the lighting down there,” he advised. Joseph nodded and took one from him with the clipboard.

Making his way gingerly down the stairs, Joseph clicked the flashlight on as he reached the lower levels. He shone the beam on the step in front of him, making his way down carefully. Falling down the stairs this far down would mean waiting a long time for a rescue. Out of habit, Joseph mumbled a short prayer under his breath for his safety. Finally, he reached the lowest level, cracking the door open with a grunt and, with no one around to judge him for it, he put a hand delicately to his groin, lifting and resettling himself in his briefs with a tiny sound of pain. He shook off the discomfort and stepped into the storage area. Boxes and boxes of food were arranged neatly in the area. It was abysmally dark and oddly eerie down here. The only sounds were of Joseph’s breathing. He swallowed, hearing a click in his own throat.

“Yea though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will fear no evil,” he muttered, an old favorite verse. He knew, logically, that there was no reason to be afraid of the dark, but the quiet and the solitude and the vastness of what he knew was above him made him feel uniquely, nakedly alone.
There was a thud. Joseph jumped, his heart beating faster and harder, sweat breaking out on his arms. He cursed himself for not bothering to grab a sweater. It was cold down here. The hair lifted on his arms and the back of his neck. A shiver made its way down his spine. He shone the light haphazardly from side to side, seeking movement.

“Is anyone there?” he asked the darkness. It had been a while since John was attacked, and none of the remaining Resistance members seemed to have any issue with Joseph or his brothers since John’s attackers had been forced out of this bunker. But then again, no one had thought Melody had any problem with John. Joseph heard another thump and pure terror dropped into his gut. He prayed desperately under his breath, backing toward the door where the stairs were, breaths coming hard and fast. He was not alone down here.

Someone or…something was down here with him.

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“Where’s Joseph?” Megan asked Jacob, who had Jake sitting in a backpack on his broad shoulders while he tallied cans of soup.

“Bottom level, went to check for pests. Said he was bored, wanted something to do.”

“Well, it’s about time he started moving around. The procedure is not that big of a deal.” Jacob looked at her resentfully over the top of his clipboard. He was wearing a small pair of reading glasses, half-crescent ones. Megan knew better than to comment on them. Everyone knew better than to comment on them, except Rook, who teased him relentlessly about them. He plucked the glasses from the end of his big nose, folded them delicately and hung them from his shirt collar by one of the bows.

“That’s easy to say coming from someone who did not have their nuts in a doctor’s hand with a scalpel next to them,” Jacob snapped. Megan raised an eyebrow.

“Did I touch a nerve?” she asked with a smirk. He growled dangerously, still wild even after spending two years in relative captivity.

“You gave Rook…ideas,” he griped, moving a hand toward his crotch protectively before he realized what he was doing and he darted the hand to his long, shaggy hair. Megan chuckled.

“You try pushing something the size of a watermelon out of a hole the size of a large grape, then you can complain about things like that,” she told him dryly. He made no comment, just grunted, pulled his glasses back on after attempting, unsuccessfully, to squint and read the words on his chart as means of making it clear he was busy and didn’t want to talk to Megan anymore. Megan sighed and rolled her eyes. She and Jacob had never quite seen eye to eye given that she had been one of the Resistance members he had caught long ago and tried to brainwash at the chalet. “Well, do you have any idea when Joseph will be back?” Jacob looked at her over the top of his glasses, his face one of pure annoyance.

“Anywhere between an hour and six hours,” he answered dryly. “There’s a lot of boxes down there.”

“Well, can you please let me know when he’s back?”

“I’ll send someone to let you know,” he conceded, stubborn to the end.

“You always were one of the strong ones,” Jacob goaded her as she walked away, always having to have the last word. Megan erected a middle finger, and was gone.

Joseph swung the flashlight wildly from side to side, jumping when some of his hair tickled his shoulder. He had lost track of where he was in the room and was trying to locate the steps while not putting his back toward the source of the noise, which was moving around the room threateningly, coming closer and closer and closer.

“Please Lord, keep me safe,” Joseph asked aloud, truly, deeply frightened of whoever was down here, threateningly silent. He finally caught a glimpse of a dark figure and he froze. It ran toward him, weapons drawn. He cried out, stumbling and falling backwards, the flashlight rolling out of reach. Skittering backwards on his butt and hands, Joseph felt solid wall behind him and let out a yelp of terror as it attacked.

“Did you pick a fight with Megan?” Rook demanded a few minutes later, stepping into the room where Jacob was just finishing up his inventory. He swiftly hid his glasses in his pocket to avoid being harassed about them again.

“I don’t pick fights, people bring them to me,” Jacob rumbled.

“Uh huh,” Rook answered skeptically, pulling Jake off his back.

“Mama!” Jake babble delightedly.

“Yes, I’m ‘Mama,’” Rook encouraged with a massive grin on her face.

“Don’t get too excited, he’s been calling me that most of the morning.”

“Don’t be jealous,” Rook said, not looking at him and instead bouncing a delighted Jake up and down. He giggled and babbled happily. She handed him back to Jacob, who took him gently and blew a raspberry into his chubby belly. Jake let out a happy screech and fisted tiny hands into Jacob’s wild red hair, the same shade as his own. “You know if you cut your hair, he wouldn’t be able to do that,” Rook laughed as Jacob cringed. Jake was industriously trying to uproot the tufts of hair he had in his hands.

“Oh, Maggie’s gonna get ya,” Jacob threatened as the large wolf paced forward happily, ears folded down nonthreateningly and tail wagging. She licked Jake’s face and he shrieked until Jacob held him back upright, wiping the drool off his cheek with the end of his shirt. “Come on, buddy, let’s go see Uncle John.”

“Jo!” Jake babbled, the closest sound he could make to “John” yet, much to Joseph’s delight. Speaking of Joseph…

“Hey, Rook, if you see Joseph, can you let Megan know he’s back up. And, uh, if you don’t hear from him in an hour or so, let me know.”

“Okay, babe,” she answered, giving him a quick peck on the lips before he left.
Joseph panted hard, feeling deeply foolish as the soft, friendly creature wormed its way into his lap, bumping its head into his chin after it let go of his boot with its claws.

“Mmrewow,” it vocalized, rumbling against his chest with soft purrs before it started kneading its paws in his lap.

“How did you get down here?” Joseph asked it as he pet it gently. It meowed and bumped its head against him again. He scooted to reach the flashlight and shined it over the two of them. It was a very large solid black cat with luminous yellow green eyes. “Hey kitty, kitty,” Joseph said softly as it started to walk away. It came back, arching its back into his touch as he pet it. “I suppose there won’t be much in the way of pests down here,” he chuckled, feeling himself calm now that he knew what the monster in the dark had been.

Standing, Joseph gave the room a cursory glance and confirmed that no roaches or mice were present. He did find chew marks, but no mice anywhere. The cat must have wiped out the local population. He looked thin, aside from his large frame. He meowed piteously.

“Come here,” Joseph offered, and he picked up the cat gently. It got its claws out, but then relaxed when it realized he meant it no harm. “Let’s bring another follower into the light,” he joked with a small chuckle of laughter.

“Why do you smell like sweat?” Megan asked when Joseph showed up in their quarters.

“It was hot in the storage area,” he lied. Megan frowned.

“What are you holding behind your back?” Joseph smiled and brought the cat into view.

“Oh my god a kitty!” Megan exclaimed. “Let me see him!”

“I was thinking we could name him Lucifer,” Joseph suggested, going a little red. Megan gave him a knowing look.

“He scared the shit out of you when you went down there, didn’t he?” she guessed correctly.

“He…startled me, yes,” Joseph admitted wryly.

And so it was that a cat joined the little band of survivors in the march to Eden’s Gate.
Loud music pounded over the speakers and a variety of laser lights jolted and jittered across the club floor, illuminating faceless, nameless people in the crowd. John straightened his lapels, brushing a tattooed hand neatly down his front. He spotted an attractive, wiry-looking man sipping on a beer at the bar and stepped across the dancefloor to get to him, effortlessly skirting through writhing, warm bodies, smirking when someone palmed his ass on his way. Scantily-clad women were dancing in cages around the floor, lit from beneath by ethereal blue lights. They grinded on the poles, dangling the chains hanging from their wrists enticingly. One of them blew John a kiss. He touched his forehead in response, but kept moving relentlessly toward the man.

The man at the bar was older than John, though not by much. His skin was tanned by the sun and crow’s feet crisscrossed out from the corner of his eyes, showing he was a man who didn’t care about the various skin treatments John used religiously. John met the bartender’s gaze and leaned forward, knowing full-well that his partially unbuttoned shirt would draw the eye of anyone interested in a thin, model-like male. John knew exactly what his baby blue eyes could do, and from the way the bartender searched his face and landed on his pink lips, the man was wondering what John’s mouth could do too.

“Vodka martini,” John ordered, “Dry as the Sahara and dirty as the thoughts running through his mind about me,” he finished, looking over and gesturing at the man drinking a beer, who was undressing him with his gaze. The man chuckled.

“Sorry.” John smiled a winning grin.

“I don’t mind,” he assured him, running a forefinger delicately up the man’s beer glass to capture some moisture before dragging it up his hand and onto his forearm, sending a shiver through the older man.

“So,” the man started, a wry look on his face, “You come here often?” John searched his face with a smile and a little chuckle, looking down for a moment when he laughed.

“Occasionally,” he conceded. “On special occasions.”

“Hmm,” the man said, eyebrows raising, clearly interested as he took a sip of his beer. “What’s the occasion?”


“I don’t see a partner.”

“Not that kind of anniversary,” John purred, standing close to the man, close enough he
could smell the man’s cheap cologne, could feel the heat coming off him in the chill of the air conditioning vent above them. “But I am looking to have a partner,” John mentioned casually. The older man chuckled.

“You may be in luck.” The bartender handed John his drink. Carelessly, John took it, not even offering the bartender another glance. The man scoffed and walked away, seeking out other wealthy patrons to flirt with. John took a deep sip of his drink, enjoying the burn down his throat. The older man turned to look at him, gray blue eyes hooded under aquiline brows. His short brown hair was arranged in a messy style, little care given to how the hair sat, but it still managed to be attractive. He sported a goatee that was well-trimmed and framed his jawline at his chin well. He was, in a word, hot. “What did you have in mind?” he asked, leaning forward with interest and knocking back the last of his beer.

“I was thinking I could suck you off in that bathroom over there,” John suggested. The man’s eyes flickered in excitement and he shifted on the barstool, palming a hand over his crotch to adjust the tent that was beginning to grow there.

“Generous,” the man said, almost off-handed.

“You’ve no idea how generous,” John promised, resting a hand casually on his shoulder and stroking long circles there. He bit his bottom lip, letting his pink tongue flick out and wet them before he blinked slowly, deliberately, a dance of facial expressions promising filth and talent. The man chuckled.

“Let’s go.”

The two made their way across the loud dance hall and into one of the bathroom stalls. John dropped to his knees and unzipped the man’s fly. His dick was completely erect, flushed and red at the end with desperate interest. John chuckled, palming it in his hand.

“Nice,” he complimented. “I’m sure you’ll feel great in my mouth.” He flicked his talented tongue out, caressing the head before engulfing it in in the wet warmth of his mouth. The older man hummed and put a hand on the back of John’s head in encouragement as he began to pump his head forward and backward over his partner’s engorged cock, groaning with pleasure and looking up sensually to meet the man’s eyes, his neck muscles working up a vigorous rhythm.

“Oh fuck,” the man muttered, fisting his fingers into John’s hair now. “I want to fuck your mouth.” John shrugged and the man grabbed his head, steadying him as he wrapped his lips over his front teeth so he wouldn’t scratch. John let the man jab his thick cock in and out of his mouth, grunting and groaning with pleasure as John gagged and precum and saliva spilled down his chin in wet rivulets. The man backed off for a moment to give John a break. John popped his mouth off his dick with an obscene noise, a string of saliva still connecting his mouth to his partner’s thick cock. He took a deep breath, swallowing and clearing his throat. “Jesus Christ, you’re gorgeous,” the man told him, cupping the back of John’s head gently.

“If you’re interested in more,” John said roughly, his throat sore and bruised from being rammed with an enthusiastic cock, “I’ve got a room,” he offered, holding up a keycard and getting to his feet.

“Oh fuck, yes. I want to fuck your tight ass,” his partner hissed. John grinned widely at that.

“Then follow me.”
They made their way to the room. It was rich, without being opulent. A simple bed, simple furniture, but ridiculously nice sheets, soft pillows and tasteful wall colors throughout the space. They wasted very little time getting down to business. In the work of a few moments, they were both undressed, humping one another desperately on the bed, panting and lapping into one another’s mouths, tugging one another’s hair with their hands. When, at last, the older man pressed his thick cock into John’s asshole, he let out a muffled scream of pleasure, enjoying the burning stretch of being forced open and then the ecstasy of his prostate being tapped time and again by his partner’s hard dick.

“Oh yes! Yes, fuck yes! Oh, god, fuck me! Yes! Deeper! Harder!”

“Oh shit, oh fuck, oh god, you’re so tight, oh you’re so hot, I, oh god, I love you so much!” John stopped moving and shot an irritated look over his shoulder.

In an instant the entire fantasy collapsed, the loud music from the club nothing more than a radio playing an old CD, the exotic dancers a video on a laptop, the martini just cheap vodka in a glass tumbler, and the opulent room their usual comfortable but plain bedroom rearranged to change up the view.

“Goddammit, Sharky, you’re supposed to be a stranger I just met,” John griped.

“Well, fuck, John, I kinda lost it there for a minute,” Sharky gasped, still balls-deep inside of John.

“Clearly,” John said dryly, but he arched his back up so that he was now sitting in Sharky’s lap, riding him up and down expertly, reaching a hand back to tangle it in Sharky’s hair. Sharky kissed the side of his face, ran a hand down John’s side and lower to the V where his hips met his torso and his cock stood at eager attention, leaking precum. He slid his hand over John’s erection and pressed into him, pushing a desperate little sound out of John’s open, panting mouth.

“I love you,” Sharky repeated stubbornly. John grinned through his panting and caught Sharky’s lips in a passionate kiss, little soft sighs and moans still bubbling up out of him as Sharky pressed in and out of him.

“I love you too,” he said softly, nibbling at Sharky’s jaw delicately.

“Happy anniversary,” Sharky whispered into his ear as he pounded into John, releasing himself with a shuddering gasp. John followed a moment later, spilling himself all over Sharky’s hand.

“Happy anniversary, Sharky,” he answered, curling up next to his partner once they had cleaned up the mess.

“Maybe next time handcuffs?” Sharky suggested. John eyed him for a moment and then smirked.

“Only if I get to use them on you.” Sharky raised an eyebrow.

“I’ve been arrested enough to not be bothered by them anymore,” Sharky told him, cocky.

“Maybe I can play the big city lawyer and you have to suck me off to get me to defend you in court?” Sharky laughed at that.

“If that’s all you would have charged me before, I woulda hired you in a heartbeat.” John
laughed.

“I love you, Charlemagne,” he said softly, using Sharky’s real name, a thing the man allowed only occasionally, and only behind closed doors.

“I love you too, John,” Sharky smiled, leaning down and pressing a kiss to his forehead. “Hey, what about that threesome you asked for a while ago?” Sharky asked him. John felt a possessive, jealous streak tear through him. He pulled Sharky closer and stroked his hair, curling his fingers in the soft locks until Sharky hummed and closed his eyes.

“Later,” he told him, but he thought now that it might be a lie. He didn’t want anyone in his bed but Charlemagne Victor Boshaw IV.

Chapter End Notes

Remember, kids, the couple that role plays together, stays together.
Chapter Summary

Faith cooks Pratt cookies and Pratt makes an ass out of himself. Small amount of smut, lots of angst. A sequel chapter will be added tonight.

Faith hummed happily to herself as she sifted the flour. There were no eggs, but the massive freezers in the food storage area had enough frozen bananas to last them a decade or more, and they worked just as well. She mixed, and stirred and then formed the cookies, prancing happily around the kitchen as she did so. Placing them in the oven, she read an old romance novel while she waited for them to bake. It was Pratt’s birthday and she was making these cookies especially for him.

“The whole family is a bunch of monsters,” Melody said nastily where she was helping Pratt with laundry, on her usual rant. He sniffed.

“I don’t know, they didn’t kill you when you tried to kill one of them. You have to give them credit for that much.”

“That’s because of Rook and you know it,” Melody insisted.

“That’s not how I heard it went down,” Pratt challenged. Melody swallowed and deflated, setting aside the shirt she was folding.

“Maybe…maybe some of them have changed. At least toned down some of their violence. But John is still responsible for the death of my sister. And regardless, they’re still nuts. Especially Faith.” Pratt frowned, pausing in his folding.

“Rachel is my friend,” he told Melody in a careful tone. She laughed.

“Yeah, your friend. You only like her because she sucks your dick.” Pratt looked affronted, but before he could respond, Melody continued, putting a hand on his arm. “I could suck your dick if that’s all it takes to be your friend. After all, I heard today was your birthday.” Pratt stared at her for a moment, taking in the gorgeous eyes, the flaxen hair, the toned body. He shrugged.

Faith rounded the corner, one hand protectively cupped around the emergency candle she had managed to pilfer and light. The glow from the little flame illuminated her happy face as she made the turn that would take her to the laundry room where she knew Pratt would be.

She froze.

Pratt was grunting, thrusting himself deep inside Melody, who had her arms slung around his neck and her head thrown back in ecstasy. Pratt heard Faith’s soft exhalation of breath and looked over his shoulder, meeting her eyes, which were already watering with pained tears.
Woodenly, she set the tray of cookies down on the folding table and floated away, feeling broken.

Faith found a quiet corner, a reading area that was almost always empty this time of day. It was today as well, and, thankful for the solitude, she threw herself on one of the overfilled couches and wept. They had never said they were exclusive. It was sort of a mutually agreed friends-with-benefits situation that Faith had never bothered to clarify. She had wondered if Pratt slept with other women, but she never really let herself dwell on it, assumed he didn’t. She hadn’t slept with anyone else. But she hadn’t known how deeply it would hurt, seeing him with someone else, especially Melody of all people, the same person who had tried to kill her friend and adoptive family member John. Her heart ached.

Being cut off from the Seed brothers had allowed her to realize that perhaps they hadn’t wanted what was best for her. She realized now, looking back on it, that, while Joseph was not unkind, in fact he had been fatherly, his relationship with her was a means to an end. Access to her family’s connections and conservatory, and thereby the Bliss flowers. She hadn’t resented it. She wasn’t stupid, she knew he needed the Bliss to help his sick and drug addicted followers, his brothers included. But still, not having to rely on the Seed brothers, not having to be ready to answer their beck and call had been deeply refreshing because she could instead be with Pratt. They had healed together, grown together. They were best friends who told one another everything. Faith had never wanted to ask for more and ruin their friendship.

Now she almost wished they had never become friends at all with this aching, burning pain splintering her chest like an arrow. She cried softly, wiping her tears on her sleeve when she heard approaching footsteps a while later.

A gentle hand touched her back and she flinched, closing her eyes.

Next to her, she felt the sofa lower as someone sat beside her, their arm still over her shoulders.

“Hey,” Pratt said softly. “Sorry, didn’t mean to surprise you like that. We shouldn’t have been doing that in a public area.” Faith’s mouth curled into a bitter line as she choked back a sob. Public sexual intercourse was a fun pastime she and he had always done together for the thrill. He was fine having exhibitionist sex with anyone, apparently.

“You can do what you want,” she finally choked out. Pratt frowned, realization pouring through him.

“Oh shit,” he mumbled under his breath. “I didn’t think…”

“No, you didn’t think,” she cried, new tears streaking hot and wet down her cheeks. Pratt clenched his jaw and reached a hand up to wipe the tears.

“Hey, hey, don’t cry, please don’t cry, Rachel. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” Though Faith fought him, he tugged her into an embrace, pulling her partly into his lap. If anything, it made it worse. He was hot, sweaty and smelled like sex. “I…thought you would have said something by now if you wanted to be exclusive. We’ve been in here for two years.” Faith let out another anguished cry and Pratt sighed at himself, realizing he wasn’t helping the situation. “I should have asked,” he concluded and Faith nodded.

“Yeah,” she said, pulling out of his grip and meeting his soft brown eyes with her bloodshot hazel ones. “You should have. But…I should have said something too. I didn’t really realize, not until…”
“Until you saw me fucking Melody on the washing machine?” Pratt prompted helpfully. Faith gave him a nasty look.

“Yeah,” she answered dryly, tone acerbic. “Good to know trying to kill one of my brothers turns you on.” Pratt opened his mouth to argue, but she interrupted. “Did you at least eat the cookies?” she asked, hopeful.

“I, uh, I didn’t want to be high when I came to check on you,” he admitted. Faith rolled her eyes, crossing her arms over her chest, truly angry now.

“I didn’t put drugs in them, Pratt,” she snapped. “I’m not just a drug hookup and…I don’t want to just be a hookup hookup either.”

“Okay, we can be something else, something more;” he said softly, grabbing one of her hands stubbornly. She yanked it away.

“You just fucked someone else, forgive me if I don’t take you at your word right now, Stac,” she griped. “I helped you through your shit with Jacob, and we shared everything with each other, and we had sex and through all of that, you didn’t think that maybe…” she deflated, calming herself. “I know. We never said we were exclusive, but…”

“I wanted to assume we were;” he admitted after a moment. “But I thought you didn’t want that. You never said anything,” he pointed out again. Faith sighed, brushing a hand through her hair and starting to braid it, just so her hands were busy with something other than strangling Staci.

“I need some time, Stac;” she told him sadly. “Away from you.” Pratt frowned, waiting for her to continue so Faith met his gaze, her own serious and angry. “I’m telling you to go away.” Hurt, he nodded, but he stood, stepping away from her.

“For what it’s worth…I’m sorry,” he repeated. “It won’t happen again, especially not with Melody.” Faith nodded. He was most of the way out of the room when he heard her say one last thing in a soft, sad tone.

“Happy birthday.”
Faith opened the door of her room to find a coffee can full to the brim of paper roses. Frowning, she picked it up, pulling one of them out and unfolding it partially.

“Baked beans” the paper proclaimed. “Beans and Weinies,” read another. Rolling her eyes, she threw them in the recycling bin as she walked to the kitchen. Staci was there. Of course.

“Oh, hey, um, I was just making you some breakfast,” he started, but she held up a hand.

“It’s fine. I’m planning on going for a run.” She was in jogging shorts and a comfortable t-shirt.

“Oh.” His shoulders drooped. “Did you get the…?”

“Yep.” And she was gone.

Faith ran on the treadmill for far longer than she had originally intended. Sweating and tired, she showered, letting the warm water batter her back before guilt made her climb out. Water could be recycled, but there were limitations to every gadget and it was best not to waste. She walked up to the solarium area that faced straight out the top of the cliff the bunker had been built into and looked up at a wan sun. She could barely see it for the snow gently dusting the nearly two foot thick glass. She missed the outside. She missed her gardens. She missed growing things, and she missed flowers. Marshmallow, her pet parakeet, sang softly in the corner, fluttering his white feathers.

“Hey buddy,” she greeted him softly. He chirped when she opened the cage, bubbling a chittery little song to her when she offered a finger for him to stand on. He hoped on and fluffed his feathers up, making a pleasing whistle. She gently scratched the bottom of his jaw with one finger as he tilted his head and chirped again. She got him fresh water as he sat on her shoulder and then put him back in his large enclosure where he picked through his food. “At least you’ll always be my friend,” she said softly.

“Oh, come on,” came Pratt’s irritated and hurt voice from the doorway. Faith turned and glared. “Just because I…you know…with another person doesn’t make me not your friend, Rachel.” Faith turned away from him, looking back up to the sky. “I still know that pink’s your favorite color. I know you love fall, and not just for pumpkin spice.” He stepped into the room, but she kept her back toward him. Pratt sighed and looked up as well, watching the gently falling snow that could faintly be seen through the thick glass. “I know your favorite hobby is gardening, growing flowers, especially. I know your favorite flowers are Yellow Lady Slipper orchids, Cypripedium parviflorum, if I’m remembering the scientific name you taught me correctly?” She didn’t answer, but he had butchered the pronunciation. “You love them because they’re one of Montana’s largest native wildflowers. I know you always wanted to be a wildlife ecologist, but your dad thought it was a waste of time and put too much pressure on you. I know,” Pratt told her, stepping very close now, his voice almost reverent, “that the first time you OD’ed you were only
thirteen. I know you want three kids, two girls and one boy. I know your favorite song is ‘Don’t Fear the Reaper.’ I still know all this stuff about you, Rachel, because you’re my friend, and you’re special to me. And I know that I’m a dumbass. And I’m sorry. And I’ll keep trying to show you that for as long as it takes,” he promised quietly. He reached a hand out to touch her, thought better of it, and walked away.

Faith stared up at the sky for a very, very long time before she retreated to her room.

When she got there, she found a dozen more paper roses, all painstakingly folded. Annoyed, she again tossed them in the recycling bin. The back of each of the labels was covered in the words,

“I’m sorry.”

Sometimes sorry isn’t enough.

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Hurk Jr padded into the kitchen the next morning where Faith was drinking coffee and reading a book.

“Oh, hey beautiful!” Hurk said it in a way that was not at all creepy or threatening. He called her beautiful as a statement of fact, not as a pickup line or a sleazy complement. Faith looked up from her book and smiled at him.

“Good morning, Hurkules,” she greeted. Hurk frowned. For a seemingly dumb redneck, he was very perceptive.

“You look sad,” he told her, his own face sinking into a look of concern. Faith twisted her lips wistfully.

“Oh, you know. Just your normal drama, the kind that can happen when you’re locked in a bunker with seventy or so people for a few years.”

“What did Pratt do?” Hurk asked levelly, but there was threat in his tone. Faith laughed.

“Nothing you should do anything about, Hurk. But thank you. Do you want some coffee?”

“Oh, I shouldn’t. Makes me go poop a lot,” he told her, no hesitation in sharing this fact whatsoever. She chuckled again.

“Duly noted.” Hurk yawned, stretched and sat at the bar in the kitchen, munching on a bowl of cereal. With little beer available, and with food stuffs closely monitored, he had lost a lot of weight. He looked…good, actually, Faith thought, remarkably similar to his cousin Sharky now that he had lost some of his fluff. Honestly, though, she preferred Hurk fluffy. He gave the best, warmest hugs. He finished his cereal and started to pad out of the room, but Faith stopped him with a hand on his arm. “Hey Hurk, can you…can I have a hug?” His face lit up.

“Of course, chica. Come here.” He enveloped her in muscular arms and tucked her in close to his chest. Listening, she heard the steady lubdublubdublubdub of his heart beneath her ear as she hugged him back. Extricating herself after a moment, she smiled up at him.

“Thank you. I needed that.”
“Anytime, young lady,” Hurk assured her, an eternal flirt. “But now I gotta go work on the heating unit. It’s on the fritz again and it turns out I’m real good at fixin’ stuff.”

“I’ll bring you some lemonade later,” Faith promised him.

“And some cookies?” he asked hopefully. She nodded, smiling again.

“And some cookies.”

“Hey,” came a soft voice.

“Hey,” Faith answered. “Want some coffee?”

“Sure,” Melody said, looking a little awkward. It had been nearly three weeks since the…event, but she knew what she had done. Faith poured her a cup of coffee and handed it to her, giving her a friendly smile. Melody took the proffered mug and thanked her, quiet for a while as Faith ignored her existence and continued to read. “Hey, I, uh, I just wanted to say, what I did was shitty.” Faith’s gaze flicked up.

“What?” she asked softly, surprised. Melody had the grace to look embarrassed.

“I knew that getting Pratt to fuck me would hurt you,” she answered. “I’ve given it a lot of thought, and, well, Pratt talked to me about how I talk about you and your family. I’ve made it no secret that I hated…” she closed her eyes, swallowed, clenched her jaw, “hate,” she changed the word to present tense, voice shaking, “your family, but…you didn’t ask for that. And it was shitty.” Her eyes flicked open again, met Faith’s. “Look, I don’t think I’m ever going to be able to forgive any of you for what you’ve done, but I already got myself kicked out of one bunker and I don’t want to get kicked out of here either. I won’t give you any more problems. Anyway. Yeah.”

With that, she drained her coffee mug and was gone.

It was probably the best and only apology Faith would get from Melody, but it did make her feel marginally better. She walked down to the library to find another book, having finished the one she had been reading. Pratt was there, at one of the desks, his tongue sticking partly out of his mouth, pinched gently between his teeth with extreme focus.

“You know I just throw those in the recycling bin, right?” she asked him loudly. He jumped, crumpling the delicate flower in his hand, a look of frustration flickering briefly over his handsome features.


Every day, just outside her door, Pratt deposited a coffee can full of folded flowers. Every week they became more and more elaborate. At first there were just simple roses, mostly a glorified spiral of paper. Then came daises, then carnations, then bouquets of mixed flowers, and even some folded paper leaves that Pratt had colored green with a marker. They were all made of recycled can labels, and they were all covered in the words “I’m sorry.” They must have taken him hours to make, but every day she chucked them in the recycling bin. Every day, though, the action lost a little bit of its venom. The first day she had thrown them in with so much force she’d nearly knocked the can over. Eight weeks in and she dropped the bouquet in almost regretfully. Fourteen weeks in, much more elaborate flowers started showing up, far more advanced than previous ones and clearly requiring more than one label to make them. She picked one up, inspecting it closely. It was a very good approximation of a Lady’s Slipper orchid. Soon, the bouquets started being made of nothing but these. Pratt had clearly been practicing, perfecting his folds.
On the first day of week twenty-four, six months after Pratt’s birthday, the coffee can was full of bright yellow origami Lady’s Slipper orchids, complete with green leaves. It seemed he had been collecting yellow and green labels for months to make this. Faith picked them up, walked to the recycling bin and held them above its opening, her hand shaking, hesitant. Sighing, she carried them back to her room.

“Thank you,” she told Pratt, when next she saw him. He frowned.

“For what?”

“For the yellow Lady’s slippers. Must have taken you a while.” He scratched the back of his head awkwardly, shrugging. “If you can put that much patience into something…maybe you deserve a chance to prove you really want to be with me,” she muttered. Hope flickered in Pratt’s eyes.

Time went on and they spent more and more time together, but regardless whether they bickered or bantered, every day origami flowers continued to appear outside her door until the walls of her room were covered in the ones she kept, reminding her of a flower garden she deeply missed. The first time she pulled Pratt into her room, he looked proudly around at his work.

“Come in to my garden,” she told him in a voice gone low with lust. He smiled as her fingers worked at his belt, murmuring her name softly as she caressed his cheek. They touched one another hesitantly, as though it was their first time, as though they didn’t already know one another’s bodies. Pratt worshipped her with his fingers and his tongue and his cock, proving to her that yes, he wanted to be here, and yes, he only wanted her.

Every day, like clockwork, the flowers appeared at her door, but they no longer said “I’m sorry.” Instead they bore little notes like “you’re beautiful” or “your eyes look like sapphires when you wear that green shirt from yesterday.”

One day, more than a year after Pratt had begun making her flowers, Faith smiled when she unfolded the large red rose that sat alone in the coffee can.

“I love you,” it said.
Two Weddings and Almost a Funeral

Chapter Summary

I'm accelerating events just a bit to get some players where I want them. Enjoy!

It was three years into their stay in the bunker when it finally happened. A radio broadcast from outside of Hope County. It was garbled, and hard to understand, but apparently a man named Roger Cadoret was holed up in a bunker in Canada, waiting out the radiation.

“Yeah, my husband has been monitoring the radiation levels here, they’re slowly going down, but it looks like we’ll be stuck here for at least another two years to be safe,” Rook told him. Next to her, Jacob jumped as though stung. She frowned at him, but ignored it, continuing.

“Our…” she searched for a word, “intelligence suggests we’ll actually need to be down here for about four more years.” listening for Roger’s response.

“Four more years and I will lose my mind. I do not think I have that long to wait, *Dieu merci*. Hold on, I am getting…there is a lot of…ugh this *putain*…I don’t know what…but running low on power today…need…recharge……sometime…morrow, maybe?” The static overwhelmed the transmission and Rook sat back, discouraged. She looked over at Jacob, opening her mouth to say something when she noticed, finally, that he was sitting there stock-still, looking surprised.

“*Husband?*” he asked. She frowned.

“Uh, yeah, you asked me to marry you.”

“But we never actually got married,” he protested.

“Oh, come on. Joseph and Megan consider themselves married.”

“Joseph’s been married before…he…it…nevermind.” Rook’s eyebrows rose suddenly and she understood.

“You want to have a wedding.” Jacob turned bright red and started picking at one of the scars on his forearm in embarrassment. “Stop that,” Rook told him automatically, pinching him, something she did every time she noticed that behavior. He winced and pulled away from her, grumbling something under his breath. “Okay,” Rook breathed, kissing the side of Jacob’s head gently, grabbing his jaw stubbornly when he tried to pull away. “Let’s have a wedding.”

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“That’s wonderful!” Joseph said, his entire face lighting up with joy. “And, of course, I’ll officiate!” he told Rook immediately. Her face fell and Joseph’s smile faltered.

“Oh. Um. I, uh, I kinda promised Whitehorse he could, since I’m not really into the patriarchy of having a dad ‘give’ me to Jacob.” For an instant, Joseph looked crestfallen, crushed. He forced the expression away, forced a little pained smile that made Rook feel truly awful. She should have thought of that. Joseph’s shoulders had drooped a bit and his eyebrows were arched slightly upwards in the middle, giving his false smile an air of sadness. His whole face screamed, “Why would you offer to let someone else do that?” but he didn’t argue with her. “But, um,” Rook
continued, patting him on the shoulder, “Earl’s not religious, so why don’t you preach a sermon? It’s been a while since you’ve done that.” Joseph looked slightly happier, stood a little straighter.

“Sure, Deputy, I can do that.” She chuckled.

“You know one of these days you’re going to have to call me by my name, Joseph.”

“Would you prefer ‘Hel’ or ‘Rook,’ Deputy?”

“Rook, please.” He nodded in agreement, made to turn away. “Joseph?”

“Yes?” She tugged him into a warm hug, pulling him close.

“I’m really glad things turned out the way they did.” He pulled away shyly. He was no longer the dangerously mad, charismatic mastermind of a cult. He was just Joseph.

“I am as well. Congratulations, Rook.”

“You have to come. Please. Please, John, you have to. I…” Sharky’s breath hitched suddenly, his handsome face flickered pain. “The last time you skipped a party, you…you almost died.” John chuckled, pulling Sharky in for a kiss.

“I’m safe, Sharky.” Sharky pulled away from him, face still etched with worry. John caught him by his shirt collar, kept him from leaving, pressed kisses up his neck, gentle, reassuring. Sharky’s gray blue eyes met his blue ones, pleading.

“Please. Please stay for the reception. Please. You’re the best man. If you won’t do it for your brother, then please can you stay for me?” John rolled his eyes.

“You know you could skip it with me. We could stay in. Curl up on the bed. Watch a movie.” I could ask you a very important question, he finished mentally, goosebumps rising on his arms at the thought of it. “I never thought that Sharky Boshaw would have this kind of power over me,” he confided as Sharky turned puppy dog eyes on him. “But you’ve made me say ‘yes,’” he agreed. “I’ll stay for the reception if it will make you feel better. Come here. Hey,” he used his index finger on Sharky’s cheek to force him to look at him. “I love you.” Sharky smiled shyly as he always did when John told him that. Raised by parents that didn’t want him, Sharky still wasn’t accustomed to spoken affection, still blushed when he mumbled, “I love you.” The only time he said it unabashed was when he was moving against John, gentle and surprisingly talented in bed, making John into an idol as he worshipped him with his mouth and his hands and his cock.

John wanted to hear those words flow unfettered from his mouth, wanted those eight letters to fall out of Sharky’s pink lips without thought as he raked his blunt fingernails over John’s shoulders. John met his gaze, smiled gently at him. He thought about the polished silver ring sitting in his jacket pocket and shivered internally.

“We’ve got an hour until the ceremony,” he said suggestively, nipping Sharky’s earlobe. It was all he had to say to get his way.

Jacob and Rook walked into the chapel arm in arm instead of him waiting for her at the altar. It was something she had requested, and he had said “yes” immediately. No one was being given to anyone. They were a partnership, a friendship, not property and owner. They stepped up to
the lectern where Earl smiled magnanimously at his daughter. The ceremony was short and tasteful, and Joseph’s sermon on love touched everyone’s hearts. He looked with adoration at his older brother, thrilled to see him happy after a life spent unhappy for so long.

John approached after the ceremony, his hair slicked back into a bun, but more kempt and managed than Joseph’s scraggly one. Sharky sported a recently-trimmed full beard that tickled Rook’s face when he hugged her.

“Congrats, Dep,” Sharky told her, the wrinkles around his eyes crinkling in a smile that filled his face.

“I didn’t think you were one for parties, John. Thought you would have cleared out by now,” Rook teased, putting a hand gently on his arm. He tilted his head, looking sweetly over at Sharky, an odd look of longing and disappointment flickering over his features for a moment.

“I promised him I would attend. And really, Deputy, there is no party like a John Seed party.”

“We’re keeping the reception kid friendly, John,” Rook assured him. A smirk slid across his handsome face.

“That’s for the best. No need to resurrect the old me anytime soon.”

“I’m glad you’re here, John,” Rook told him. His eyes flicked momentarily over the word “wrath” etched across her chest where all could see it. He swallowed.

“I’m glad you’re part of my family now, Deputy,” he assured her in his gentle Georgia accent.

“So, when is it your turn?” Randall asked, walking up and addressing John and Sharky who glanced at each other and smiled awkwardly. John spluttered for a moment, making excuses and turning very red.

“And here’s the part where I run away,” Rook said, scurrying off with Jacob following close behind her, looking deeply uncomfortable at the social awkwardness he had just experienced second hand.

Joseph sat at the edge of the common area where people were dancing, bouncing Ethan on his lap as Megan danced with a friend, giggling. He smiled gently, but his eyes were still a little sad. He had really wanted to officiate the wedding, but what mattered was that his brother was happy. He watched with amusement as Sharky struggled to keep up with the smooth, fluid movements of his partner John. Perhaps he could officiate that wedding, if it ever happened.

It was, Sharky decided, a truly great thing that he had talked John into coming. John was a wonderful dancer, a strong leader, pushing Sharky around the dance floor gracefully, looking at him as though he hung the stars in the sky. Not once in his life prior to the cult had Sharky ever thought he would end up falling in love with a man, particularly not a Seed, but here he was, not just messing around with a man, but madly, madly in love with one. It wasn’t as though he hadn’t thought about it before almost every guest at the wedding asked him about it, but he didn’t know if it was what John wanted. John wasn’t even sure if he wanted kids. That had always been a deal breaker for Sharky, but now, children or not, he couldn’t see himself living without John.

“I was thinking,” John started at the same time as Sharky said, “You know...” They both chuckled.
“We have to stop doing that,” John laughed.

“You go first.”

“No, you,” John prompted.

“I think you started talking first.”

“Will you marry me?” they asked in unison. John looked more shocked than Sharky. He released Sharky’s hand and stepped back, digging in his jacket pocket.

“This is why I wanted us to stay in. I didn’t want to take away from Jacob and Rook’s day,” he admitted sheepishly as he held up the little silver ring.

“Oh my god!” Rook shrieked next to them, covering her mouth with her hands. Their heads jerked toward her, expecting a meltdown. Instead, they saw she was grinning widely. Relieved that Rook wasn’t going to be a bridezilla, Sharky turned his head back to face John.

“Of course I’ll marry you, Johnny boy.” John smiled broadly, slipping the ring onto Sharky’s finger.

Joseph stood abruptly, the words out of his mouth before his brain registered them.

“I’ll officiate!” he blurted. John laughed and tugged him in for a hug.

“Of course you will. Are you free right now?”

“What?” Joseph said dully, caught off-guard for perhaps the fifth time in his life.

“Come on. Hey, Robin! Turn the music down. Everyone! I have an announcement to make!” In an instant, all eyes were on John. He quirked a brow at Sharky in question which was answered with an enthusiastic nod. “If you would all make your way back into the chapel, I find myself unable to live another moment without being married to Sharky Boshaw.” There was a collective gasp, but it was a gasp of excitement, happiness, not horror.

In a few minutes, it was over. John and Sharky kissed tenderly and the party resumed with three sets of happily married people floating around the dance floor. Joseph was grinning widely, having gotten to officiate his little brother’s wedding, at least. Megan teased him, but she couldn’t resist the happy look on his face. She kissed him softly and murmured sweet nothings in his ear.

“So,” Rook murmured as a slow song came on and Jacob pulled her close, “we’re married.”

“We’re married,” he rumbled in agreement, a bit of a smile tugging at his lips. “You’re my wife.”

“And you’re my husband.”

“Yeah, you can call me that now,” he teased. He pulled her close, kissed her, which raised hoots and vulgar encouragement from some of their guests. “Your husband can’t wait to see you out of that dress,” he murmured.

“It’s not even a wedding dress, you’ve seen me in this dress before,” Rook protested. He looked at her with softness in his gaze as he cupped his hands around her face.
“No matter how many times I see you in that or anything else you will always, always be the most beautiful, the most wonderful thing that has ever walked into my shitshow of a life, pup. I love you.”

“I love you too. Husband.” Rook showed all of her teeth in a huge grin and squealed when Jacob picked her up by the hips, kissing her roughly.

“For the record,” Wren said as she danced with Earl and glanced over at the happy married couples, “I am entirely too old to be getting married at any point. So, you know, no pressure.” He chuckled.

“Well, there’s no tax benefits anymore, so what’s the point?” he asked her.

“Exactly,” she said. “And no, I’m not hunting for you to ask me. I love you, Earl Whitehorse. And I’ll spend the rest of my life with you. I don’t need to say that in front of a crowd to make it true.”

“Damn. Stole my line,” he smirked. She stepped on his toes intentionally, but she grinned up at him.

Feedback suddenly played over the speakers.

“H-hello? Hello, is anyone there?” Heads collectively looked up at the speakers, confused.

“What the fuck?” Jacob asked.

“That’s from the intercom outside,” John muttered.

“I, uh, I don’t know if anyone’s in there, but I don’t know how much longer my rad suit will last, and uh, a storm’s comin.’ I could really use some help. I’m a doctor. Well, I’m kind of a doctor. I can heal people. It’s a long story. Anyway, point is, I can help you out with medicine if you’ll let me in. Name’s Selene.”

“Well,” Rook said as eyes looked to her for her opinion. “What are we waiting for? We have guests. Let’s let them in before we have to end the day with someone’s funeral.”
**Chapter Summary**

Selene enters the bunker and gives Rook an idea she hadn't thought of before.

**Chapter Notes**

Sorry for the weak chapter. A lot of what I have planned out comes after they emerge from the bunkers, but I don't want to just skip over their time in the bunker.

“You’re kidding right?” John asked Rook, face curling into a frown reminiscent of when they were enemies. His Roman nose became more angled as the nostrils drew up in disagreement, the lines around his mouth hardened and his eyes were chips of ice beneath aquiline brows. Rook turned to him and the crowd collectively fell silent. You could have heard a pin drop.

“It’s a person,” Rook insisted. “Someone who needs our help.”

“We don’t even know if they’re friendly. What if there are others? What if they’re infected with the disease we heard about on the radio before the Collapse? Are you really prepared to risk the health and welfare of your friends, your family, your child for a stranger’s life?” John asked, his tone reasonable, but firm. He was unmistakably a former lawyer.

“I’m inclined to agree with John, pup,” Jacob admitted. Rook scowled at him.

“Don’t you ever use my kid against me again, John Seed,” she snarled, but Jacob put a gentle hand on her shoulder, calming her.

“We let her in,” Joseph ordered, stepping forward. In an instant, quiet, meek Joseph was gone, replaced by The Father. For the first time in well over a year, The Father was taking charge, all soft words backed by hard edges, his stance and his expression making it abundantly clear that he would abide no disobedience. “We will decide if she is worthy of staying once we have offered her shelter and succor.”

“And what if there are others?” John argued, always pushing, never respecting his brother’s authority until he was put in his place. Joseph turned his gaze coldly toward him.

“Then we will welcome them as well, John.” John took a step back, nearly stumbling, looking as though Joseph’s intense gaze had physically pushed him backwards.

“If we do this, we’re doin’ it smart,” Jacob growled, falling into line under his brother’s authority, but refusing to risk lives. “Whoever’s at that door goes into the quarantine room for at least…Dr. Allen?”

“At least a week,” the man answered without hesitation. “Maybe longer, depending on where they’ve been and if they show symptoms of anything.”
“And we’re bringing weapons,” Jacob stated, meeting Joseph’s eyes. Joseph offered no argument, but his jaw ticked.

A small group of people made their way upstairs toward the doors while the majority of the bunker’s population mingled, some going to bed, others waiting up to hear news of the newcomer.

“Wow,” Selene said after she had pried her rad suit’s mask off, “this is one hell of a welcome party.” Jacob was casually holding a rifle, John had a revolver in his hand and Sharky was holding a shotgun. Only Rook and Joseph and Dr. Allen were unarmed, but all of them were wearing hazmat suits.

“Figured we’d wear our best suits to meet someone new,” Rook joked. Selene smirked.

“Dope. Well, uh, thanks for letting me in, I guess.”

“Is there anyone else with you?” Jacob asked, tone all business.

“Just me. I’ve run into a few other people, but it’s been nuts. Not a lot of nice people in the wastelands, gotta tell ya.” Jacob hummed.

“Where are you from?”

“Originally? California. Now? I’ve been working my way around the northwest, but there’s been a lot of violence and not a lot in the way of resources, so, you know. I figured maybe the wilderness would be my best bet.”

“How long have you been out there?” he asked immediately, almost talking over the last of her sentence.

“Wandering? Six months, maybe.” Another hum. He surveyed her, stepping closer. Anyone with eyes or ears could tell that he was interrogating her. “Strip,” he ordered. She blinked, taken aback.

“Uh, look man, I’m all about it if this is some kind of sex coven, but if not, I’m gonna have to say no.”

“Not a coven, but if you don’t strip and shower you can leave,” Jacob answered her. He glanced over at John, who nodded subtly. He and Jacob had privately agreed that if the newcomer left, they would leave with a bullet in their brain. They couldn’t afford for a large group of people to be tipped off to where they were. Resources were tight enough without having to fight for them. This was a test.

“Alright, bro,” Selene said after an annoyed sigh, stepping out of her rad suit and pulling her stockings and shoes off. “But if you wanna watch me strip, you gotta pay.”

“Rook,” Jacob said, handing her his gun. The men in the room turned away and Rook kept a watchful eye on Selene as she soaped herself off under the hard stream of water, shivering at the cold.

“Sorry about my husband,” Rook said lightly, sliding Jacob a disapproving glare. “You’re the first visitor we’ve had and we’re all a little on edge. How’s it been out there?”
“It’s rough,” Selene admitted. “I’ve mostly been living on ramen and cans of food I found. I was studying to be a doctor, but, uh, I dropped out of med school the same day the bombs dropped and haven’t been sober a day since,” she said lightly. John shifted uncomfortably, a motion neither his brothers nor Sharky missed. Sharky put a hand on his wrist gently. “But, I can still help people. I can still patch wounds and all that. I figured if I could make myself useful to a big group like this one, maybe I could stop being a nomad for a bit, you know? I’m kinda tired of living in a yurt.” Rook stared at her, blinked. “That was a joke, I don’t actually have a yurt,” Selene finished. Rook tossed her a towel, which she dried with gratefully and then slid on the t-shirt and sweatpants she was offered. “So, what’s with the hazmat suits?” she asked, curious.

“We heard there was disease spreading before the bombs. We’d like you to stay in quarantine,” Rook explained as the others turned back to face Selene now that she was clothed. Selene used a towel to try to dry her wet dreads, considering.

“The disease you’re talking about is mostly in hotter areas. Southern California all the way through to Florida. All throughout Central and South America. It’s killed more people than the bombs, but I haven’t encountered anyone with symptoms, yo,” she said in her casual tone.

“What are?” Dr. Allen spoke up.

“It starts out like a cold, then acts like the flu, and then the person snaps. Becomes hyper aggressive. Not quite zombie ‘I’m gonna eat your brains’ aggressive, but dangerous. It’s unmistakable. They try to kill everyone in sight and about twenty-four hours later they drop dead.”

“Jesus,” Sharky muttered. “Sounds worse than angels.”

“Sounds like angels,” Rook added, clenching her jaw. Selene frowned, not understanding what they were talking about.

“How long from onset to death?” Dr. Allen asked. Selene thought for a moment.

“About a week.” He nodded.

“Alright, then that’s how long we’ll keep you in quarantine.”

“Says who?” she asked, looking peeved now. Dr. Allen huffed a humorless laugh.

“Says the actual doctor in this situation.” Selene snorted.

“I don’t see a degree hanging anywhere,” she muttered. Dr. Allen’s lip curled and he opened his mouth to answer, but Jacob interrupted him.

“Is that going to be a problem?” Jacob demanded in his gravelly tone, glancing at his gun, which was still in Rook’s hands. Selene stared at him for a moment, taking in his stature and his hard face through the acrylic face plate of his suit. She shrugged.

“All good, Big Red,” she assured him. His eyebrows rose slightly and he paled, looking deeply unhappy.

“Do not start calling me—” Jacob started, turning to Rook quickly, face full of dread.

“Oh my god, I love it. How did I never think of that one?”

“Oh Christ,” Jacob mumbled as Dr. Allen escorted Selene to the quarantine room off the side of the shower area. “I hate her already,” he griped.
“Seriously, though, how did it never occur to me to call you ‘Big Red’?” He threw a look her way that might have killed a weaker woman. She just giggled.

“Alright, Blondie,” he snapped.

“I will neuter you,” she threatened. They glared at one another for a moment before he deflated. He knew when he was beaten. “What if I only call you that in bed?” she asked, trying to compromise.

“That’s gonna make it real fuckin’ weird when I call him that,” Selene butted in. Rook cackled.

“I like her.”
Chapter Summary

John and Sharky have their first argument as a married couple just hours after their wedding.

Sharky sat heavily on their bed, pulling his shoes off. It was late by the time Selene had been let in, showered, interrogated and allowed to go to sleep in the quarantine room.

“We have to shower,” John told Sharky drowsily. Sharky looked up with tired eyes.

“I’ve worn the same pair of underwear for a week straight before. We can wash the sheets tomorrow.” John shuddered at the thought of Sharky wearing underwear for a week straight, but he couldn’t say he was surprised that it had happened before.

“We just washed them today,” John pointed out, loosening his tie and unbuttoning his cuffs. Sharky pulled his tuxedo print t-shirt off, throwing it at the hamper in the corner and missing by a wide margin. He groaned.

“Come on,” John tugged him to his feet. “You’ll feel more relaxed after a shower and we can fall asleep in each other’s arms. Husband,” he murmured, tipping Sharky’s face up by putting a knuckle under his chin. Sharky reddened, but smiled softly.

“Alright, fine,” he said tiredly. They showered quickly and collapsed into the bed, curling into one another happily. There was a long silence and John was almost to sleep when Sharky cleared his throat. “We need to talk about the kid thing, John,” he murmured. John scowled, clicking the bedside lamp on. He looked at Sharky blearily.

“That didn’t take long,” he said roughly, his tone unreadable. “Don’t you think we should have this argument in the morning,” he suggested wearily. Sharky propped himself up on an elbow, looking earnest.

“It’s not an argument,” Sharky said. John’s voice was raised almost instantly in frustration.

“It is an argument, because I don’t wan…” Sharky stopped him with a finger on his mouth.

“It’s not an argument because there’s nothing to argue about. Shit, son, I ain’t good at this feeling stuff, but…I want you. And if that means I don’t ever have a kid, then, well…” he let the sentence trail off. John’s eyebrows rose.

“Oh,” he said softly, cupping a hand on Sharky’s waist gently. They had spatted about it off and on the entire time they had been together, but it had never been completely resolved. “It’s easy to say you’ll give up things you want now,” John told him quietly. “But what about in two years? Or five? Or ten? You can’t give up things you want just because you’re scared I won’t want them too.” Sharky sat up in earnest now, frowning.

“Why’d you stop at ten?”
“What?” John asked, utterly exhausted, too tired for this.

“Why’d you stop at ten years, hombre?” Sharky asked, tone a little accusatory. John surveyed Sharky’s face, careful, cautious, sensing hurt there. He remembered what Sharky had told him about his parents, about how they had reminded him constantly that he was an accident, a mistake, he wasn’t wanted and they had shunted him off to live with his grandmother when he was only ten years old. John sighed.

“I stopped at ten because most married people I knew didn’t make it that long,” he murmured, looking down. He met Sharky’s eyes again after a pause. “I’m a lawyer, Sharky. I’ve seen what two people can do each other. I’ve watched two people who used to love one another tear one another apart. It’s easy to bask in the afterglow of a wedding, but the aftermath of a broken marriage can be awful. It’s not something I ever want to experience with you.” He wiped a hand over his face, pained. He met Sharky’s hard gaze. “I want us to last ten years. I want us to last fifty. But I can’t guarantee it. And that scares the shit out of me.”

Sharky took a shaky breath.

“I will stay with you until I keel over, but you’ve gotta promise me you’ll do the same,” he plead, his eyes soft, begging. John ran a thumb over Sharky’s lower lip, gazing at him softly.

“I’ve seen you die young, I’ve seen you die old…” he heard the words filter through his brain again, almost mocking now.

“Marriage is hard work, Sharky,” John said, voice so quiet Sharky had to strain to listen.

“Then why did you marry me without thinking about it? Shit,” Sharky pulled away, clenching his jaw, but John grabbed him so hard by the shoulder that he thought he might bruise the pale flesh there.

“I’ve never thought something through more in my entire life, you ass,” John snapped, grabbing Sharky’s face between his hands, bumping their foreheads together so abruptly and so hard they both winced at the crack. “I will spend every waking second of my life proving to you that I want you by my side. But I don’t want you to start this marriage by agreeing to give up something you want. I don’t want you to sacrifice things that will make you happy for me. It will just make you miserable, and it will make me feel like a monster.”

“I want you regardless of whether or not we ever have kids,” Sharky told him firmly. John smiled, let out a relieved breath.

“Good. Because I gave it a great deal of thought before I asked you to marry me. You cannot compromise on making a human being. Both people should want a child before they make one. You and I both know that intimately. You interrupted me before I could finish earlier,” he muttered. “I expected the discussion about having a child to be an argument because I don’t want the kid to be mine,” he said significantly, searching Sharky’s face for a reaction. “It should be yours, when and if we find a willing mother.” Sharky’s eyebrows shot up. “I…I think maybe the mental illnesses in my family…I think they might get passed down.” His face was a picture of agony for a moment before it flickered away. “So when we have a kid, just one kid,” he emphasized, “I want it to be yours.”

“It’ll still be ours,” Sharky said firmly, fighting off a massive smile.

“Of course,” John smiled in response to Sharky’s enormous grin.
“God, I love you.”

“I love you too. Now, can we please go to sleep?” Sharky pulled John close as he flipped the lamp off.

“Well, just because we don’t have a willing mom available doesn’t mean I won’t keep trying to fuck a kid into you,” he teased and John scoffed.

“Way to ruin the moment, jackass.”

“I didn’t hear any objections,” Sharky answered, squeezing John’s ass cheek. In the darkness, John pressed a soft kiss to Sharky’s forehead.

“Here’s to fifty more years of this,” he whispered and drifted off to sleep.
Chapter Summary

Rook and Jacob must deal with loss and recover from it, but a happy surprise is in store for them.

Chapter Notes

Alright, gentlefolk, this one starts out REALLY sad, but I promise it ends happy and the next couple of chapters will be happy as well.

TW: miscarriage

Jacob wiped a tired hand over his eyes, his heart aching. It was the fifth time it had happened since they had Jake. Rook was sitting on the edge of their bed, her pants still stained with blood, her face blank, empty. She had gotten four months along this time. Dr. Allen didn’t know if it was symptoms of much exposure to Bliss, the lack of sunlight to process vitamin D or some other issue, but this fifth miscarriage had hurt the worst.

“I can’t do this again,” Rook whispered, tears almost breaking her voice. “Please, don’t make me go through this again,” she plead and his heart broke for his wife. Jacob nodded, squeezing her shoulder, keeping his thoughts on the matter to himself. He wasn’t willing to hurt her again. Not like that.

“I’ll have Dr. Allen make sure it won’t happen again tomorrow,” he murmured, rubbing her shoulder softly, wishing he could take some of her pain. Where his hand rested, she was cold. Still. Like a living corpse. They hadn’t told anyone about the first four. They had been about to make the fifth baby public, had thought that maybe this time it would make it. Only John and Joseph and their spouses knew about this one. It was not a conversation Jacob was looking forward to having with them. “I’ll give you some time alone,” he told her, kissing her very gently on the top of her head. “Get some rest.”

Jacob made his way to the only place he could think of that no one would look for him: the chapel.

Stepping inside the white painted space, complete with faux flowers and wooden pews, he sat at one of them, staring malevolently at the cross just behind the altar. He thought about the tiny child that had not had a chance to live. A daughter. His heart clenched and he was surprised to find a sob bubbling up out of him. A daughter. So innocent. So pure. Hair, red like his. Pale. Angelic. In his mind he pictured her, all dressed up in pink cotton, giggling, showing buckteeth and gazing at him adoringly with big blue or hazel eyes. Goosebumps raised on his arms as he heard a tiny voice in his imagination.

“Daddy, daddy, pick me up!” Jacob would have been wrapped around her little finger.
“How dare you?” Jacob snarled at God, tears streaming down his cheeks. “How dare you?! Haven’t we suffered enough?! You’re a monster,” he whispered, covering his face with his hands. “A monster.” He wept openly, snot and tears wetting his big hands as he tried to hide the shame of his weakness even in this empty room. He hadn’t talked to Rook about these fantasies, about his excitement at carrying his daughter on his shoulders, about how protective he would have been when young men started sniffing around his teenage girl. But it was not to be. And to fight for it would be weakness on his part. He had to be strong, for Rook.

There was a soft knock and Jacob sniffed quickly, ramming the heel of his hand into his eyes and flicking away tears. Joseph was standing in the door of the chapel, holding Jake’s hand. Of course Joseph, of all people, would check here if he was looking for someone.

“Jake was looking for you,” Joseph explained softly, his hand moving to sit gently on Jake’s ginger head. “Are you alright?” Jacob answered by shaking his head, taking a shuddering breath.

“Daddy!” Jake exclaimed, running up to him, climbing exuberantly in his lap.

“Hey! Hey buddy,” Jacob greeted, trying to ignore the agony in his heart for the sake of his son. Jake’s bright green eyes searched his father’s face and his little brow crinkled in concern.

“Daddy, why you crying?” he asked, touching Jacob’s face softly with his tiny hands. Jacob swallowed hard, fighting back yet more tears. Joseph was standing off to the side, frowning. He seemed to have put two and two together.

“Your father is upset because your mom isn’t feeling very well, Jake,” Joseph murmured, bending down so that he was closer to eye level with his nephew. “Your mom’s okay, but she doesn’t feel good.”

“It’s okay, Daddy,” Jake said with zero hesitation, clambering deeper into Jacob’s lap and grasping a handful of his dad’s red hair to steady himself. Joseph met Jacob’s gaze, brow furrowed in question. Jacob shook his head subtly and he saw grief cross Joseph’s features. He put a hand on Jacob’s shoulder.

“I am sorry, brother.”

“Daddy, don’t cry,” Jake objected as the last of Jacob’s careful control broke and he started to weep again, holding Jake close to his chest, startling him.

“No, no it’s okay, Jake,” Joseph murmured. “It’s okay to cry when we’re upset. It’s okay to be sad sometimes. It’s not weak to admit that you’re sad, or to cry when you want to cry, okay?” He met Jacob’s eyes.

“Thank you,” Jacob mouthed silently.

“Okay,” Jake said uncertainly, allowing Jacob to hold him and not wriggling or struggling to get free. He wrapped two little arms around Jacob’s neck, staying surprisingly still for a five year old. “Are you sad because my baby brother or sister went to Heaven?” he asked timidly after a moment. Jacob flinched as though struck. He loosened his grip and pulled back so he could look Jake in the eyes.

“Who told you that, buddy?”

“Uncle Sharky,” he said in a small voice verging on upset. He clearly thought he was in trouble for asking.
“Okay buddy,” Jacob sighed, glancing at Joseph. Rook must have talked to Sharky about her miscarriage. It was hardly surprising, the two were best friends. “Yeah. I’m sad because your…” he took a deep breath to steady himself, to keep from breaking down again, “Your baby sister went to Heaven before we could meet her.” The words felt bitter on his tongue. He didn’t really believe them, didn’t really believe in God, because what kind of God would be so cruel? But it was not the time for anger anymore. It was time to help Jake understand. “Do you know what Heaven is, buddy?”

“Uncle John and Uncle Joseph said it’s where you go when you aren’t alive any more. When you, um, die,” he said, his tone a little uncertain, his brow crinkled in consternation.

“Okay,” Jacob said, still a little taken aback that someone had apparently explained death to his kid. He couldn’t decide whether to be angry or relieved that someone had beaten him to it.

“So since little sister is in Heaven, we can’t get to see her?” Jake asked, looking a little distressed now in his confusion.

“No, buddy, we won’t be able to see her. But she’ll be waiting for us, okay? And she’ll be watching over you. Your own personal guardian angel,” Jacob promised. In for a dime, in for a dollar. They could discuss religion and philosophy when Jake was older.

“Will I have any other brothers or sisters?” Jake asked, searching Jacob’s face with an-intently curious expression. Jacob was relieved at the change of topic, but this one was just as uncomfortable.

“No, no more brothers and sisters,” Jacob said, throat burning. “But you still have Ethan to play with, and the other kids.” Jake thought about that for a moment, nodded.

“Okay. Can I go play with Ethan?” Jacob looked at Joseph, who nodded.

“Yeah, buddy. You can go play.” Excited now, Jake darted to the door, thought better of it, turned back and climbed back onto Jacob’s lap, hugging him tightly.

“I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you too, bud,” Jacob told him, swallowing a hard lump that had formed in his throat. Jake scurried off and Jacob breathed out a massive breath. “Jesus Christ,” he puffed out, wiping a hand over his face.


“If your fucking God has a problem with me using his kid’s name in vain, then he can come apologize for killing mine,” he snarled. Taking a different tack, Joseph sat down next to his brother, put an arm across his broad shoulders.

“It’s never easy, losing a child,” he muttered.

“I don’t know how you did it,” Jacob admitted. “How you ended your daughter’s life when the doctor’s wouldn’t.”

“She was suffering,” Joseph said, his eyes going distant. “But it was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. Faith. My sweet Faith.” He cleared his throat after a moment, pulled his glasses off and wiped them on his green t-shirt since they had fogged with tears.

“Was it worth the prison time?” Jacob asked, his voice quiet. They hadn’t talked much
about Joseph’s stay in prison after his child’s death.

“I would do it again a thousand times if only to spare her pain,” Joseph said almost immediately. “It was all part of God’s plan,” he continued, voice sure. Jacob scoffed angrily.

“If you tell me my kid’s…my daughter’s death was part of God’s plan, I’ll deck you, Joseph.”

“I never claimed that God was merciful, Jacob,” he reminded, his voice gentle but firm. “After all, look where we are. Look at what happened. God’s wrath poured out upon the earth.” Jacob shook his head.

“We were supposed to be in paradise after the Collapse, Joseph. Eden. Not hell on Earth.”

“I am afraid I don’t have any answers for you, Jacob. Not ones you want to hear. But know that I am here for you.” Jacob nodded.

“I gotta go talk to Dr. Allen.”

“Are you sure?” Joseph asked. Jacob looked over at him, heart clenching again.

“I won’t hurt my wife like that again, Joseph. Jake is so much more than enough. Did you hear him? Did you see him just now? He’s the most wonderful thing I’ve ever done in my life. And, maybe, after we leave the bunkers, there will be kids who need homes. I don’t know. But I know that I have to do what I can to save her from more pain.” Joseph nodded solemnly.

“I hope peace comes to you swiftly, Jacob.”

“It hasn’t yet in this lifetime,” Jacob grated out. “I doubt it will start now.”

Jacob knocked at the clinic door.

“Dr. Allen.”

“Jacob. Please, call me Greg. We’ve known one another long enough, been through enough here lately to be on first name basis.” Jacob nodded.

“All right. Greg, I need to schedule a vasectomy. As soon as possible, preferably.” Dr. Allen’s eyebrows shot up.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Jacob said, no hesitation in his tone.

“All right,” Dr. Allen said, but he seemed uncomfortable. “Jacob, I want you to take some time with Rook to think about this. We don’t have the technology anymore to reverse this procedure.”

“Just…” Jacob took a deep steadying breath, “just schedule it, Doc.” Dr. Allen sighed heavily.

“I’ll do it in a month.” Jacob snarled in response, turning away and putting his hands on his hips, shoulders tightening. “Jacob.” Jacob turned back and met his eyes, fury filling him. “You
just lost a child. Give yourself time to grieve. Give both of you time to grieve before you finalize the decision.”

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“Rook, Rook, stop,” Jacob protested, still feeling the occasional dull pulling sensation downstairs as Rook climbed on top of him, kissing him desperately, her movements needy.

“Please. I need this. I need you.”

“Dr. Allen said we needed to wait a month or use a condom and condoms are in short supply, pup,” he told her in his gravelly voice. It had only been two weeks, long enough for him to mostly heal, but not quite long enough that there couldn’t still be an accidental baby made.

“Please,” Rook begged, using those big green eyes on him. He deflated. “Besides, what are the chances I get knocked up from one time?” she reasoned, tugging at his belt.

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It turned out the chances were pretty good because nine months later, Rook delivered a healthy baby. Jacob held his new child, his voice trembling with tears. Neither he nor Rook had kept their hopes up, and neither of them had agreed to know the sex until the baby was born healthy and alive.

Jacob had spent more time in the chapel in the past nine months than he had spent in a church ever in his life. He prayed, he begged, he threatened, he beseeched. He even promised Joseph he would start going to his sermons if his child survived. And here it was, tiny and pink and very, very alive, testing out its lungs by screaming in protest of its new situation outside of the warmth and safety of its mother’s womb.

“Hey baby girl,” Jacob greeted her, rocking her slowly in his big arms as she nuzzled against his chest, calming. She was just how he had imagined her. Soft dark red hair. Big blue eyes that looked just like his own, though a little lighter in color, similar to John’s. Though his own eyes were bright with happy tears, he saw that Rook still looked reserved, still looked scared, as though she thought that maybe the baby wasn’t real. “She’s beautiful, pup. Here.” He handed her back to Rook, who took her as though she was made of glass.

“She’s okay,” she whispered, but it almost sounded like a question.

“Better than okay,” Dr. Allen assured them. “All ten fingers, all ten toes, strong, healthy heart and lungs. I’ll give you two some time alone.”

“Thanks, Doc. Greg.” Dr. Allen smiled and patted Jacob on the back before leaving the room.

“I don’t even know what to name her,” Rook choked out through happy tears. “I didn’t let myself get my hopes up, so I didn’t think of names.” There was a knock at the door. It was Whitehorse, who Rook had asked for specifically. She smiled beatifically at him. “Hey, Earl.”

“Hey Rookie,” he said, tone happy. “I’ve got a name idea straight from your mother’s mythology books, if you’re interested?”

“Absolutely.”

“Phoenix,” he suggested. “Not only is it the name of the mythic bird that rose from the
ashes, but translated from Greek it means ‘dark red,’ or ‘flame.’” Jacob chuckled, touching his daughter’s soft red hair.

“Fitting,” he murmured.

“This kid better like birds,” Rook chuckled. “Phoenix Rook.”

“Phoenix Seed,” Jacob corrected, but they were both teasing the other. Joseph brought a curious, wide-eyed Jake into the room. “Here’s your baby sister, buddy,” Jacob told him as he released his uncle’s hand and stood on tiptoes at Rook’s bedside. Jake looked interested, and a little afraid.

“Thought you said there wouldn’t be any more brothers or sisters?” he questioned in a reserved little voice, crawling partly into Rook’s lap to see better.

“Heaven had other plans,” Joseph told him before either parent could respond. Jake furrowed his brow, reached a gentle hand up to touch his sister hesitantly.

“She’s not an angel anymore?” Rook chuckled.

“No, Jake. She’s your little sister. Her name’s Phoenix.”

“Hi Phoenix,” Jake said, a smile breaking across his face. “I’m your big brother Jake.” Jacob thought his heart might burst from happiness. He took Rook’s hand and kissed it. Their family was complete.

“You made a promise,” Joseph reminded Jacob. Jacob scowled nastily at his brother.

“It was a promise made under duress.”

“It was a promise made before and to God, Jacob. I take that very seriously.” Sighing deeply, Jacob opened his mouth to protest.

“I promised you I would come listen to your sermons if she lived. That doesn’t mean I believe in God, or forgive him,” he snapped. Joseph’s nostrils flared in irritation and he arced one brow upwards. Jacob sighed. “I will…come to church on Sunday. But I’m not gonna like it,” he assured his brother. Joseph looked smug.

“I look forward to you opening your heart, brother.”

Jacob mumbled something that sounded like “I’d rather lick my own asshole,” but Joseph ignored it.

“I’ll see you in the chapel at eight on Sunday, Jacob,” he said as he walked away. Jacob looked down at the sleeping baby he cradled in his arms and smiled.

“Worth it,” he told her.
Because You're My Brother

Chapter Summary

Jake and Ethan spat and Jacob intervenes with a story.

Chapter Notes

TW: mentions of physical abuse of a child
TW: mentions of vomiting

“HE PUSHED ME!” came Ethan’s shrill voice, sounding affronted and angry.

“You started it!” Jake hollered back, shoving his cousin back again hard enough to knock him on his rear. Stunned for a moment, Ethan looked owlishly up at Jake before dissolving into tears. Joseph and Jacob came over to investigate the source of the crying.

“What’s going on over here?” Joseph said softly, bending down in front of his son.

“He p-pushed me,” Ethan wailed. Jake looked guilty, but also peeved.

“He started it,” he insisted. “He took my notebook.”

“You’re supposed to share!” Ethan squawked.

“Alright, boys,” Joseph interrupted before it could devolve into a battle of two tiny wills. Jake had been acting out since his sister Phoenix had been born, and Ethan, always smaller, weaker and more timid than his cousin had recently taken to following Jake around like a puppy, driving the other boy to madness. Jake crossed angry arms over his chest, frowning nastily at Ethan.

“It’s my notebook! My mommy said so.” Joseph sighed, pushing his glasses back up his thin nose.

“Your mother also taught you how to share, Jake. Can’t Ethan have a piece of your paper?” Jake frowned, considering.

“No,” he said resolutely. Joseph glanced over at Jacob who abruptly yanked Jake off the ground and held him at arm’s length. Jake glared at his father angrily. “Put me down.”

“No,” Jacob answered him, just as stubborn. Joseph bit back a laugh. It was as though Jacob was arguing with a young copy of himself. “Not until you listen to a story.” Jake quit squirming at that. He let his legs dangle and his shoulders relaxed, looking like a kitten in Jacob’s big arms. Ethan wiped his arm across his nose, sniffling, but he also looked up at Jacob, curious.

“A story?” he asked, voice small. Jacob nodded, sitting down heavily and plunking Jake down on his lap, keeping big hands on his ribs to restrain him from leaving. Joseph sat cross-legged on the floor, intrigued about what Jacob was about to do regarding their sons’ disagreement.
“Once upon a time,” Jacob started in his gravelly tone, smirking at his brother and then looking at Jake, “There were two brothers. One brother was big and strong. He was bigger than all the other kids his age and he wasn’t afraid of anything. Well,” his voice went quiet for a moment, “almost anything. The other brother was younger,” Jacob continued, “he was, oh, about your size Ethan. Thin, but fast and smart.” He glanced at Joseph again, who smiled.

“What were their names?” Ethan asked, sniffling again and scooted into his father’s lap, though his attention was entirely on Jacob. Jacob chuckled.

“The big brother’s name was Jay,” he adlibbed quickly, “and the little brother’s name was Joe. Jay wasn’t too fond of having a little brother at first. It meant he didn’t get much attention from his mom. He had to give his clothes to his brother and he had to help his brother walk to school all the time.”

“What’s ‘school’?” Ethan interrupted again, frowning.

“It’s a place where people used to go to learn. It’s like the library we take you to now that you’re old enough to read,” Joseph explained quickly.

“Anyway,” Jacob continued, “unfortunately Jay and Joe’s parents weren’t very nice people. Especially their dad Old Mad Seed…”

“‘You get back in here, boy,’” Old Man Seed demanded. Jacob obeyed, but he didn’t hang his head, or wince like Joseph did when their father yelled. Joseph was small, and gangly and weak. “I thought I told you not to leave your books lying around,” his father snarled, reaching for his belt.

“I didn’t,” Jacob protested. It was true. They were his books, but he hadn’t left them out. In fact, he rarely took them from his room. A little flare of anger shot through him as he realized that his pesky younger brother had taken them out. His lip curled, but before he could say anything else, Joseph oozed into the room like a hesitant slime mold, sticking to the walls, his head tucked down into his shoulders in his best impression of a turtle.

“I left them out,” he said quietly. Old Man Seed turned his furious gaze on Joseph, grabbing him by the wrist and yanking him bodily across the room. He slid his belt out of its loops and bent Joseph over his leg. He looked up at Jacob, who watched in horror. Jacob had been beaten plenty of times, but so far Joseph had not experienced this abuse, just neglect. So far Joseph had never been beaten. Joseph looked up at his brother, eyes watering, looking like a lamb led to slaughter.

“I suggest you get gone unless you’d like some yourself,” their father threatened Jacob. Feeling deeply ashamed, Jacob met Joseph’s watery blue eyes once more, and stepped out of the room, breathing hard. He wasn’t the one being beaten, but he felt every slap of the leather, endured every piteous wail of pain from his brother, feeling it tearing his insides up. Feeling very sick, he stumbled out to the patchy grass and gravel excuse for a backyard and hurled, throwing up the meagre food he had been given to eat that day. Panicked that someone would see and punish him for wasting food, he buried the vomit and sat on the stoop outside dejectedly. Joseph emerged a while later, sniffling, still crying a bit and rubbing his sore backside and legs. He looked over at Jacob dejectedly.

“He hit me,” Joseph said softly. “He hit me like he hits you.”
“Yeah,” Jacob responded, clenching his jaw, “welcome to the Seed family, little brother. You’re not small enough to be cute anymore, so now you’re going to get beat anytime you do anything wrong,” he said bitterly.

“It hurts,” Joseph observed as he stood quickly after attempting to sit next to Jacob. Jacob stared over at him with hard eyes that softened after a moment.

“It helps to walk,” he told Joseph. Joseph nodded, shoved his hands in the pockets of the old jeans that had once been Jacob’s and were still too big for him. “Come on. We’ll walk to the store,” he said. Joseph walked slowly, stiffly, like an old man. He’d get used to it, Jacob thought, anger burning in his chest at the injustice of the punishment, at the unfairness that was their father and his awful, liquor-fueled rages. They made their way into the store and Jacob walked to a tall acrylic display box that held a silver lighter etched in fancy curled designs.

Jacob had wanted it for months. He had been saving for it, doing odd jobs here and there, picking up every penny he saw on the ground. He nearly had enough.

“You gotta pay for that before you open it,” the shop keeper told Joseph, who was staring longingly at a Spiderman comic book. Jacob’s lip curled in annoyance at his little brother.

“You do want that?” he asked, walking over. Joseph shrugged thin shoulders.

“Dunno,” he said in a small voice. Joseph looked away dejectedly, physically turning away from the comic book he so clearly longed for. Jacob put his hand in his pockets, knew he had the money to buy it. Joseph was a pain in his ass, followed him around like a dog, asked him questions, touched and borrowed his things. But he was his brother. And he had been beaten today. Like a dog. Like less than a dog. Jacob swallowed.

“You really want that comic book?” Jacob asked, his tone serious. Joseph looked at him with a frown on his sharp, malnourished features.

“Yes,” he said simply. Jacob nodded.

“Alright. It’s yours. But you’ll have to hide it from Old Mad Seed,” he warned. Joseph smiled at the nickname and his face lit up at the prospect of owning the comic. “You’ve gotta be more careful where you put things, and what you do. Now that he’s hit you once it’ll happen again, over and over. I’ll…I’ll try to protect you, when I can.” Joseph’s brow furrowed.

“Why?”

“Because you’re my brother,” Jacob answered firmly, picking up the comic book and setting it on the counter. He counted out the change and then passed the colorful book to Joseph, who opened it eagerly. Looking over his shoulder sadly, Jacob swallowed his disappointment at not getting the lighter. He wouldn’t get it any time soon, either. Joseph’s comic book had taken nearly half of his hard-earned money.

Two weeks later Old Man Seed found Joseph’s comic book under his mattress.

“It’s mine,” Jacob intervened before Joseph could admit his guilt. “I bought it. With my own money. It’s mine.”

“And you hid it under your brother’s bed?” the old drunk asked, squinting one eye skeptically. Jacob tilted his chin up.

“Didn’t think you’d look there,” Jacob lied. Scowling, Old Man Seed grabbed him by the
arm, yanked him over his knee. Jacob didn't fight him. He took the beating without hesitation or
sound, went outside afterwards and stretched his legs, wincing at the pain. Joseph appeared.

“Why did you do that?”

“Because you’re my brother,” Jacob answered dully. Joseph said nothing, just nodded.

A few weeks later Jacob wordlessly handed Joseph another Spiderman comic. Joseph
took it gingerly, frowning.

“What's this for?” Jacob just shrugged.

“Hide it better this time,” he advised. Every few weeks Jacob would come home with a
Spiderman comic book and Joseph would accept it. Once, a special edition was published, nearly
twice the price of a normal comic. Jacob bought it anyway with money he won arm wrestling with
bigger, older kids. He gave it to Joseph after a particularly gruesome beating for some fault or
other. Joseph took it with trembling hands and this time he bumped his forehead affectionately
against Jacob's and hugged him, standing up on his tiptoes to do so.

Jacob stood awkwardly, letting his little brother hug him before stepping away, red-

faced.

“Better not let him find that one,” he muttered, fleeing the room.

“I won't,” Joseph promised.

For the next month, Joseph could hardly be found during his free time. He went to
school and then he disappeared to do odd jobs around the neighborhood, sometimes catching rides
with friendlier neighbors to wealthier areas to mow or rake leaves.

It took nearly three months, but finally little six year old Joseph Seed had enough money.
He walked to the convenience store, skirting drug addicts and too-friendly women in skimpy
clothing. He bought what he was after, ignoring the hard, suspicious look the shopkeeper had given
him and made his way back home.

Jacob sat on the stoop chewing on stolen Pop Rocks and sipping an equally stolen bottle
of Coca-Cola.

“Those are bad for you,” Joseph said. “They’ll make your stomach explode.”

“Says who?” Jacob demanded, taking another sip and burping violently. Joseph didn’t
feel like arguing. He pulled the little package out and handed it to Jacob, who frowned. “What the
hell is this?” he demanded. Joseph blushed at Jacob’s use of a bad word but said nothing about it.

“I bought it for you,” Joseph said timidly. “I know you wanted it. You didn’t get it
because you buy me comic books instead.” Jacob stared at him for a long moment, stared at the
lighter in his hand, shiny and new and bought just for him.

“That was stupid. Could have bought yourself another comic book or three,” Jacob
pointed out, always a pragmatist, even at ten years old. Joseph faltered a bit, quirked his brow. This
was not the reaction he had been expecting. “What? You want a parade?” Jacob snarled. Joseph
shook his head sadly, backed away, starting to walk off. Jacob stared at the bright lighter in his
palm, felt the weight of it, flicked it open and closed a couple of times, sparks flying off the flint.

“Wait,” he called. “Want to go light trash on fire behind the abandoned house three blocks down?”

Joseph turned, smiled a bit, tugging his hands out of his pockets.
“Sure!”

“Well, then come on. I don’t have all day,” Jacob told him, trying and failing to remain aloof. The effect was somewhat lessened when Joseph wrapped a thin arm around Jacob’s waist and Jacob put a hand on his shoulder in response.

When their father found out about the fire, he nearly lost his mind. Furious, drunk, stumbling over himself and screaming, he ransacked the house for the matches that he insisted they must have used, swinging fists at the two brothers when they got in range. While searching for a matchbook, he found a collection of Spiderman comics. Jacob saw Joseph go very pale, saw his breathing accelerate. Old Man Seed turned to Jacob, thoroughly distracted, for the moment, from the fire that had gotten out of control and was only now a smoldering fire that various neighbors were adding trash to now that it wasn’t threatening to engulf their houses.

“You brought more of these into my house, boy?” he demanded. Jacob’s mouth was already open to say ‘yes’ when Joseph interrupted.

“They’re my comic books,” Joseph admitted, “and I started the fire, it wasn’t Jacob’s fault. I had a box of matches, but I burned those too. It’s all my fault,” he insisted. Jacob looked over at him in astonishment. Old Man Seed’s face puckered into a look of such fury Jacob thought he might die of a stroke. He hoped so, hoped the cruel man would go apoplectic and keel over, but he did not. Instead, he picked up all the comic books, pointing a trembling finger at Joseph.

“You. Come with me.” He burned all of them, making Joseph watch, and then beat him until the backs of his legs were bruised purple. He took the punishment stoically, looking at Jacob for strength. Jacob’s hand sat cold on the lighter in his pocket as he watched, powerless to do anything to stop the savage beating.

“Why did you do that?” Jacob asked quietly that night when they were curled in bed. Jacob had crawled up into Joseph’s bed to make sure he was alright, had curled himself protectively around his brother who was crying, not over the beating, but over the loss of his comic books.

“Because,” Joseph hiccupped through a sob, “you’re my brother. I had read them all anyway,” he said, trying to sound brave.

“When we get older, when we get out of here, I’ll buy you every Spiderman comic you could ever want, Joseph,” Jacob told him softly, pulling his brother close. They fell asleep curled in the comfort of one another’s brotherly embrace, Jacob’s lighter tucked in the safety of his pocket, its value exponentially increased.

“Years later,” Jacob told the boys, “Jay used that lighter to burn a very bad place down. But Jay and Joe got separated from each other because of that.”

“Did Jay and Joe ever see each other again after they got separated?” Jake asked, engrossed in Jacob’s heavily modified version of a story from his childhood. He couldn’t possibly tell his son about the graphic beatings he and Joseph and finally John had received at his father’s hands.

“Yeah, buddy. Yeah, they did. Do you understand the point of the story?” Jacob asked him.
“Yeah, um, you should share because you love your brother and because your brother will share with you.”

“Uh huh, that’s right.”

“But Ethan’s not my brother,” Jake reasoned, looking at Ethan uncertainly.

“No, but he is your family. And you love him, don’t you?” Jake thought for a second before nodding emphatically. “So don’t you want to give him some of your paper?” Another moment of consideration and Jake climbed down off Jacob’s lap, handing Ethan his notebook.

“You can have the, um, the notebook, Ethan.” He looked a little unhappy at the arrangement, but he was clearly trying to please and Jacob glowed with pride in his son.

“I just want one piece of paper to color,” Ethan told him warily, hazel brown eyes wide.

“Okay,” Jake answered, sticking his tongue between his teeth in concentration as he very slowly and very carefully tore a piece out and handed it to Ethan.

“Can you apologize for being so rude to your cousin?” Jacob asked Jake. Jake looked genuinely guilty.

“I’m sorry, Ethan,” he said, the edges of his mouth down-turned.

“It’s okay. I just want to draw Mommy a picture. I can, um, draw you a picture too if I have another piece of paper,” Ethan offered, eager to please. Jake thought, looking down at his notebook, clearly doing intense calculations. After a second he tore out another sheet of paper, laying it down very carefully next to where Ethan was now coloring intently.

Jacob glanced at Joseph, who smiled.

“Children are a gift from God,” he murmured.

“They’re certainly a gift,” Jacob agreed.


“It probably should be, but it’s not.” He reached deep into his jean pocket and extracted a tarnished cheap-looking aluminum lighter. Joseph let out a laugh full of wonder.

“After all these years?” he said, awed. “Why did you keep it all this time?” Jacob met his eyes intently.

“Because my brother paid a heavy price for it.” Joseph walked over, bumped his forehead to Jacob’s and they stood like that for a moment, head to head, Joseph’s hand on Jacob’s shoulder.

“I love you, brother.”
Start Packing

Chapter Summary

The survivors prepare to leave the bunker.

“Are you sure?”

“Rook, I’ve checked the readings every hour on the hour for the past month. Weather is good. Radiation levels are normal. It’s safe to leave the bunker.”

“What about the other two large bunkers?” she asked, dreading the answer.

“I spoke with Hurk. Faith’s Gate still isn’t safe without a rad suit. My gate…the Whitetail gate,” Jacob grated out, “is a no go according to Eli. To leave it right now would be fatal. We’ll have to wait for it to clear. We’ll figure something out.”

“It’s time, Rook. If we don’t leave here and get some source of food established before we’re out of stored food, we’re all going to be dead real soon,” Earl, her most trusted advisor, pointed out. She sighed, looked over at Joseph.

“Joseph.”

“You are our Judge, child. It is you who must decide.”

“You know I hate that shit, Joseph.”

“Language,” he scolded. Rook rolled her eyes and sighed.

“Alright,” she murmured, meeting Jacob’s gaze. “Tell everyone to start packing.”

John reached carefully for the misshapen green clay figurine of an airplane. Sharky was about to grab it from him to toss it into a box, but John jerked his hand back.

“Hey! Be careful with this!” he ordered, protectively cupping the figurine in his hand. Sharky chuckled.

“I remember when Jake made this for you. I thought you were gonna blow a gasket,” he laughed. John’s eyes crinkled with amusement as well.

“He meant well.”

“The look on your face, though,” Sharky cackled.

It had happened when Jake was barely four years old. John and Sharky had walked into their unlocked quarters, curious to find the door ajar. No one in the bunkers locked their doors, but it was odd that the door wasn’t latched.

They stepped into the bedroom area to hear happy toddler babbles. John stepped into the
bathroom and gasped, putting a hand to his chest in dismay.

“Genuine French bentonite clay, Sharky,” John had told him when they first moved into the bunker. “Only the finest. I’m saving it for after we leave the bunkers. It will keep my face soft and young and make everyone think you robbed the cradle.”

“And how much did you pay for this mud?” Sharky had asked him skeptically, holding the pot of clay as though it disgusted him. He blinked when John told him the price, momentarily made speechless in disbelief. The pot of facial clay had cost more than Sharky had made in a month when he had worked at the propane shop before he accidentally blew it up.

The mud in question had been smeared on the drawer handles, the mirror, the toilet and all over the front of little Jake Seed. He had looked up happily from where he was intently working on something.

“Unca John! I made dis for you!” he had declared proudly, holding his handiwork up so John could see it. Sharky looked at the clay, looked at the mess, looked at the child, looked at John and was prepared to grab John before he could strangle his nephew to death. John stared at the wet airplane that Jake had crafted from the expensive clay. Sharky’s husband was breathing hard, his nostrils flaring, but he closed his eyes, forced himself to take a deep breath, and hunkered down at eye level to Jake. Very carefully, he took the plane and for a moment, Sharky was just as worried that he would smash the plane just to make a point to his nephew about getting into other people’s things. Instead, John surveyed the plane, clearly crafted by someone who had never seen one outside of a book or a movie, and smiled.

“I love it,” John had told his nephew. “But we’ll have to let it dry so it won’t get ruined. Maybe we can fire it in the oven,” he had wondered out loud.

“Two hours at a hundred and fifty degrees oughta do it,” Sharky chimed in, always a whiz with anything involving heat or flame.

Once it had been fired to a deep mint green, John had coated it in clear nail polish that he also, for some reason, had owned. The plane was one of his most prized possessions.

“If you break that, I’ll break your nose,” he threatened Sharky now as they packed, wrapping the little figurine in a handkerchief fondly. “I hope I can show him a real plane, maybe take him up in one.”

“What do you think it looks like out there?”

“I don’t know. Selene said she saw buildings and trees when she first came here. It sounds like much of Hope county survived relatively unscathed,” John said, his voice hopeful.

“We’ll see,” Sharky shrugged. John took his hand tenderly.

“Together.”

Joseph was standing quietly in the chapel, staring at the painting one of his followers had made of him years ago. It was kind. In the painting, his features weren’t so angular, so hawk-like. In the painting his eyes were soft, and his cheeks rounded, his hair line wasn’t receding as it had now. Had they really all seen him this way? This saintly visage, was it what all of his followers expected him to be, still? In one hand, he held a Bible, and his other was on his own message, his own words, given to him by the Voice. Should he even bother to take it with him? The Voice
hadn’t spoken to him in years.

“Hey, love,” came Megan’s soft voice as she stepped into the chapel.

“Hello, angel,” he greeted her, not looking away from the painting.

“You’re still the Father to them,” she murmured as she stepped up behind him, taking his hand off the Book of Joseph and squeezing it. She always seemed able to read his mind. He looked to her, his face full of doubt, more wizened and pale than the painting depicted. His hair was thinning and streaks of gray had started to pop up here and there. He himself was thinner, too, his muscle definition lost to time and lack of exercise. He missed meals meditating and often went without exercising so that he would consume less food. He still had to protect his children, make sure they were fed and clothed. He thought of Rook, her quiet, confident leadership and he found himself a little jealous of it. What had happened to him in this place? Had he lost his way or was he exactly where he was meant to be?

“I don’t know how Rook does it,” he admitted after a moment’s thought. “She makes decisions as though guided by the Voice, takes on challenges in an instant, leads her people with benevolence, never worrying, always so sure of herself. They way I used to be,” he muttered, straightening his glasses, which she snatched from him, ignoring his glare and kissing him lightly on the cheek.

“Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them…who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?” Joseph sighed, but a smile crawled hesitantly across his face.

“God would send me a Bible scholar for a wife,” he chuckled.

“Well, someone has to keep you humble,” she teased. “We’ll be fine. Worrying accomplishes nothing. You’ve done what the Voice asked. You’ve kept your people safe. Now it’s time to go out into our New Eden.”

-------------------------------------------

Unlike his two brothers, Jacob was not remotely convinced that a perfect, God-given paradise was waiting on the other side of the bunker doors. What he expected instead was violence, competition and war. Humanity never changes. In a world where resources would be limited, he was sure that Locusts would come to take their hard-earned Eden. But he would not allow that to happen. In the depths of the bunker, Jacob Seed was oiling and preparing his rifle for use for the first time in seven years. He had a limited number of bullets, but he would make them all count.

It was a new world, and he would be ready for whatever it threw at him and his family.
Well, well, well

Chapter Summary

The survivors begin to adventure out into their New Eden

Chapter Notes

Short chapter this time, but the next one should be up by tomorrow.

Above all, it was quiet. There were no birds singing in the heat of what was clearly early afternoon. Jacob felt Rook reach for his hand, her breathing a little faster, a little shallower than normal. He looked over at her and saw she was already looking to him for comfort.

“It’ll be okay, Rook.” She nodded.

“I know. You’re here with me.” He gave a small smile, still grateful for her adoration of him years after their love story had begun.

“Where to first, Shorty?” Sharky asked with his gravelly voice. He was antsy. Twitchy, even. Fire. He could start fires now, and not put everyone’s lives at risk. Rook glanced to him, her face making it clear she wanted him to settle down.

The landscape, while still recognizable as Hope county, was ravaged by years-old fire and destruction. New, springy pine trees rose amidst the burned stumps and scorched branches of their elders, life arising from black, ashen death. A soft wind fluttered over them and they all flinched, collectively, but the Geiger counter did not beep or tick. Small butterflies wafted gently over a sea of pink, yellow and blue flowers, most overwhelmingly verbena, which splattered the open fields in a cacophony of highlighter pink. In the distance, they could see a column of smoke rising, about a five miles or so south west of where they stood currently.

“Maybe we should visit Dutch’s bunker, give him a proper burial?” Joseph suggested. Rook shook her head. Dutch had passed away sometime about three years ago, that or his radio had failed, but they all knew which one was more likely. He was old, and crotchety, and he had health problems even before the bombs dropped.

“I think Jess will want to take care of that,” Rook said softly, heart squeezing at the thought of the two of them, old friends. At least Hudson still talked to her occasionally over the radio. Jess had never bothered. The hurt was too deep, the rift too wide to repair using the fragile waves of a radio transmission.

“What about the jail?” Randall suggested, wiping his brow of sweat as they stood outside, simply enjoying the touch of the sun on their skin for the first time in seven years.

“That’s too close to Faith’s Gate, too much radiation still,” Jacob protested.
“We could try my ranch,” John said hopefully, looking at Rook and knowing, accepting, that it would be her decision. Rook still stared resolutely at the dark jut of smoke in the distance.

“I’m thinking that would be a good place to start,” Rook pointed. Jacob shifted next to her.

“Could be walking into a world of trouble, pup,” he rumbled. She huffed a laugh.

“Good. Means nothing’s changed. Come on,” she addressed the group, adjusting her grip on her rifle. “Let’s go.”

Joseph walked almost silently beside Rook, his sharp blue eyes taking in the landscape, their New Eden. It wasn’t quite what he imagined, but it was a start.

“You know I never thought it would work out like this, you and me walking side by side, friends not enemies. I still remember grabbing your shoulder, shoving you forward out of your own church. My hand was sweaty. Clammy. Must have felt awful.” Joseph chuckled.

“The cuffs were worse. You really cinched them down.”

“Sorry about that,” Rook answered, chagrined even years later.

“Well, you were a rookie,” Joseph reminded her, looking at his sister-in-law fondly.

“For the record, singing ‘Amazing Grace’ to a half-conscious deputy is easily the most creepy thing you’ve ever done. Scared the shit out of me.”

“Language,” Joseph said automatically, but he was distracted by movement in the distance. “Is that…?”

“Holy shit. We can still eat hamburgers,” Sharky crowed as they watched a herd of wild cattle grazing placidly in the distance.

“Don’t get too excited, we’ll still have to catch them,” Rook reminded him. “Let’s not get too close.”

“Good call, Dep,” he answered, but he still looked delighted.

“Oh my God, look at that,” Rook cackled as she looked over her shoulder and saw white letters in the distance. “It survived hahahaha!” she pointed and punched John in the shoulder. He gave her a sour look and kept walking, supremely annoyed that of all the things destroyed by fire and time, the gigantic, altered “NO” sign to the north east was not one of them.

Randall looked through his binoculars.

“That’s not the only thing,” he chuckled, handing the binoculars to Jacob.

“Ugh,” was Jacob’s only response as he handed them back. Distantly, the burned-out frame of what was once an enormous statue of Joseph still jutted up into the sky. Joseph’s cheeks burned distinctly red and he had the decency to look embarrassed, tucking his head down a bit.

“It was intended to encourage our followers,” he commented. Rook stuck her tongue in her cheek and looked at him wanly.

“Uh huh.”
“Let’s just go,” Joseph suggested, scratching the back of his neck sheepishly.

They hiked the five long miles toward the smoke, using their water carefully, though they passed several streams. Rook collected samples to take back for testing, unsure yet whether it would be safe to drink. Halfway through their journey, Maggie darted off, sniffing something intently and vanishing into the landscape. Rook looked after her unhappily, but Jacob put a big hand on her shoulder.

“She knows where home is, Rook. She’ll be back.”

When, at last, they reached the source of the flames, they were unsurprised to see that it originated from next to the Lamb of God church. It was a massive bonfire composed of branches, various trash and pine needles. Over the smell of that, they could detect the scent of meat cooking, barbeque. A figure stepped out from around the fire, hands on their hips.

“Well, well, well. Imagine seeing y’all here.”
A continuation of the last chapter, so also a short one. A longer chapter will be up this weekend once I'm done revising my Master's thesis. Damn you IRL responsibilities!

The massive, lumbering bear standing next to the man who had spoken charged Rook and the rest of her party, except for Sharky, scrambled wildly to get out of the way, raising weapons.

“Stop!” Rook called to her group, “don’t shoot Cheeseburger!” The old bear tackled her to the ground, licking her face happily and making a deep lowing growl in his throat that she recognized as a sound of happiness. She spluttered when he licked her again, wiping her mouth and sitting up as she scratched behind his ears happily, kissing him on his massive forehead. “Hey Wade!” she greeted the man who had addressed them.

“Deputy Rook. You’re lookin’ a little pale,” Wade observed. She chuckled, stepping forward and hugging him.

“You’re one to talk. Jerome!”

“Hey, Deputy,” the pastor greeted.

“You’ve got some gray hairs,” Rook commented with a laugh.

“Yes, well, time comes for all of us. But I don’t worry about it too much. Proverbs sixteen and verse thirty-one: ‘Gray hair is a crown of splendor; it is attained in the way of righteousness,’ and lest we all forget it, Proverbs twenty and verse twenty-nine, ‘The glory of young men is their strength, but the splendor of old men is their gray hair,” he quoted with a toothy grin. Rook laughed and pulled him into a crushing hug.

“Don’t ever change, Preacher.”

“How’re you doin’, Rook?” Grace said, walking up, her hand in…oh…her hand in Joey Hudson’s.

“Oh, uh, hey,” Rook greeted, a little taken aback.

“What? You’ve never seen a lesbian couple before, Rook?” Joey teased, pulling away from Grace to hug Rook.

“I think you know the answer to that question, given that you’re speaking to the thottiest bisexual in this county other than John and Sharky,” Rook riposted. On that note, Joey’s gaze shifted from Rook’s face and onto John, who stood awkwardly with Sharky between him and Joey. “What’s up, fuckface?”

“Deputy,” he greeted placidly. Joey clenched her jaw and forced herself to look away.

“She went to bury her uncle and left the county. Wouldn’t take a radio, just her weapons and her pack. Said she couldn’t stand to be here anymore.” Rook felt her eyes watering with tears, swallowed a lump in her throat.

“I see. Well. I hope she finds someplace to make her happy.” Jacob put a comforting hand on Rook’s shoulder. “Well, uh, as you can see, as we announced on the radio, we’re coming out of the bunkers. How long have you all been out?”

“Only about a week,” Jerome answered. “It’s nice to feel the sun on my face again. We haven’t explored much. We mostly focused on finding food.”

“Speaking of,” Sharky interrupted, his stomach growling.

“Help yourself,” Wade told him, leading him to a grill where a rack of pork ribs were dripping fat. Rook’s mouth watered.

“Jacob, you want some?” she asked him as she took a couple of the ribs. He looked vaguely nauseated.

“No, I’m fine for now, pup, thank you.” Rook realized and her eyes widened.

“Oh. Sorry. We’ll, uh, we’ll maybe see if any chickens survived the Collapse.”

“Oh yes,” Wade told her. “I was holed up with a bunch of critters, even old Cheeseburger here. Had myself a veritable Ark, but even without that, plenty of stuff survived. Plenty of delicious stuff,” he observed, taking a bit of rib.

“So, Rook, what is the plan now?” Joseph asked.

“Well,” Rook said, looking around. “It seems to me it’s time to start moving into areas and planting gardens and catching animals. But for now, let’s eat and we’ll head back. I literally cannot wait to take Jake and Phoenix outside for the first time.”

“Hey, and maybe we can find a willing lady friend,” Sharky purred, kissing John on the temple.

“You’re incorrigible,” he scolded, but his expression was one of amusement.

“Uh, I think it’s pronounced ‘incredible,’ Johnny Boy, bein’ in the bunker so long has obviously started to scramble your brains.” John gave a martyred sigh and pulled Sharky closer for a kiss.

“You’re lucky you’re so pretty, babe,” John told him, a veiled insult that Sharky immediately perceived, looking irritated.

“I’ll have you know I only had to take the GED test three times before I passed it, thank you very much,” Sharky told him.

“Have there been any issues with enemies?” Jacob cut in, eyes sharp.

“Not so far,” Jerome said, “but we’ve heard news of gangs roaming outside the county.”

“God will keep us safe,” Joseph said softly. Jacob patted his rifle.

“Well, if He’s as lazy as He’s always been, I’ll keep us safe instead,” he snarked.
“Jacob,” Joseph started softly.

“The Lord helps those that help themselves,” Jerome chimed in, turning so Jacob could see the shotgun he had strapped on his back. “Always best to play it safe when it comes to defending and protecting those we love.”

“Amen, preacher,” Jacob said dryly.
Of Dinosaurs and Men

Chapter Summary

The children are taken outside for the first time and Rook and the Seeds realize what a dangerous world their New Eden can be.

Terror. Pure unadulterated terror was all little Ethan Seed felt as his mother and father carried him outside and sat him down in something they called ‘grass.’ It was itchy. He didn’t like it. There was something called ‘dirt’ too and he liked that even less. It was like ‘dust,’ or ‘garden soil’ but worse. His thin ribcage working hard to draw in gasping breaths of air, his wide brownish-hazel eyes took in the massive expanse of everything and he felt panic rising. He clung to his mother’s hand, trembling.

“I don’t like it. I want to go back inside,” he cried, staring up into an endless light blue abyss. “We’re gonna fall off!” he told her, frustrated that no one was as worried about this as he was. An equally frightened, but more stoic Jake Seed let go of his mother’s hand, staggering his legs like a newborn deer, holding his arms out in preparation to grab something to prevent this fall that Ethan insisted would happen. But he didn’t fall off the ground. More curious now than scared, he leaned down to survey a tiny green lizard crawling over a blade of grass.

“Look! It’s a dinosaur,” he declared confidently.

“Is it gonna eat us?” Ethan asked, half-crying, his small, timid voice cracking with fear.

Other children were beginning to emerge from the bunker with their parents, all a mixture of terror, excitement, curiosity or wonder. A bird began to sing nearby and all the small eyes in the gathering of children turned to locate it, looking around wildly for the source of the noise.

It chirruped and landed on a tall sunflower stalk nearby, studiously picking seeds out of the center of one of the wilting yellow flowers. It was a chickadee.

“Bird!” one of the children declared, a better judge of taxonomy than Jake Seed who was now labelling everything he saw with magnanimous, excited guesses.

“Look,” he declared, gesturing toward the sunflower. “A tree!”

“Not quite,” Jacob corrected after he stifled a belly laugh at his son’s antics. “Those are trees.”

Jake stood for a moment, stupefied at the sheer number and size of what were ‘trees.’ Ethan was still clinging to his mother’s legs, face pallid in the bright sun.

“Ethan!” Jake hollered, his face full of astonishment, “TREES!!”

“Want to go see one up close?” Rook asked her son, balancing baby Phoenix on her hip. Phoenix was gazing in bewilderment at the bright blue sky and blowing spit bubbles.

“Yes!” Jake yelled immediately, amped up on cake they had made in the bunker and excited to be, at last, free to frolic for the first time in his life. He leapt upwards, his handmade flip-
flops popping loudly. “Ethan!” He approached his terrified cousin and tugged him inexorably away from his mother, “Let’s go!!!” His confidence somewhat bolstered by Jake’s bold behavior, and by the fact that no one had, in fact, fallen up in to the sky, and the dinosaur hadn’t eaten anyone, Ethan scurried after Jake and Jacob. Joseph followed close behind and he suddenly tugged off his shirt, sighing as the sun flickered across his back and faded tattoos.

“Well, that didn’t take long,” Jacob commented dryly. Joseph snorted.

“Some sun would do you good, Jacob.”

“Have you seen the color of my hair? You see these freckles?”

“What freckles? They’re all gone. You can literally glow in the dark, babe,” Rook commented, grinning. Scowling, Jacob tugged his shirt off, revealing his patchwork of scars. Rook’s eyes travelled over him, but her gaze was lascivious, not pitying. She had never judged him for his scars. “Lookin’ good, Big Red,” Rook purred. The children were running ahead of them, Ethan shedding his terror for curiosity, finally. He and Jake took turns trying to help one another climb one of the pine trees, but there were no low branches, only rough bark and a straight trunk. They gave up eventually and began to do what all little boys do at some point in their lives: dig in the dirt for the mere sake of digging in the dirt. They found and had identified for them earthworms, beetles, grass roots and ants.

Bored of digging and playing with the other children after a couple of hours, Jake eventually strayed deeper into the small wooded area that was close to the bunker, hearing an interesting sound. It sounded like…beads? Or maybe something hard being rapidly struck against something. He stepped forward warily, intent upon finding the source of the sound. Stretched out on a wide rock was a massive piebald Western rattlesnake, easily six feet long. The two surveyed one another, the snake sizing Jake up with little flicks of its tongue. Its rattle, the source of the noise, was still flickering rapidly. Jake felt a shiver down his spine. He wasn’t sure why it was making that noise, but he knew that this animal did not look very nice. This animal looked a lot like Kaa from The Jungle Book…a snake?

Frightened, he took a step back and a branch snapped under his foot, making him jump. The snake lunged backwards, opening a threatening mouth and unfolding four long, sharp fangs. Jake froze, waiting to see what would happen. Finally, seemingly convinced that while Jake was not a threat, he also was not going to leave, the snake decided to leave instead, slithering off the stone and away into the grass. Relieved, Jake retreated, returning to his parents with a face pale and sobered by the experience.

“You okay, love?” Rook asked him when she saw his worried expression.

“I saw a, uh, snake,” he told her, frowning. Her face went very white and then very red.

“Are you okay? Did it bite you?” He shook his head and Rook huffed out a relieved breath, looking to Jacob. “I think it’s time to teach the children how to identify things they should stay away from.” He nodded adamantly, picking Jake up and hugging him.

“Want a piggyback ride, kid?” he asked, already putting Jake on his shoulders.

“What are those?” Jake asked, gesturing toward black-gray storm clouds that were rolling in menacingly. Just as Jacob was about to answer, Joseph walked up, looking concerned.

“Jacob,” Joseph greeted. He was trying not to look panicked and failing. “Have you seen Ethan?”
Ethan, his confidence long-fled since he lost track of what direction his family and his home were, was crying softly, big tears dripping down his face as he stumbled through the vast landscape. There was a whispering through the trees as pine needles rattled together and the wind picked up. He smelled something weird. It smelled like the air filters his father had to help clean in the bunkers. It was an odd, electric smell. He didn’t know a word for it, but it was ozone, carried in by the developing storm.

A cold drop of water landed on him and he jumped, looking up, only to feel more drops pattering softly on his face. He licked a few drops off his lips and continued wandering, heart pounding. He was too afraid to call for help, was scared it would attract a monster, maybe a dinosaur, or something worse like a ‘bunny.’ He didn’t know how big bunnies were, but those buckteeth depicted in his books looked distinctly dangerous.

Pushing a low-growing pine branch out of his way, he stumbled upon an open clearing that overlooked a large body of turquoise-blue water. Just inside the clearing, the ground ended, dropping off in a shear granite cliff. A large wood and metal bridge was mounted at the edge of the cliff face and stretched over the water to the other side of the gulch where the water flowed lazily, raindrops painting gentle ripples across the surface. Ethan’s initial reaction, as always, was caution tinged with fear. But then he spotted it: soft, pink-white petals that fluttered down and landed on the water’s surface delicately, round, orange-red spheres that dangled enticingly – the tree was growing nearly out of the side of the cliff face, just to the left of the far side of the bridge. It was beautiful. It called to him. Mesmerized, Ethan crossed the bridge, his knuckles white on the guard rails. Near the tree and only about ten feet away from the end of the bridge was an old pickup truck and two tattered rad suits. A little farther away were cracked green barrels of something long-evaporated.

Ignoring this, Ethan clambered toward the tree, using rocks and brush to hold him up as he reached, reached, reached for one of the fruit that was just outside his grasp. Just was his fingers brushed the fruit, two things happened. First, came the loud padding of feet behind him. Second, came a cry.

“Ethan!” Caught off guard, Ethan lost his grip, scrambling for purchase and failing. He slipped down the long incline and splashed into the water below. A large grey form plunged in after him, grabbing him and dragging him to the other side of the shore away from the tree. Ethan coughed, wiping his black-brown hair out of his face and shivering from cold. Maggie shook her fur out and licked him with a little disgruntled growl.

“Ethan, what were you thinking?” Megan gasped, picking him up and holding him protectively to her front, mindless of the dampness that was being transferred to her clothing.

“Mommy,” he cried, cuddling closer to her.

“Good girl, Maggie, good girl,” the adults that came and gathered around all told her, scratching her belly when she flopped over on the ground with a whine.

Joseph looked to his brother again, breathing a sigh of relief and wiping his forehead.

“Parenting is going to be much harder outside the bunkers,” he fretted aloud. Jacob nodded, struggling with Jake who had flipped backwards out of his piggyback seat atop his father’s shoulders, giggling.

“What do you suppose that is?” Jacob asked, pointing at the peach tree and returning
Jake safely to the ground. Joseph frowned, crossing the bridge, the light drizzle making the way slick. He carefully plucked a peach from the tree and tasted it, his vision going a little hazy with a familiar sensation.

Returning to the rest of the gathered group, he held the peach up for his brother to inspect.

“The children are not to eat of that tree,” Joseph ordered. “It may bear the wisdom and gift of God, but it is too dangerous for ones so young.” He turned to his son. “Do you hear me, Ethan? You must not eat of that tree until you are adult.”

“He shouldn’t eat of it even then,” Megan protested, frowning. Joseph met her eyes. The rain began to pour harder and thunder rumbled through the mountains. Jacob went quite pale and started shaking. Rook put a gentle hand on his arm.

“It’s just the storm,” she murmured. “I’m right here.”

“I had hoped I wouldn’t feel like that again,” he admitted, his eyes wider than normal, his PTSD, a long-dormant demon, rising from slumber at the sound of thunder.

“Alright kids, time to go back inside and eat some lunch,” Rook called as they walked back to the area around John’s Gate.

“Nooo!” came a cacophony of little voices, the gaggle of children still exploring everything in their parents’ view.

“Brother,” John greeted Jacob as he walked back up. Parents and children were filing back into the bunkers, shaking off water as they went. “What is that?” Jacob handed it to him and he sniffed it before taking a bite and blinking blearily. “Well, that could be problematic,” he said softly. “Hopefully not all the edible plants have been tinged with hallucinogenic properties.”

“There were a couple of Bliss barrels near where this tree grew. It was right next to the place where Joseph and I…” John nodded.

“It wasn’t the only barrel,” he pointed out, gesturing toward the top of a green barrel that just barely stuck out of the sand that had piled around the bunker’s entrance.

Joseph waited until the children and other adults were inside. Lightning lit the sky amidst the dark gray of storm clouds. The thunder rolled and Jacob winced. Taking the remaining fruit from John’s grasp, Joseph held it before him like poor Yorick’s skull, considering it.

“Only time will tell if this is a blessing or a curse. Come, brothers. Let us go inside.”

“Rook?” Jacob called, adjusting Phoenix in his grip. Rook had handed her to him as he walked toward the doors, but she hadn’t joined him. John took the baby from him, stepping inside wordlessly. “Are you coming?” Rook was standing in the rain, head tilted back, arms outstretched, palms up, a small smile on her face. She turned to her husband.

“I’ll be in soon. It feels good to have the rain on my skin again.” He nodded, stepping back outside, staying just under the awning over the bunker entrance. “You don’t have to stay out here with me,” Rook murmured as another flash of lightning illuminated her face in stark white light. Jacob cleared his throat, shoving his hands in his pockets as the answering thunder shook the ground. Jacob looked a little rueful as Rook frowned at him, concerned.

“You know I promised God I’d listen to Joseph’s sermons if He…ugh, if He answered
my prayers about Phoenix?” Rook chuckled, splashing in a puddle as she listened.

“Yeah. As I recall you haven’t missed a sermon since.”

“Yeah, well, much as I still disagree with a lot of what God has said and done, a sermon a few weeks ago kinda stuck with me.” He stepped into the rain, his red hair getting plastered to the top of his head by big drops of rain. He took Rook’s waist and pulled her close.

“What’s that?” she whispered, gaze flicking to his pink lips as she bit her bottom one.

“‘Don’t ask me to leave you,’” Jacob murmured and Rook almost objected before she realized he was quoting something. “‘Wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God,’” he told her, brushing a wet strand of blonde hair behind her ear and leaning down to kiss her. She put a hand behind his head to pull him closer, and though thunder rumbled through the valley again, this time Jacob didn’t flinch.
House and Home

Chapter Summary

John and Sharky go looking for home.

Sharky had not seen John so close to breaking down and crying in years. He stood, his shoulders slumped, his face crumpled, his hands dangling limp at his sides looking into the hangar. He had insisted on coming here, just a week after they first stepped outside the bunker. It had been a mistake.

“Johnny,” Sharky murmured, putting a hand gently onto John’s shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“Why would someone do this? I thought we had all…reached an agreement. Made peace.”

“You know as well as I do that not everyone had moved on, babe,” Sharky told him. “Then or now. We still need to be careful. Old grudges die hard, and there was, you know, straight up murder committed by both sides.” John sighed, reaching a hand out to touch the devastation. Within the hangar, Affirmation was scattered into burnt, destroyed pieces. Someone had set off a stick of dynamite, or a grenade within the plane and then dismantled it further, additionally graffitizing the largest pieces with the taunting word “NO” in white spray paint. The plane, John’s prize possession, was utterly destroyed, irreparable. “You okay?” Sharky asked for a long moment. John let out the breath he had been holding, pressing his eyes closed hard for a moment before opening them. He gave Sharky a forced smile.

“It’s just a plane,” he said, but his voice was trembling and his eyes were glittering with unescaped tears. “Let’s go see what other devastation was wrought on my property,” he suggested, voice dull.

They picked their way through the property, pleased to find that at least most other things, the buildings included, were still intact. Most of John’s large legal reference collection was untouched, though a few of them had been pilfered and burned in the fireplace. It was obvious someone or someones had been through here, using the space as a temporary shelter. It must have been a while ago, though. Dust sat thick and heavy on almost every surface. Crinkling his nose, John ran a finger through it, starting to wipe it off on his shirt, thinking better of it, and wiping it onto Sharky’s, who punched him gently on the upper arm in irritation.

“Too bad we don’t have power. Night’s comin’, and it’s gonna get cold.”

“Provided the batteries are still intact, we can have power,” John told him. “Just a moment.” He stepped back out into the hangar, and then returned. Lights flickered on, and they both jumped when they heard a clicking and then whirring sound. Joseph’s voice filled the great room from scratchy speakers.

“…see that there is more love all around you.” Sharky stepped closer to John, gauging his mood. More than anything, he looked tired. “All the pain and suffering you spread will not help us in the long run. These actions—” Sharky cut the message off with a press of his finger and then pulled John in for a gentle kiss.
You are not that guy anymore, Johnny. You know, I used to call you ‘that smirking fuckface John Seed,’ and now, now I want to punch whoever fucked up your plane. You’ve earned forgiveness, John. And if anyone disagrees, well, I will just have to punch them right in the dick.”

“Smirking fuckface,’ really?” John asked, a smile sliding over his features. Sharky blushed.

“To be fair, you do smirk, and you really were a fuckface, dude.”

John reached a finger out and fast-forwarded the message a bit, tilting his head to listen.

“I’ve seen you die young. I’ve seen you die old. The difference between the two outcomes is how much love you let into your heart.” He turned to Sharky, cupped his cheek in a hand.

“If my brother is correct, I am going to live to a ripe old age, because I love you,” he said, voice filled with passion and he kissed Sharky hard on the lips before pulling back slightly, “I love you,” he kissed again, pushing Sharky insistently toward the upstairs bedroom they had shared so many years ago, “I love you.”

“Don’t wear that out,” Sharky muttered, putting a thumb on John’s lower lip tenderly. He was still awkward about those three words, still blushed when he said them, which told John he really meant them every time they shyly issued from his mouth.

Walking upstairs with Sharky in tow by his hand, John found the bed still intact, though it had been used. He stripped the sheets off and found some clean ones, or at least previously clean ones. They smelled musty, but they would have to do for the time being. Turning back to Sharky, he kissed him roughly, running a hand up and into his fine brown hair, tugging him down onto the bed.

“It’s good to be home,” he admitted as he rolled away from Sharky a couple of hours later, panting and glistening with sweat. Sharky wiped himself off and tugged his boxer briefs back up, adjusting himself thoroughly, to John’s amusement.


“Our home,” he corrected, voice hurt. Sharky glanced over at him with a small sigh.

“I didn’t have much in this world, but my trailer…my bunker…all my stuff. It’s prolly destroyed but…that was my home. In the forest overlookin’ the Henbane.”

“And the jail,” John cut in dryly. Sharky huffed at him.

“Like I said,” he continued, raising his voice, “it wasn’t much, but it was mine. I know people made fun of me, talkin’ about what trash my parents were, how my grandma raised good-for-nothin’ Charlemagne Boshaw and sure, maybe she didn’t do the best parenting job, but her place was special to me, and I…I ain’t ready to accept that it’s gone yet.”

“Sharky, we don’t know that it’s gone. We’ll just have to wait for radiation to die down in the area and we can check,” John suggested softly. “In the meantime, you have both places. This is our place, and that land will still be your place. Okay?” Sharky met his eyes, looking a little pained.

“Alright. Hey, on a scale of one to shove-a-crescent-wrench-up-our-asses, how pissed do you think Nick would be if we took Carmina out for a spin if she’s still there?” John laughed.
“What Nick doesn’t know won’t hurt him. We’ll go see what kind of condition she’s in tomorrow. In the meantime, since the solar panels are working, there should be warm, filtered water to shower with now that it’s had some time on. Join me in the shower?”

“Johnny, if I ever answer that question with ‘no,’ just go ahead and kill me cuz I have clearly lost my mind.” John laughed and slid out of the bed, following Sharky to the shower, pinching his asscheek as he stepped through the door. “Oh fuck!” Sharky yelled.

“Oh, come on, I didn’t pinch you that – oh Jesus!” The two fled like mad, darting out of the bathroom and down the stairs. The telltale snuffling and snorting of the skunk that was in the bathroom could be heard even downstairs. It was agitated, and it was now in their bedroom.

“I’m gonna blow a hole in that little fucker,” Sharky said, grabbing his gun.

“No, it’ll spray!”

“Fuck. Then what do we do?” Sharky asked, fiddling with his shotgun. John sighed.

“I guess we’ll just have to wait for it to leave.”

“Well, goddamn. I was really looking forward to that shower,” Sharky admitted sadly.

“Same. In the meantime, let’s grab our packs so we aren’t running around the house mostly naked, just in case there’s something worse in here.”

“You know, in a way, I think this is just some karmic justice,” Sharky rambled as they dressed from their packs in the great room. John wrinkled his nose.

“What exactly do you mean by that?” he asked with a frown.

“Well, uh, back when I was still callin’ you a smirkin’ fuckface, I also had this genius plan to turn a skunk lose in your house. Specifically in your shitter.” For a moment, John was very still, his face blank, but then he burst into laughter.

“I would have fucking killed you, Sharky Boshaw.”

“You woulda had to catch me first,” Sharky shot back with a grin. “Oh shit, there it is,” he said suddenly, pointing at the skunk, which had meandered down the stairs and was sniffing the air with curiosity.

“No, Sharky don’t!” John yelled, but it was too late. Sharky raised his shotgun and pulled the trigger, the skunk sprayed and John spluttered. Furious, he wiped warm, greasy liquid off his face, resisting the urge to vomit, his eyes already watering.

“I might still kill you, Sharky Boshaw,” he threatened, holding his hands out in disgust, his abdomen jolting with nausea.

“If it makes you feel any better,” Sharky said regretfully, “it got me too.” John sighed.

Beneath the Stars Reprise

Chapter Summary

Jacob and Rook have an argument and an agreement.
*Smut alert.

Jacob heaved in an enormous breath, his hands on his knees where he stood, bent at the waste, gulping in oxygen.

"I did tell you that you were getting old," Rook reminded him, breathing a little harder herself. Jacob had insisted he wanted to go for a run in the cool evening air, but his age and the fact that they had just spent the better part of seven years inside a bunker had caught up with him. He was no longer as spry as he used to be. He was nearly fifty-five years old, and his current struggle to catch his breath, and the lightening of his bright orangey-red hair clearly attested to it. Rook put a gentle hand on his back when he shot her a nasty look.

"Don’t…start," he forced out between breaths. Rook grabbed a single strand of his hair and plucked.

"Ooh, look at that, it’s a grey hair.” Jacob glowered at her.

"You thinkin’ of leavin’ me for a younger man?” he asked, and from his tone he was half-serious. To lighten his mood, Rook laughed, gesturing him toward her.

"Come here, Big Red.” She forced him close as he stood and took another enormous breath, running her hand through his hair. “I will love you whether your hair is red, or gray, or gone. I will love you when you turn fifty-five, and I will love you when you’re seventy. I love you. Now, lucky for you, I anticipated this happening when you insisted you wanted to go on a run. Hang on.” Rook unzipped the backpack she had insisted on carrying, pulling out a thin blanket and spreading it over the grass. She also pulled out a radio.

“Rook to Shark, Rook to Shark, come in.”

“Comin’ in loud and clear, chica,” came Sharky’s gravelly voice.

“Looks like we may be back a little later than intended. Probably morning. Think you can handle the rugrats until then, buddy?”

“Bowchickawowwow,” Sharky responded and Rook laughed. “No problem, chica. You and Jacob have fun. Just not, you know, too much fun. I know from personal experience than sand inside an orifice is a really unco—”

“Thank you, Sharky, duly noted,” Rook laughed. “We’ll see you in the morning.”

“Ten-four, Dep.”

“I still can’t believe we’ve been out of that bunker for a month,” Rook breathed, surveying the sky, which was beginning to darken.
“I can’t believe Sharky convinced John to leave his lodge and come back to the bunker camp, for any period of time.”

“Yeah, well, a shortage of fresh food would make anyone inclined to come back, I think. How are plans for getting people out of yours and Faith’s Gates?” Jacob sighed.

“Slow. And tedious. We’ll have to be careful. Faith’s Gate will be easier than mine. I’ve been in contact with Eli, and they’re running low on food. We’ll probably have to suit up and send people with food.” Rook hummed a displeased noise. “Rook—”


“Pup…” he reached out and took her upper arm gently, but she tugged away, clenched her jaw. She knew the look she saw on his face. He had already volunteered, because he had been in charge of the plan and had decided he needed to go, probably as part of some mid-life crisis “oh no I’m getting old” panic, Rook thought nastily, frustrated with her spouse.

“When are you going?” she ground out finally, voice resigned.

“In a couple weeks,” he admitted, hunching his shoulders a little, fearing her inevitable wrath. She turned away from him with an angry sound. “Hey.” He turned her back toward him and used a long forefinger to force her chin up to meet his eyes. “I’ll be fine.” They were quiet for a long moment, and Jacob finally sat down on the spread blanket, patting the spot beside him. “Heard anything from the more…resistant Resistance members lately?” he asked as Rook sat, pointedly not leaning against him. She sighed again and he thought he saw her eye twitch.

“We’ll have to be careful in some areas. Jerome warned me. Some of them are still holding grudges, probably the same ones responsible for destroying John’s plane.” She shook her head, pulling her knees up and lacing her fingers together around them, compressing herself where she sat. Her voice was quiet, frustrated. “They’ll eat a shit sandwich if it means we have to smell their breath,” she said bitterly. “The only solace is that Jess didn’t join them.” Jacob hummed in response, rubbing Rook’s back. She didn’t resist him and finally relaxed after a moment. “Do you remember that night when I drove you out here, back when you were still my prisoner, before the bombs?” Rook asked him.

“I’m still your prisoner,” Jacob whispered, pulling her close. “Until the day I die,” he promised, kissing her temple. “And yes,” he said, laying her down tenderly, “I remember. I remember kissing you…like this.” He demonstrated. “I remember pulling your blouse off, like this… I remember slipping my thumb under your panties and sliding them down. I remember kissing you…here.” Rook gasped and arched up into his mouth, which was pressed earnestly against her warm slit. His tongue lapped inside her, and his fingers caressed the pale skin on the insides of her thighs gently. He used a teasing finger to stroke her as he kissed and lapped at her, one hand pinning her to the ground by her belly.

Rook came with a small cry, grasping at Jacob’s hair, pushing his face hard against her pelvis. He rose with a gasp and a growl, tugging his zipper open and ramming into her, eliciting a yelp from her and a purr from him. His pelvis slammed into hers, pressing her into the ground with deep rutting motions as he pinned her arms to her sides by the wrists. He bent and pressed soft lips against her neck, biting and sucking, marking her, for the thousandth time, as his.

“I love you,” he told her as he slowed his rhythm, his hips a dance of pleasure against her own, bringing her to climax again and again as he pulled her back off the blanket, held her close against him like a desperate man, his breaths coming hard and hot next to her ear, driving her to
madness with arousal. She slipped her hands beneath his shirt and raked short nails down his back, stuttering over scars gently, careful to raise gooseflesh but not welts with her urgent clawing. Rook ran her hand down under his pants to grasp at a solid butt cheek, squeezing it. Growling, Jacob cupped the back of her head, forcing her lips to his, gasping into her mouth, lapping at her lips, biting her lower one between sharp white teeth before he released it and whispered again, “I love you.”

“I love you too,” she assured him as she felt the hard globe of his ass clenching, felt him tense and heard him give a stuttered grunt as he emptied himself inside her.

When they rolled apart, the stars were twinkling gently above them, the aurora occasionally flickering between them like a phantom rainbow. They held one another’s hand and Jacob pulled Rook tight against him, cuddling her close.

“Don’t leave me again,” Rook begged. “Jacob, I’ve made a point of not asking you for anything if I can avoid it, but I am begging you now, please don’t go on that expedition. Let others go. You don’t have anything to prove, to me or anyone else.” He stroked the top of her head, kissed it, sighed.

“Rook, the mark of a good leader is being willing follow your men into danger.” She scoffed.

“Jacob, this is not the army. And you’re not their leader. Not anymore.” He sat up abruptly.

“I know that,” he protested, frowning. Her eyes were glittering with unescaped tears. She rammed the heel of her hand into her eyes to smear them away and curled her lip.

“I am asking one thing, Jacob. Just one. Please."

“I’m not leaving my friends to do my work for me, pup.” Rook hissed out a sound of irritation.

“No, but you’ll leave your children fatherless.” His own lip curled at that comment.

“Rook, I’ll be fine,” he griped, raising his voice.

“You don’t know that, Jacob. We don’t know anything about this new world yet.” Jacob let out a soft breath of air.

“Rook. Pup. Can we sleep on this? Please?” Rook breathed in hard through her nostrils.

“Fine,” she snapped, and laid back down, stiff as a board against him. Ignoring her pouting, Jacob pulled her insistently close, stroking her hair with gentle fingers. “Stop that,” Rook snapped.

“Make me,” he challenged. She said nothing more. At some point, she finally relaxed, either because she had fallen asleep or because she had decided to stop pouting, Jacob wasn’t sure.

When he awoke in the morning, however, Rook was gone.
Realistically, there was no way Rook could have known that there was going to be a stampede of wild cattle when she got up to go for a walk to cool her head that morning. That said, it didn’t lessen her irritation at herself as the huge beasts trampled around her, narrowly missing her in their panic. She ran with them, supposing that to be the best plan of action to avoid dying. It figured that she would bitch Jacob out about putting himself at risk, only to get herself killed doing something infinitely dumber. She cursed under her breath as she ran, panting. She heard a shrill whistle and a set of hoofbeats that sounded different from the panicking steps of the blustering, smelly cattle that ran next to her.

“Hey chica! If you can hear me, get yourself to the right of the herd! With a quickness!”

“Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck,” Rook muttered, darting behind one animal and barely avoiding a wild kick from another. She skirted around yet one more, making her way to the right to get to the far edge of the herd. A large man on a red horse was galloping madly alongside the herd, his left hand extended. He got right alongside her.

“Grab my hand!” he hollered. With no other choices available to her, Rook obeyed, feeling her arm nearly yanked from its socket as he slung her up and over the back of his horse so that she was abruptly sitting behind him. “You’ll forgive me, but I gotta finish what I started here,” he yelled over his shoulder. He raised a rifle, and with a nearly unbelievable shot from a moving horse, nailed one of the animals right in the back of the head, dropping it instantly. He pulled his horse up to a stop and climbed off, helping Rook down as well. “Well, that coulda gone to shit real quick. Sorry about that, didn’t realize anybody would be–”

“Tobias?!” Rook said, utterly shocked. He stopped, turned back to her, his eyebrows flying up wildly.

“Hel Rook, well I’ll be goddamned! Come here!” he demanded, pulling her into a hard hug.

“I thought you were in Texas?! I thought you were in the army?! And what happened to your eye?!”

“Oh, this old thing?” he asked, tapping the eyepatch over where his left eye used to be. “Yeah, that actually answers the second question, which is, I was in the Army, but I wasn’t after I lost an eye, and also technically the army doesn’t even exist anymore. As to why I’m here, well, I figured this was the last place I knew I had people who I cared about, so I thought I’d try to find Earl, and you, of course.” Rook frowned and hit him in the chest, her face clenching with irritation.

“You never called him. Or me. What the hell, Toby?” He pulled a face at the old nickname, and then gave a small, pained smile.

“After Wendy and Emily died, I couldn’t see anyone, couldn’t talk to anyone. I just needed to get the fuck away from here. I signed up for another tour. And then another. And then I lost my eye. By the time I came back, I didn’t want to stir up all that stuff with y’all. When I heard you lost your parents in a wreck too, I didn’t want to…dredge everything back up.”

“Tobias…we would have been there for you. We could have worked through it together,” Rook told him, putting a hand on his shoulder, which nearly required her to stand on her tiptoes. He scoffed.
“Yeah, that’s what my therapist said too, but then Cheeto-in-charge picked a fight with Kim Jong Idiot and here we are.” His shoulders slumped. “It doesn’t matter, Rook. The world would have gone to shit whether I came here for the warm fuzzies or not. I’m just glad Wendy didn’t have to see all this. Or Emily, God forbid. This is not a world you have children in.” He sighed and Rook raised her eyebrows.

“I, uh, I have two kids,” she muttered.

“Oh. Shit. Well, congrats,” he said lamely. Rook rolled her eyes.

“You haven’t changed much. Still the blunt bastard I remember.”

“Hey! I prefer the term ‘son-of-a-bitch,’ thank you very much.” Rook chuckled. “Look,” he said in an apologetic tone, “I gotta get the meat from this back,” he gestured at the carcass. “I got people I’m helpin’. Ordinarily I wouldn’t give a rat’s ass about anyone but myself, but it’s a few young people, and there’s a toddler. His parents died and hell if I know what to do with him, but I know I gotta keep him fed.”

“Why don’t you come to our camp?” Rook suggested. “We’ve been really careful about the company we keep, but if you trust your people, then I’ll take your word for it that they’re alright.” Tobias gave her a significant look.

“I don’t. Trust them, that is. They’re young, and they’re lookin’ for a fight.”

“Any chance you can split off from them?” Rook asked, frowning.

“I ain’t leavin’ that toddler, Rook.” He fiddled with his tongue piercing for a moment, clattering the plastic against the backs of his teeth. Rook laughed.

“You still have your tongue pierced?”

“Eh, repierced. My commanding officer didn’t take too kindly to it when I was enlisted, but I’m my own man now, so I rammed a safety pin through it about three years ago and found a bar to put through it in an old tattoo shop.”

“Jesus, Toby, that’s a quick way to sepsis.”

“Hey, my tongue piercing is very important,” he insisted, waggling his eyebrows. “It’s for the ladies.”

“Ugh. Whatever, Toby. Anyway, about this toddler…do you think they would let you take him?” she asked. He chuckled.

“I think they’d pay me in gold if I did. They kid cries a lot. He’s malnourished. And he needs a mom. Why, you want another kid?”

“Oh, god, no, two is enough. But I think I’ve got some parents for your boy,” Rook said with a smile. She pulled out a map of Hope County with new markers on it for the destruction that had occurred. Many of the landmarks and roads had been destroyed, but the map was still usable. “I’ll tell you what, you meet me here in two days. Come quietly, and I’ll meet you. I’ll come alone. I know you’ve gotta get back, but it was good to see you, Toby. Take care of yourself, cous’.”

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Jacob felt his stomach sink at the words that he had just gotten close enough to overhear.
“I’ll meet you. I’ll come alone. I know you’ve gotta get back, but it was good to see you, Toby…” He let out a sigh of disgust, drowning out whatever else his wife said. The man she was speaking to was huge, bigger even than Jacob by at least five inches and perhaps thirty pounds. His shoulders were wide and starkly muscled. His hair was golden-brown and curled tightly to his head. With his height and intimidating stance, he looked like a statue of Adonis come to life. The only flaw he seemed to have was a missing eye, covered with a black eyepatch. Rook hugged him warmly, holding him close and closing her eyes. It made Jacob nauseated and angry. So angry, in fact, that all sense of reason fled. He strode forward, unable to contain himself any longer, ready to murder this intruder that his wife was embracing so intimately.

“Who the fuck is this, Rook?” he demanded, jabbing an accusing hand toward Tobias. “Have you been meeting with him? Talking to another man behind my back?” Rook blinked at him before a look of fierce anger flooded her features.

“How dare you take that tone with me, Jacob? And how dare you imply what you’re implying? Jesus, will you get past this dumbass mid-life crisis you seem to be struggling with and pull your head out of your ass? Jacob, this is my cousin Tobias Rook. Toby, this is my jackass husband, Jacob Seed.”

Jacob was struck completely, absolutely speechless. Tobias held out a hand.

“Tobias,” he rumbled. “Do not call me ‘Toby’ or I’ll kill you. Only Hel here can get away with that still.” Jacob shook himself after a moment and took Tobias’ hand in a firm grip and shook it once.

“Jacob, it’s nice to meet you.” Tobias glanced at Rook’s furious face.

“Oh, I doubt that,” he confided with a smirk. “I think you have well and truly landed yourself in the dog house, sir. Anyway, Hel, I gotta get. Until next time, Jacob. If you survive.”

Jacob gave a half-hearted laugh, turning to his wife as Tobias rode away. He blanched at the look of pure fury on her face. He often forgot that her primary sin was wrath, but he was starkly reminded of the fact when he surveyed her crossed arm stance, complete with red face and eyes glittering with malice. Jacob scratched the back of his head.

“I, uh, may have overheard a conversation that was out of context and made a very bad, very stupid assumption,” he explained lamely. Rook said nothing.

“You are unbelievable,” she snapped. “And he’s right. You are sleeping on the couch. And, you’re not going on that expedition. Because I am. No arguments. I promise you Joseph will take my side on this. You’ve been acting a little…crazy lately, babe. We get out of the bunker and the next thing I know you’re wanting to seek out trouble, you’re volunteering for dangerous missions and you decide to take up running? You hate running. You like potatoes. And beer. Who are you, and what have you done with my husband?” she demanded. Jacob went red in the face and muttered under his breath. “What was that?” she asked, tone imperious.

“I said I’ve been feeling a little useless. Being trapped down in that bunker and scouting for food supplies. I need some action, pup, some excitement.”

“You are unbelievable,” she snapped. “And he’s right. You are sleeping on the couch. And, you’re not going on that expedition. Because I am. No arguments. I promise you Joseph will take my side on this. You’ve been acting a little…crazy lately, babe. We get out of the bunker and the next thing I know you’re wanting to seek out trouble, you’re volunteering for dangerous missions and you decide to take up running? You hate running. You like potatoes. And beer. Who are you, and what have you done with my husband?” she demanded. Jacob went red in the face and muttered under his breath. “What was that?” she asked, tone imperious.

“I said I’ve been feeling a little useless. Being trapped down in that bunker and scouting for food supplies. I need some action, pup, some excitement.”

“Are all men like this?” Rook asked tiredly. Jacob shrugged, helpless.

“I don’t know. Probably.” Rook glanced back up at him.

“The reason I’m meeting with Toby is because he found a toddler and he doesn’t know what to do with it.” Jacob frowned.
“And what are we going to do with a toddler?” Jacob asked, eyes wide and expression flabbergasted. Now Rook smiled, and her mood lightened significantly.

“We aren’t going to do anything. But I have a plan. Now come here,” she demanded, and, ever her willing prisoner, he obeyed. She yanked him down by the collar of his shirt so they were eye to eye, and then she kissed him, biting his lip hard enough to draw blood. He yelped, holding a hand to his lip and seeing blood on his fingers when he drew them away. Rook glared at him, daring him to say something. She finally laughed, breaking the tension between them and pulling him in for a gentler kiss. “I can’t stay mad at you for very long, but you deserved that. Come on. We’ve got shit to do, old man.”
Tobias carried the toddler over one shoulder, handing him gently to Rook.

“Thanks for coming back, Tobias. And thanks for saving this little guy. What happened to his parents? You said they died, but how?” Tobias gave her an even look.

“I killed them,” he said softly. Rook’s eyebrows rose.

“I’m guessing you had a good reason, but I’d like to hear it.” Her tone had gone dark with malice and suspicion. It had been many years since she had seen her cousin. Was he still the good man she had once known?

“They were planning on selling him,” Tobias explained. “Didn’t want to deal with him anymore, were offering him to whoever would give them the most food or resources. They finally tried offering him to a guy who clearly wanted him for the wrong reasons. I put a bullet in each of their brains. So, I feel responsible for him.” Rook softened immediately at that.

“I can imagine. Come here, bud, it’s alright now. Shh, I gotcha.”

“That group expecting you back?” Rook asked, concerned. Tobias sniffed.

“Nah, they’re wanderers. But, we’ll have to watch out for them. Come on, show me this bunker of yours. Is Jacob still alive?”

“He is. So far,” she smirked. “I have to ask, where the hell did you find a horse?”

“There’s a few of them loose in places. Encountered this one in the Dakotas. He’s still unpredictable, but he doesn’t require fuel to run, just grass and the occasional piece of fruit or candy I can manage to find. Got some place for me to put him?”

“Honestly, no, and we could use some help setting up fences and barns. We need to catch some of these cattle. Our people are going to need a reliable source of food. Come on, let’s get going, we can chat on the way.”

“Hop on, Clyde here can carry all of us,” Tobias said, pulling Rook up. “You still remember how to ride?” he asked.

“It hasn’t been that long since you and I were breaking horses and moving cattle around on Dad’s ranch, Toby. Let’s go,” she said, keeping a gentle, but firm grip on the toddler. “I’ll show you the bunker later. For now, we’re headed south west.”

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The toddler was about three years old, probably a bit younger, but he was silent except for the occasional hiccupsing cough. His hair was jet black, and his eyes were a crystal blue, so
“What’s his name?” John asked softly.

“We don’t know,” Rook said. “Toby says the parents just called him ‘boy.’” John swallowed. It was obvious from his expression that this struck just a little too close to home for him. “You guys are angels for doing this. I know it’s a big ask and I know I kinda sprung this on you out of the blue, but–”

“No,” John interrupted, his voice gone soft with some inexplicable emotion. “He’s perfect. You did the right thing bringing him to us. Hey buddy,” he said, bending down to address the small child. “I’m John,” he explained, holding a hand to his chest. “And this is Sharky. We’re going to be taking care of you, okay?” There was no response from the toddler, just another tear sliding down over a thin cheek.

“I’ll get him some oatmeal,” Sharky rumbled behind John.

“We’ll leave you three alone,” Rook said, her cousin following her out of John and Sharky’s home.

“See ya, Rook,” Sharky called, but he sounded distracted.

John remembered how the first few days of his care by the Duncans were kind, all candy and treats and loving touches. But it had turned bad quickly. The switch from kindness to cruelty had been overwhelming and terrifying. For now, he opted to just let the toddler exist in his presence.

Pulling a book off the shelf, John began to read aloud. *Oliver Twist*, now there was an appropriate story, he thought as his soft voice filled the room. Over the top of the book, he could see the toddler drawing closer, sniffing and wiping his nose on his sleeve as he worked his way toward John, though he kept the coffee table and other furniture between them, gazing furtively out from behind the barriers like a frightened animal. Sharky walked in with the oatmeal and the boy retreated, looking warily between the two of them. John gave Sharky a significant look. Taking the hint, Sharky set the oatmeal down close to the toddler and moved away. The couch in the den was large and could hold up to six people, but Sharky sat down right next to John, flinging an arm around his husband’s shoulders and kissing him gently as he continued to read. The boy ate the oatmeal greedily, hidden behind the edge of the fireplace, but John still read, patient.

John was on chapter seven by the time the boy had the nerve to crawl up on the far end of the couch away from the two of them. Over the course of the next hour or so, he crept closer and closer, finally worming his way onto John’s lap. John tried to keep his breathing steady, tried to push aside the paranoia and concern about being a father to a child who needed one. He paused in his reading to glance at Sharky, who was staring at him with such warm adoration that he blushed. He adjusted his seat, wrapping an arm gently around the toddler, who leaned back on it.

“Hey buddy,” John said softly as he reached the end of chapter ten. “My voice needs a break. Can we take a break?” The boy gave the smallest of nods and John smiled carefully at him, not wanting to scare him off. “We’ll need something to call you, bud. Do you have a name?” The boy thought for a moment, then shook his head, his eyes beginning to well with tears again. John clamped down hard on the feeling of rage that shot through him at that. How dare a parent not name their child? How could someone care so little? But then he reminded himself of his own parents, who had probably only named him, Joseph and Jacob to have an excuse to reference the Bible more often.
John didn’t want this child to have a biblical name, didn’t want him to suffer under the weight of God’s expectations, but he also wanted some allusion to his or Sharky’s names if he got to choose a name for him.

“What if we called you Charles? Huh? Charlie for short?” Again, the boy thought, and, after a long moment, he nodded. “Alright, Charlie,” John said, using a thumb to smear dirt off one of the toddler’s cheeks, “What do you say we take a bath?” The change was instantaneous and violent. The toddler pulled away with a cry, burying himself under the coffee table. Sharky and John stared at each other for a moment. Sharky made a motion to reach for the child, but John stopped him with a hand. “Don’t,” he advised. “Give me a minute.” John sat, legs crossed, on the rug next to the coffee table, holding a hand out casually. “We aren’t going to hurt you, Charlie. No one’s going to hurt you ever again, I promise. My parents were mean too. They did bad things to me sometimes. But we aren’t going to do any bad things to you. Why don’t we just sit on the couch for a while and read, and then, maybe if you feel like it later, we can take a bath? Huh?”

Very hesitantly, as though the air were the consistency of Jell-O, Charlie stretched his hand out and took John’s. He squirmed out from underneath the coffee table and onto John’s lap, two pairs of blue eyes gazing into one another. John felt like the child was looking into his soul. He hoped what he saw there was adequate. The toddler put his arms around John’s waist and John embraced him, swallowing hard and blinking eyes stinging with tears. He would give this child the care he wished he had when he was young. He would do better that was done to him. Sharky put his hand on his shoulder and he leaned his cheek against his husband’s hand, just existing for a while.

A few hours later, Charlie was clean and warm and dressed in one of Sharky’s t-shirts, which hung nearly to his feet. He was curled up in the guest bed, which had been given fresh sheets. John found an old teddy bear he hadn’t thought about in years. The police officer who had taken him from their foster parents the night Jacob burned their house down had given it to him. He had kept it, all these years, a comfort when times were hard. He had slept with it in his bed, crying into its soft neck on the nights the Duncans beat him. He had sat it on his desk when he studied for the bar exam. He had held it close to his chest the night he had been assaulted. He had held it thoughtfully the night Joseph had told him he wouldn’t reach Eden’s Gates. The bear had been a sponge for his agony, a simple thing that he could cling to when there was no one else to comfort him.

But John didn’t need it anymore.

“This is an old friend,” John said that evening, offering it to Charlie as he tucked him in. “He’s a good listener, and he doesn’t mind if you cry or if you hug him. Do you think maybe you want him to be your friend?” Charles nodded, reaching out for the bear and pulling it close, snuggling into the blanket and yawning.

“Holy shit, Johnny,” Sharky said quietly as his husband closed the door to Charlie’s room. “I don’t know where you got the idea you’d make an awful parent.” John smiled shyly.

“I guess it helps that I can relate to him.”

“Hmm. We both can. Come on. Let’s go to bed.”

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