To Love Reptiles

by Weirdness_Unlimited

Summary

What would happen if Slit survived the carnage of the final chase to re-capture the wives?

The Razor Cola was crushed between the War Rig and The People Eater's Limousine, then the gas tank blew. Max Rockatansky's Interceptor has been reduced to a crumpled up heap of scrap, but something inside is still breathing.

What would you do if you found something that could survive the madness of Fury Road? How crazy would you have to be to bring that broken creature home with you?

Notes

This fic is undergoing major editing one chapter at a time. Chapters I've re-worked will be apparent with a short comic strip at the beginning.
Deep Fried Slit

Chapter Notes

IMPORTANT: this fic is undergoing major editing one chapter at a time. You'll know if a chapter has been edited if it has a comic strip at the beginning. I'd also like to point out that Slit is horrible and I don't condone his BS.

- Slit -
Waiting. I hate waiting for things to happen. We lost the war rig in the bogs, searched all around the fringes of it waiting for the traitors to come back out once they realized we had them cornered. According to Immortan and his Imperators, there's nothing beyond the bog but sand and salt. They would be out of their minds to keep heading east. They had to come back out eventually, so we turned back and we watched for any sign. The outposts to the South of Gas Town had been informed in case they tried to find asylum at one of the strongholds. Crews were circling territories to watch for their return and the rest of us? Getting sun stroke out in this dull hell hole and knowing the Immortan was only so determined to get back what was stolen to make an example for us. You do not thieve things from gods, and those who are close to his godliness don't let his things be stolen from him. Really, though, he could get more breeders with the snap of his fingers.

Now, I took advantage of a narrow band of shadow on the passenger side of the Razor Cola. It was near noon. Poncho and Saw were shoulder to shoulder under the car to get out of the sun. Bust was hiding elsewhere from the heat. Those boys were wise enough to pick me up when they saw that my idiot driver left me in the sand to rot, then rightfully eager to gain a top-notch lancer when that shit Nux road off to his mediocre death without me.

I could act surprised about what happened to Nux, but I wasn't. Figures that the moron would screw up and fail. The fact that he screwed the pooch right before the Immortal's very eyes? Hysterical, it serves him right, and it took the sting out of him leaving me behind twice, too. Poncho knew damn well that I was the pick of the litter, this was enough to satisfy me for the moment. I'd be pissed later about losing Nux, maybe put out for a while too. The fallout from this shit show could be dealt with later, the right way, with a few new skin decals and a shot of bunk hooch. Later. Later I'll deal with it, and after that, I'll figure out how it would best suit me to reach the gates of Valhalla before getting soft and pathetic just like him. I was trying not to dwell on it all, but not having much success.

When shit happens, it happens fast. I heard Doof shredding away, that's the signal to move. It took Saw and Ponch several precious seconds to get out from under the car, Bust took his sweet time turning up to take his spot as the gunner. Young idiots. The only reason they had this shine rig was because Saw was big and nasty enough to win battles in the fury pits for it. All this steel and power and they had no fuckin' idea what they were doing with it. I was already in the lancer's basket, shouting at them to move. I had the seniority, the grey on my head to do it. A good thing about Ponch, he didn't bitch about everything like Nux did. You say jump, Poncho says "how high" because he knows who his betters are. His only claim is fair driving and he knows it.

We were soon ahead of the rest, gaining speed. Razor Cola is heavy with all these bodies riding her ass, the only reason we caught sight of the rig first is because the fastest of all three war parties had already been reduced to scrap. Razor Cola had been jetted to a high status out of lack of competition, not the greatest honor, but it wouldn't matter what rig I rode in on once I had Furiosa's traitor head on a fucking stick.

"Pick one and suck it, Nux," I whispered to his ghost as I crawled over the roof and onto the bonnet with my pistol. Surely he was dead, at least that's what I thought.

Bust was first to cark it mediocre. He went off half-cocked, missed his mark with the harpoon, and then found out the hard way that they had lead and some raggedy crew that hadn't been there before. Good riddance and less dead weight. The damn bloodbag was shooting at me before I could finish my count of their new heads, so I shot back. Bastard. If it weren't for him and his loony blood and his damn foot that can't keep a boot on it I wouldn't be down the best driver in the fleet. If Nux hadn't sucked up his madness through a tube he wouldn't be dead.
Alright, I'll shred you first.

I shot back. Might've grazed him. Damn Ponch couldn't keep the car steady as Nux might've. His fault I missed, not mine. Couldn't help the blast of giddies in my head at the idea of Bloodbag's head blown open. Soon, you. The whacko had to reload, so I took my chance to squirt a little more juice into the intake. Had to get ahead, take the tires, then I could despatch them however I wanted. Yes, yes.

That's when I saw it, the filthy little defector, a betrayer, crawling out with a jerry can to try and push those wheezing engines of hers harder. He was alive. He was helping them. He was mad, and dead to me all over again.

"You filth! You traitored him!" I didn't feel the words I said, felt like it came out backward. I couldn't believe what I was even seeing. Later. I'll deal with him later when it was over. Nux was nothing, no, he'd rendered himself even less than nothing! Fuck 'im.

We chugged ahead, Razor Cola got a pat on the nose for her fine work. Saw dropped his spiked load. Ha! The shit-stain Nux inhaled a mouthful of guzz just as the War Rig's tire popped! I just couldn't contain my joy, I cackled away. I felt bulletproof! High as a pole cat! Choke, you fucking pedestrian. I was damn near dying of giggles, rolling away from the intake and hanging by a few fingers as I laughed to the skies. I could almost hear the departed heroes laughing back.

When I happened to look up and see Bloodbag coming to my former best mate's rescue, my happiness left me just as quick as Nux had. Even patted him on the head like he knew him! Driver stealing puke! I howled, pounded bruises into my ribs and showed him whose teeth would chew his head clean off his hairy shoulders soon enough. Words failed me.

Thought he could best me?! I could spit guzz too, hell I could drink it and piss premium fuel. I saw a bike race ahead of the rig, I thought it was one of ours.

Bang.

Poncho took lead to the face. Fuck! Sneaky witches! I was falling behind, again! No! Not this time. The moment Razor coasted to a stop, I was off the hood and throwing open the driver side door. Ponch had his jaw blown apart, he was still alive though, gurgling and trying to hold his face together. Fucking useless. I hauled the carcass out by the belts and dumped it. He was worthless now. Saw had an opinion of that. He tried to drag me out of the cab, and what he got was a covenant wrench laying on the seat across the teeth for trying to stop me from taking the wheel. If he wanted to get in my way, then he could lose his ivory and walk his ass home.

The feral bastard, he'd stolen my driver. Nux was mine, mine. Best driver in the Citadel, maybe all of the wastes! Worthy of a lancer like me! Nux, he traitored me too. After all I'd done for the skinny shit! Put up with his incessant prattling, unbearable weakness, his stupidly sunny disposition, and now he was taking pats on the head from a smelly feral! I couldn't scratch the thoughts, the ridiculousness of it, out of my head as I pushed Razor Cola to her limit to catch up. I wanted blood and it almost didn't matter whose, but the feral had definitely usurped Furiosa at the top of my list. I saw him on the bonnet as I sped around others in pursuit. If those pole fuckers trying to saw the thief open succeeded, I'd spill their guts instead for robbing me of my righteous vengeance.

They almost had him, but he fell off after using one as a meat shield for slaughter. I expected to see his body go under. It didn't. I had to fall back and go around to see where my target was.

My rage drove me harder, faster, reckless. I didn't think, In between the rig and the People Eater's refinery on wheels I went, not minding the foolish danger of it. I saw the feral go down, now he was
just hanging there, only held up at the ankle by the thieving witch's metal arm. I downshifted, then slid right up to the sixth gear and lead-footed the guzz. I would relish the taste as blood and skull meat splattered through the lack of front glass onto me. I pointed, made sure he'd know who was coming for his head.

Maybe my rage burned too hot. Everything was grinding and crunching. Metal twisted, and next came flames. I'd made a mistake. *The limousine.* Was it the gas tank or me that blew? I wasn't sure, so I screamed, forgetting the feral, Nux, everything.

"Valhalla!" And I hoped that traitor shit of a driver heard me greet the gates.

-A Scavenger-

When I was a kid I loved the sun. The great hot eye in the morning sky is warm and bright and makes little things in the dirt grow. My mother adored it too, but the sun made Mama's hide tough like a leather bag after many years working in the fields. Love wasn't enough to keep us from cooking on the long march through the wasteland, looking for a new Green Place. We never found it.

“Ah man, that was so long ago. It's just silly thinking about it, Dune. Get a life, would you? Lots of scraps to pick through. Glory, glory! So much scrap! All the war fodder finds me at the end and all of their metal and trinkets, too.”

I had watched the war parties from the West scream back and forth over the past days, chasing one of their own no less! How odd and how fortunate for me.

“Road wars bring only shiny treasures half buried in the sand for Dune,” I reminded no one.

There I was, picking through the wrecks, wondering idly what had ignited the conflict. I swore that I'd seen three whole war parties pour out of The Canyon to hunt down a big ol' rig and tanker. So much death! so much carnage! I could hardly wait to tell Mum all about it.

Things have changed since the Green Place, so have I. It was change or die so I made it my life to watch the wars and feast on the devastation. Not a bad life being a scav, but only if you get to the wreckage first.

Out here there were a couple of groups who made it their business to pick apart the vehicular corpses and expired battle fodder. I had to watch out, keep a keen eye on the horizon for Rock Riders and Buzzards too. There were also the fiendish men who made moonshine in our lovely region called Scavenger Country. They often came to the call of war to pick at what was left behind, too, looking like vultures dressed in blacks. I hadn't stumbled across them today. If I had I'd have put some lead in them for skirting too close to my turf.

“This here patch of dust belongs to Dune!” A cry of challenge shouted to no one. Nothing but desert forever in any direction. Nothing but me, the corpses, and the lizards. At least that's what I thought.

Something in the twisted remains of the next wreck on my path shifted. I could hear the metal grinding and the rasping breaths of something barely living. Something besides me was alive out there? Rust and dust. I needed to keep a finger on my knife just in case a merciful slaying must be done.
I pulled my tarp full of goodies along behind me, heaping onto the pile anything shiny and worth taking as I made my way to the wreck. Smoke still rose in wisps from the mechanical remains. When I was close enough to inspect I snorted. Must have been the wind moaning. Nothing could have survived this. It was crushed in, twisted, and burnt. There wasn't much worth scavenging from it.

“Tisk tisk. Sad to say it mate, you're not worth the sand you're laying in. Dune would be lucky to find a nut worth salvage.”

A groan sounded. A reply? Maybe a ghost. I circled the wreck once more to call out my greeting.

“Hello? Something living? Yeah? No?”

The groan came buzzing in my ears again, then a wet gag like an engine sputtering. Oh, look! Fingers poking up through the warped driver side window. I sniffed at them. Oh dear, the wreck may as well have been an oven. Whatever was inside was cooking or had already been well roasted. I could smell the savory flesh sizzling and it wasn't an unpleasant stench. It made my tongue wet and my guts churn with hunger.

My mind might not have been what it once was but I had the good sense not to mistakenly eat a man who was still alive in a fit of craving. I ignored my empty stomach and began pulling at the doors, the roof, anything that looked busted up enough to pry apart.

In the end, I had to reach inside and start pulling out what remained of the seat piece by piece so that I could haul the body up and out. It was hard to lift him. I expected him to be heavy, certainly, but not to find it impossible to lift him out the window at all. Even if he hadn't begun to shriek I may still have guessed that he was caught on or pinned under something. Oh, how he howled and yipped in pain, scratching down my arms and neck with fingers coated in the sloppy pulp of some other wound he may have been trying to hold together. Dried life fluid and thick clots sloughed off onto my scarf and vest.

“Stop that! You wanna keep cooking? Yes? No? If you wanna keep simmering I'll just come back for a bite later!” I warned the dear thing.

He stopped, but I suspect his silence was only because the will to fight had left him. Poor Ducky, all cooked up and denied the afterlife his kind chase. Just as well, it's a false life after death anyway.

“Ah, yes. Here's your problem,” I said as I crawled inside over his mangled lower half like a lizard into a bolt hole. The source of his fussing was easy to pinpoint.

The poor creature was pinned by a leg which was barely there at all. The limb was all fused and cauterized by a fire that had engulfed the car but it was shorn off at the knee, crushed between the steering wheel and I'm not sure what. Nothing was where it should be in here. All mashed together and parts mingling that shouldn't. Only a little bit of skin and sinew kept his knee and thigh attached to one another. I wasn't at all certain of how conscious he was and I doubted that he could even feel much at this point. It needed to be cut loose if he was getting out. I was wasting droplets of water and salt all over my skin just laying here half sprawled through this oven with my legs hanging out in the wind. How the heat hadn't made him dead yet I'll never know.

“Slice, slice, then we'll have you out in the lovely sun. Least you won't be so fuckin-forkin heavy once we've whacked off this bum leg. Yes?”

Another whimper in response. He wroth a little too, which was perhaps a weak protest.

“Traitor... filth...” He uttered, barely audible.
“Hmm? Talkin' to Dune? Yah, she's filthy. Is she a traitor? Nah. No one there for her to traitor,” I told him as my fingers plucked the blade from my belt.

The cargos had melted into him. It was a bitch to cut through where the synthetic material had started to cool a little. Had to slice up his pant leg and clear it away to see what I was up to. Cut. Cut. The flesh had been rendered into jerky. Nerves would be dead dead dead. So he felt nothing of the cuts to free him, I'm sure of that.

Out I came first, then shoved my hands down under his pits and started dragging him up through the driver's side. His eyes shot open and another wail was let loose.

“Aw, hush now Ducky. No use hollering like that. Aw, shush.”

I deposited him on the sand perhaps a bit clumsily. I wasn't kidding, the fuckin-forker was heavy. Dry sobs escaped him now as I examined the blistering. My my. They were in their hundreds, huge and everywhere up his left side and the back of his head. All the burns were on the same side he was now missing a foot. Some of the ugly bubbles were the size of my fist and taught with piss yellow fluid. I knew how it felt. Goddess of Green did I know.

"Oh, look at your sorry face," I exclaimed in a gasp as I rolled him onto his back with the heel of my boot, "That must have hurt."

The most shocking detail wasn't even the burns, it was his mouth. Such brutal scarring was quite stunning to look at, like the grin of a scaly beasty. It looked like a permanent smile even now as he lay there with half his skin melted off. He managed a true grin at my words. It was eerie and exciting to watch expressions form and fade from such a striking set of lips. A smile doesn't hide reality however, his must be a living hell.

I lifted my blade once more. So much pain, so much blood. I had wished that someone would kill me when I was burned up by a cruel act and then double burnt with the sun. Being forced to live was just terrible. Awful.

I pressed the razor edge of my weapon against his Adam's apple. It would be quick and I'd put his remains to use. He'd not be wasted, he'd give life and perhaps be redeemed of a past spent taking it.

"Valhalla," he hissed with reverence, sensing my intent perhaps.

Valhalla was Joe's greatest lie. This poor boy wasn't going to a promised land beyond death, he'd go straight to the fiery lake for all the killin' he's done. So silly and brainwashed that he never knew the value of life.

It got me thinking about saving him from that flaming lake instead of cutting through his blood gushers like I should. After my burns had healed up I enjoyed living again; with a head which was on a little crooked but indeed I could still have a good time and cut a rug now and again.

“Hmm, to make a maggot farm? Or let new scars be made? Dune wonders how cooked you are.”

He mewled pathetically, eyes pleading for respite.

“You think you could make it one more day? I could polish you up. Make you sparkle again. All you have to do is keep on breathing until we get back to my kip. Yes? No?”

No response. The blade was tucked away safe as I looked back to my sled. Now I had a choice. The scrap pile and the fun heavy things or the crispy War Boy. I looked from one to the other. Well, I didn't need all of the shiny things. Or all of the studded hubcaps. Just a few hubcaps would do. Even
if the man-beast died he'd make a lot of maggots to eat. I couldn't say no to that.

I had to push the excess out of the tarp and roll him over onto it. I felt terrible for him. His blisters were busting anywhere I gripped him too hard in the process of tugging him along to my ride and hefting him up into the sled.

I tossed a few rags over his torso to protect his burns from the sun and used some bungee cord to secure him down, murmuring sorry here and there as I worked. I went back for the rest of the leg and the boot on it. Waste not want not.

Now to fire up the big fan and get us sailing. The sled was -in reality- an airboat fan, parts of a pontoon boat and miscellaneous bits from salvaged cycles. The front end of a motorcycle was secured to the back with shoddy welding and a thousand lengths of scrap cloth tied around it. The handle bars of the half-bike had been replaced with a long wooden shaft and the tire served as the rudder. You could pretend you were sailing on an ocean from tales older than time when the dusk sky paints the wastes a pleasant shade of blue.

“Let me take you home Ducky. I'm sure you'll like it there. I do.”

That said, I pulled the start cord and gave a satisfied sigh when the aged motor wheezed to life again.
Names

I remember the wreck and the roar of the war party fading as they raced on.

I know that not all reach the shining gates instantly, sometimes Boys had to suffer first. I must have lost and gained consciousness a dozen times. It hurt, *everything* hurt. I used to think there was no level of pain I had not already overcome. I was wrong.

I tried to stay put and die proper, but I just couldn't stand it. The heat was scorching, burning, chewing me apart and even slow smoking my lungs with every breath. The foam in the seat was still smoldering under me, so my meat and bones were acting of their own accord. My hands scrabbled at the door and yanked at anything, looking for a way to lift myself out. Sometimes I'd get a precious
breath of clean air by pulling myself over the dash as far as I could. I could never wrench myself far
enough to climb out. I was caught. Something had folded inward and pinned me down inside the
dead Razor Cola.

Usually, instinct is good but sometimes you have to fight it. I wanted to die but my flesh refused. My
charred body wanted to live even though it felt like I was being skinned alive on the left side. I pulled
harder, cracking fingernails as I clawed for escape. Something tore, sending wave after wave of
burning electricity up my leg. I scratched at that too, trying to find a wound or whatever had me
trapped.

I shrieked at it. I howled like an animal even. It sickened me to be this weak, this uncommitted to
death when promised sweetness lies just beyond it. I wretched up acid over the steering wheel, then
let myself settle into my own bile as I lost strength and the ability to keep my eyes open.

I heard a voice. When I turned my head to peer out the window on my right I could see it, her. She
shimmered through the waves of rising heat until she became a figure silhouetted against the blinding
light of the sky. She had writhing snakes for hair, and in my delirium, I swore that I saw great black
wings rising from her shoulders. A Valkyrie, I thought. I reached for her through the window, ready
to be taken.

"Sad to say it, mate, you're not worth the sand you're laying in," she lamented.

No, no! I was good! I'd done everything right! It was my turn to see the gates! Never once was I
soft! I tried to wheeze out the words to tell her so. Not much made it out of me. All I could do was
open and close my fingers, hoping to grab her if she came close enough. Despair dragged me back
into the blanket of the abyss. I cursed Nux for fucking over us both.

Memory fails me here and often after this point. Somehow I was lying on my back in the dirt and the
death angel had been surprised by my face, so I gave the picky bitch a smile and hoped that was
enough to change her mind about my worth. That's the last I remember for a while, outside the
sensation of being dragged and submitting to the darkness pulsing around the edges of my vision. I
assumed that she'd chosen to take me home to Valhalla but where I next woke was no promised
afterlife.

I woke to pain, which is a sure sign that you're still alive because immortal heroes aren't supposed to
suffer anymore. I was lifted, dragged, stripped, scrubbed, practically violated in a state of dumbness
and near blindness.

There was someone there, hovering over me and muttering excitedly into my ear. Was it Nux? No,
the voice was off and the hands which touched me weren't right.

Light would scald my brain with senseless flashes and movement when I had the strength to crack
open my good eye. I could only see what was right in front of my face and before me was a dented
metal dish and a bloody rag hanging out of it. I couldn't even fight off the hands torturing me. I was
weak and pathetic.

*Useless mediocre body. Useless Nux. Useless everything.*

I thought I was in the Bloodshed. Organic Mechanic's domain was the only place I knew where they
clean the shit and viscera from you so thoroughly that you still feel filthy after the fact. They didn't
leave me alone on the wet stone for long, nakedly shivering and wishing I was dead. It was as if they
enjoyed my yowling and feeble attempts to crawl out from under their cruel hands. Whoever it was,
they just wouldn't stop touching the raw meat left exposed to open air by the burns. They kept
shushing me as if I could listen and obey when everything felt like an all-new inferno. They hissed
out 'sorry' too. What the fuck?

If my brain had any will to work at the time, I might have realized that I was getting bandaging and medicated petroleum or something. I didn't have the sense to know better or to put two and two together to understand that this wasn't the Bloodshed. I didn't even know how screwed my meat suit was. If I were home I wouldn't be getting this kind of attention, I'd be left to rot. They don't waste time on anyone that would take too long to heal. Burns like that take months to close over. I was wound up in cloth like a buzzard's rashy body, but I didn't know that. All I knew was that I wanted this to stop.

Time jerks forward and back when you're too ruined to have your head on right. I still don't know what order these things happened to me. These fractured memories would feel like fever visions when I recall them years later.

I could sometimes see someone- Well, parts of them. The first time I tried to see whoever it was that was always next to me, all I could make out was a left knee and elbow. I had somehow thought it was Nux, not forgetting the road war but hoping it had all been a nightmare. It wasn't him, it was someone dressed in dust brown bryches working a small fire and rotating a meal on spits. I could smell roasting meat and I recognized my left boot. The boot was soaked through in red as it sat by my caretaker's knee. Looked like whatever they had cooking was bigger than a lizard but I couldn't figure what it was. It was just a blurred blob over the excruciating brightness of the flames. I looked away from the fire's glow. I couldn't stand scorching my aching skull meat with more unwelcome light. Road war or a bad dream, I shouldn't be around anymore. I could feel that certainty in my worthless corpus.

Organic had a few tame bloodbags that would do work when they were off rotation to make more blood. They did most of the cooking and cleaning so that Organic was freed up to deal with sick Boys. That must be what this caretaker was.

I let myself drift back into oblivion, uninterested in whatever work this wretched blood factory was up to and unable to locate any appetite at the smell. The aroma of food only annoyed already frayed senses.

The next time I half woke, a cup was being shoved into my face. I turned my nose away from it, ignoring the horrible burning of blistered skin stretching against my neck with the move. I thought it was Organic trying to force feed me one of his vile concoctions. My head was lifted, and something too soft to belong in the bloodshed was pushed under my cranium to prop me up.

"Yes? No? Come on, Ducky, take a drink. Dune knows you're still in there."

The voice of a breeder confused me long enough to let myself taste a few drops of hot liquid that had splashed over my lips. Tasted like meat cola, pretty good too. Broth. My mouth felt dry with zero warning and my guts clenched around all the nothing in them. I drank when the cup came back to my mouth, choking up what went in too fast to swallow.

Fingers wiped up what spilled from my face without any scorn over wastage. Weird. I asked for Nux. Why wasn't my driver here? The only reason he wouldn't be here to make sure the bloodshed boys did their damn jobs was if... The road war wasn't just a dream, and this couldn't be the bloodshed. There were no breeders in the bloodshed and certainly no one who'd touch me like this, so softly. I tried to turn my head away from the knuckles drying my chin, unable to comprehend the intent behind the action and only becoming frustrated with it.

Rusted whimpers left me. Next to the dying embers of that fire, it was now too dark to see much. I was so confused and terror was rising up in revolt inside me. I don't like not knowing where I am or
who I'm with, but blankets were being piled on and the warmth around my brokenness lulled me back into a slumber near death.

It felt like my captor never left me be. She was always worryingly close. Although I wanted to crush the filthy betrayer's windpipe and watch him suffocate, the fact that Nux wasn't the one looking after me left an anxious feeling in my head. I wasn't afraid. War Boys are never afraid, except when everything hurts and they know for sure that the gates are closed to them. Maybe I was afraid then.

Aqua-cola would come just about as often as I could wheeze for it. The stranger's hands would pick up my head and pour it in. I'd retch it back up more often than not but there came no scolding or punishment for wasting precious mouthfuls. After filling me up like a canteen, the hands would roll me over onto my right side and then start peeling me like an onion from the Immorta's crops. It felt like I'd had to endure this endless times for longer than any half-lifetime.

I'd shout things without meaning to. Stop. Don't. Nux, help me. It was always screaming, crying, begging for my driver's ghost to come save me. Most of the time I'd piss myself halfway through being washed against my will. If that wasn't humiliating enough, the lunatic who had jailed me away from Valhalla would just croon softly while I lay in hot piss and then clean me up like some pup that hadn't learned to walk yet. I almost never made it to the shit pot at the end of the room when she tried hauling my shrieking body to it. She'd tell me it wasn't my fault. Well, no shit. If I was dead like I was supposed to be, then this certainly wouldn't be happening to me.

Nux had better be fucking dead if he wasn't here to fix this nightmare. He should be the one cleaning up piss and blood and listening to me curse him. He was filth. My driver was nothing to me but an AWOL traitor now, but I needed the scrawny bastard more than I ever thought possible. It felt really rusty to wish a betrayer could come to rescue me.

"There, there. Let us get you cleaned up and put on the salve so we can wrap you up again," she'd say. That was always the line she sing-songed at me, day after day.

"Then, Dune thinks it's about time for supper, some maggots in your belly. Won't that be nice? A delicacy of the wastelands!"

The creature always cackled at her own stupidly repetitive words. Time passed, just days although it felt like months. My eyes still didn't seem to want to work right. Sometimes I'd be able to open them and see the blur of the creature moving back and forth by the light of a torch but never for long. Sleep would steal away what little strength I had left and leave me prone to my captor's half-assed care. I'm not sure how long I was there before I could turn my head and actually see the scavenger milling about in this rust hole she lived in.

The first time I saw the witch's face, I was watching her crawl up a tangle of rock and scrap metal toward a place in the gloom to squat over a bucket. She tilted her chin up and opened her mouth like the wretched do when Immortan Joe gives them aqua-cola.

This place was a cave, the walls were crying aqua-cola where the loon waited eagerly for drops to fall onto her tongue. She was mostly naked, wearing only hand sewn grundies and covered in scales like a reptile. Her teeth, they were like a row of knives. Fear gripped me but yet again so did the exhaustion. I was asleep before I even had the chance to make my horror known.

That night I began to dream again. The first dream I'd had in I don't know how long. A monster stalked me, chasing me to the car as Nux waited inside, but when I got there, the door slammed itself shut and the creature was somehow inside with him. A woman, a goanna woman made of scales and fangs with snakes for hair mauled my driver inside our Coupe. I pounded on the glass with my fist, it refused to break. I woke to complete darkness and did not dare move. I was afraid to sleep, but
also afraid to make a sound and draw the monster to me. Everything since the crash was fear in one form or another.

The next day was different. I watched the scavenger dress in layers of hole-riddled clothes and I had the sense to see that she didn't have scales. They were old scars from burns, like mine. The teeth hadn't been imagined, they really were yellowed daggers hidden behind an unsettling smile.

“You look bettah! None of that far away look in your eyes. You thirsty Ducky?”

I'd heard that word so many times that for a moment I wondered if Ducky really was my name. So soft, so rust and lame. That name made me want to spit. Thank V8 that I remembered my true name in time to growl it like a curse.

“Slit,” I told her from where I lay, immobile.

“Eh?” The scaly witch tilted her head of matted brown tendrils and swiped her tongue over her lips.

“My fucking name. It's Slit. Slit.” I tried again only to be mocked in snortling laughs.

“That's a fitting name but Dune wonders what your name was before you had such a fucked up face?” she asked with a smile that did nothing but piss me off.

I chewed on the lumps of scar tissue inside my cheek. If I could move, I'd have strangled the wench for that question. Dune, as she called herself, picked up a bowl to scoop up a handful of half-dead maggots and hold them under my nose. Today I was more aware than I had been in the days before, so I refused her attempts to feed me. Oh, I opened up and let her pour them in, they wriggled and squirmed their way out of the parts of my face that never sealed back together quite right, then I ejected them right back into her ugly face. She hissed, face twisting to make her even uglier as I spat as many of them back as I could. I did not want to give her the satisfaction by swallowing any, but I knew the scavenger wouldn't take no for an answer. She just grunted, wiped her face with a sleeve and offered more.

“If you eat, you'll feel better my Ducky,” she chided gently as if I was a damn pup. Ugh, why?

“Slit!” I snarled again, turning my face this way and that to evade her hand full of the foulest tucker.

“Ducky, please?”

“Slit!”

“Out! What's your real name mate?” she finally asked, and I exploded.

“No one named me!”

No one named me. Not the bitch who thrust me into the lift guardian's hands when I was too small to remember, not the other pups in the litter I slept in as a child, not even Nux. I made my own name and only after that son of a whore Imperator carved my face up.

The scav nodded serenely. How in the name of V8 wasn't she startled or even the least bit offended by being roared at? I'd momentarily forgotten that it's hard to be wary of human rust.

“I see, I am Dune,” she unnecessarily introduced herself.

I turned my eyes to the cavern roof above, beyond irritated and even just a little morbidly impressed by the thickness of the maniac I was talking to.
“I figured that,” I could do no more than deadpan my way out of this ludicrous conversation.

The loon always spoke in the third person, so I'd known her name for some time. I found the fact that she thought to introduce herself at all hilarious, but it wasn't the ha-ha kind of funny.

There was silence while she kept trying to feed me. I soon gave up avoiding it in hopes that she would just leave me alone when the dish was empty, but the daily ritual of horrors began again.

“Dune has to change your dressings,” she murmured as she pulled a pail of cola closer and snatched a rag off a low strung drying line. My anger was roused.

“I hate you!” I shrieked, and it was no lie. Why wouldn't this mad creature let me die already? I felt dead, mostly.

“I hate Dune too. A rotten bitch ain't she?” She just hummed at me with a smartass grin. I could sense the sarcasm.

She wiggled her hands under my ribs, which hurt too, and lifted me over onto the side that was less destroyed to start the misery of peeling off all of the rags she'd tied around my wreck of a body. I had been so shiny, so chrome before. Now, what was I?

“Ahh! Fuck! Can't you do this any less mediocre!”

She had to wet the bandages to get them off, but they often still stuck to me. Felt like being jabbed with a cattle prod.

"Everything outside of the womb hurts. Be still. Dune was impressed that you're willing to talk already. It's only been eight days. Don't make her regret dragging you home!” Dune scoffed at me, bizarrely patting the back of my head while she scolded me for the first time.

“You fucking should regret! I'll make you regret!” I threatened with every intention of seeing it through.

Like always came the pain, the sobs, the humiliation but until this time I never had enough awareness to clearly remember what happens after the peeling and horrid cleaning. Dune would coat her hands in slime from a leather pouch on her belt, then smooth it over where I had no skin left to protect me. It felt... less wretched. It was the only thing that felt kind of okay in this evil place.

I stayed awake long enough to watch the wrappings, stained rags, be scrubbed clean in carefully collected water in the bottom of a metal basin and they were hung to dry. More salve was layered onto me with careful hands until finally, I was wrapped up once more. I was reminded of how Nux had looked after me that time I got sliced in the gut by Buzzard prongs. It hurt somehow to remember the shithead fondly.

“Sleep, Ducky. It's been a hard day,” the whacko hummed.

I couldn't do much else but just what the evil witch asked me to.
“That's sick.”

“You're sick literally so, Shut up- Don't listen to the mouthy War Boy Mumsy. He's just angry and in pain. So much rotten pain...”

“Your fault for not letting me croak like I should've.”

“If you don't stop fuckin-forkin muttering shit behind my back Slit- Dune swears!”

“How come you only say my name when you're pissed?!”

“Because it's a shitty name.”

The war fodder spat a curse as I turned back to mum. I was busy rearranging the shiny ornaments I had made for her. Maybe poor duck - Slit just wasn't capable of understanding. Mum wasn't looking so hot lately, all bones and jerky now after the long years sitting here in the corner. She didn't stink anymore like she had once. The smell had long gone away.

“What should Dune do mum? Didn't think about how much food two sets of gutty works would go through...”

“You're talking to a fucking corpse you know. It can't hear you.” He grumbled and hissed. I liked him much better before we both got hungry. There was still the water dripping down faithfully from the stone, but after a few days without something to chew on this temper of mine was inconsolable.

“Dune knows that Slit. Just be quiet so she can make sense of what ma says.” He needed to shut up. Mama always talks softly, in ways only a daughter could understand.

“What's crawled up your arse? You're usually chipper for a loony bitch.” He said and I felt worry twist my stomach.

I hadn't felt worried in a long time. The waste always provided.

“We're out of maggots. No more food. No more life... No more Dune and Slit before long.” I supplied him with the truth because it might silence him.

He was sitting up now, talking more too. Usually, his scorn was fun. I could hiss back and make it a game but not today. Yesterday I gave that noisy face of his the last half a handful of grub and my guts were two days empty then. I should have dug his leg out of the wreck too and dumped that into the maggot farm. There would still be three or four days of crawlies to munch if I had.

By now the flies and crows would have left nothing but bone and gristle to salvage.
I stepped away from Mama and sat across from Slit, watching him grip at the stump of his left thigh.

It had been heartbreaking to watch poor Ducky realize it was gone. Once he'd been able to move a little he had said his foot was hurting him something fierce so I checked. _The other one_ he'd said when I mistakenly looked at the only foot he's still got. He'd watched in horror as the covers were pulled away to reveal that there wasn't really anything left to hurt below his left knee. Then he cursed some fool called Nux.

He seemed to be coping now in his own way. He's been even angrier and nastier since then but who could really blame him for that?

Surprisingly his slacks had protected a good portion of his legs from the blaze although, the tools and doodads in his pockets had gotten hot enough to leave their marks. There was a perfect red imprint of a wrench seared into his ass like a brand. It had been in his back pocket.

Slit leaned back against the boulder he slept next to despondently. I didn't know if he was all slumpy because of the news of our food shortage or just because being miserable was a part of his personality.

He was getting boring to look at what with being all quiet and mopey. He got like that sometimes. That pout was one of the few expressions that I hated to look at on his delightfully mangled lips.

I turned my eyes back to Mama. Sometimes all I had to do was keep my thoughts on her and the answers to my questions would just pop into my head like magic. I thought of a song she used to sing.

“Oh, the shark, babe, has such teeth, dear. And it shows them pearly white. Just a jackknife has old Macky Heath babe. And he keeps it outta sight...”

I ran the tip of my tongue over the edges of mine. Not so white anymore. Not like pearls they were. Teeth made for tearing, cutting bits of lizards to ribbons. Sometimes people too. Slit had reeked like roasting meat before. I wondered if he might still taste okay now.

“...Ya know when that shark bites with his teeth, babe. Scarlet billows start to spread.” It was only after I turned my attention back to poor Ducky that I realized I’d been singing out loud. His brows were low, but eyes wide and engaged. The tendon in his almost not at all burnt arm twitched as if preparing for something violent like.

I flashed my sharp and yellows at him, grinning wide and amused. “Ya think Dune wants to eat you up? Yeah? No?”

He started puffing up his chest like a big ol’ angry cane toad, teeth grinding and the lids around his wonky eye twitching. Yeah, that's the face I liked on a Slit. He was much too fun to sink my teeth into.

“Nah Ducky. Hush hush. You mighta stunk real tasty like when I pulled you outta that metal tangle, but Dune likes the company... And she wants something fresh.”

He deflated a little but not much. “By Immorta- You're a fanging bag of busted ball bearings and assorted _nuts._”

“Well, this nut bag is going out,” I said and I did, but not before gathering what I’d need to put food in us by tomorrow night. I poured what had been collected in the water catcher into my canteen, once that was filled I dumped the rest into a mason jar and pushed it toward the War Boy.
“Make it last. Won't be back for a while” I warned. He would need to be frugal with it since I didn't think he'd be hopping over to collect his own anytime soon.

Next came the knife, strapped on around my thigh and tucked into the sheath. A scarf to protect my neck from the sun, munition, and my most treasured effects. Mama's vest -all embroidered nice with faded colors- and her L42 Enfield. She taught me to sling lead at a distance back when I was still pretty to look at.

Just a quick change of wrappings for my ducky Slit, then I'd be ready to hit the sands for treasures like any good scav worth their blood and salt.
Slit has the plan to escape this place and the scavenger that dwells here. The chances of his success are however debatable.

Dune was leaving and said that she'd be gone a while. Mad as it was to say, I was getting optimistic about being left alone.

I'd been here almost a month. I knew that because the nutter would scratch lines into the wall for each day that passed. The line which represented the day she pulled me out of the Razor Cola - Immortan rest her chrome soul- was special, stained dark with blood from her thumb. Apparently that was how she marked special occasions. If I counted the lines after the bloody smudge it added up to twenty-seven. In those days when I started being alive enough to think I'd begun patching together an idea which had turned into a plan.

Those who knew me would have assumed that I'd gone off to Valhalla. Brothers who were dead and already there would be wondering where the hell I was. I didn't want to disappoint them.

Nux wouldn't be there. Filth like him don't get to ride eternally. I dismissed the way my blood pump clenched at that thought.

“Eyes are far away again. Whatcha thinkin' about Ducky?” Dune Interrupted my line of thought with her usual chatter and prying.

“About how much I hate it when you ask that.”

“Jus' curious. Bandage changes before Dune goes.” She grunted out, ignoring my glare.

I watched her walk across the space to fetch the rags that had been hung to dry the day before and the jug where she stored overflow from the aqua-cola catch. Dune walked with a mild gimp in her step. She couldn't extend that right leg completely. It stayed a little bent because the skin on the back of it didn't stretch right. I knew because once or twice I'd seen more of her bare flesh than I'd have cared to. War Boys aren't particularly modest either but it's different and unnerving looking at naked a woman. I never had before, at least not up close. The scars were almost chrome through.

At some point in her mediocre life, she'd been torched just as bad as I had, leaving her looking like a croc skin bag all down the back. Maybe that was the only reason I was still alive, through surviving she must have had some basic knowledge of how to heal burns. Still I wondered how I had managed to fend off infection. This place couldn't even begin to compare with the Organic's sick ward.

Hateful glares and hard words didn't scare off Dune when she came at me ready to peel off the old layer and slap on the new. I tried fighting it once, but she'd easily overpowered me in the state I'm in.

It was pointless and painful to fight. So, all I could do was try not to look at her face while she worked, her hands I'd watch, though.

The right hand didn't have any fingernails, and every digit was always curled slightly, stiff from the tightness of the scarring. Her left hand was unremarkable and not at all damaged. I found myself
hating that whole and untainted hand far less than the scarred one because it wasn’t as clumsy and rough. It was soft. The fact that I almost liked to be touched with that good hand of hers confused me. Pissed me off.

As always, I’d rather be dead while she did the unwrapping. Yet, after that when her hands were full of the glop that she spread on my ugly hide - I hated Dune less.

It still hurt to be touched at all, but it was something about how the hands applied the salve. It was, I don’t know, sort of soft and rust but shine too.

It made me feel things no War Boy should. It was like some dumb out-of-body thing that I couldn’t help. I’d lean into the nutter with the shoulder that wasn’t fried. My face always seemed to end up rested in her scar hand while the shine hand would graze over the unholy wrecked skin like a whisper sounds close.

When this part was over I’d hate her again, even more than the last time I came up from the stupor.

While she put on the new layers I found a few words coated in a little venom. She deserved it for keeping me alive and constantly making me feel like a needy pup.

“I hope you find some lead in your face while you’re gone.”

She sighed as she wrapped up each finger on my left hand carefully. “Well. Dune hopes you whizz on yourself again while she’s gone.”

*Rustbuckets,* she knew what buttons to push. “Burn in hell!”

“We both already have Ducky.”

What she said made me blink stupidly at the very notion. No, it hadn’t been hell, it had almost been Valhalla for me. Almost. It was the failure to reach it that had been hell. I didn’t care what it had been like for her to heal.

When she was finished with me she stood, wiping her hands on a rag from her back pocket and plucking her rifle from the foot of my sleep spot. Before she went she scratched at the part of my head that wasn’t toasted and I jerked away from her fingers with a wince and a curse.

I hadn't shaved my head or face in weeks, not since the night before the one armed Imperator stole Joe's treasures. I hated to be reminded that the war paint was gone and that I was looking less and less like a proper War Boy by the day.

When she left I strained to hear the footsteps fade. Distantly I heard a motor sputtering and fighting her as she started it. It was an odd hum, not an engine I'd ever heard before.

She must have had two different rides. Because sometimes when she left for short trips to circle her territory I'd hear a motorcycle, not whatever I heard her leave in today.

If my ear wasn't lying to me, then I might be able to escape this hole in the dirt. I'd just have to get myself down that tunnel and onto that cycle. There was no room for doubt, because if I couldn't stay on the thing with this missing leg then I'd never make it to Valhalla.

Now that Dune was gone, ten days of careful plotting came to use. The first thing I did was drink every drop she left in the jar for me. I couldn't take it with me unless it was already in my gut because Dune had the only canteen. It was a really odd feeling to drink that much in one go, I could sense it sloshing around when I moved. Seldom had I ever felt that before this place. Being shrewd and
knowing the value of her crying cave was Dune's only merit. It was no wonder she was so often anxious to defend her turf.

I rolled over, biting back the urge to curse at the electricity shooting up through my spine when the ruined skin stretched under the ugly brown wrappings.

The loony devil was deadly serious about putting lead in anything that got too close. So, whenever she was gone to patrol her patch of dirt I'd find a way to pull myself over to the piles of scrap and junk that she lined the walls with. The collection was almost impressive, the fruit of years ripping off travelers and picking up the aftermath of skirmishes on the roads. Three days ago by the pile, I had put together something that just might make it possible to stand and then stashed it back under the rubbish. Before fetching that I needed my pants.

Dune had pulled all of the shit out of the pockets and hidden my belongings away somewhere, then hung my pants on a rock pendant jutting out of the wall like a fist.

I could reach the pant leg that wasn't torn half off. With my right hand that was minimally bandaged, I managed to curl my fingers into a fist around the ankle cuff and shake the slacks down from where they hung. After pulling them into my lap to inspect I could see that she'd altered them with a long line of stitches to close the left leg so that if I ever wore them again, my stump wouldn't hang out of it.

Something under my ribs hurt as I fisted the singed material tight in my painful fingers. I hated this. Hated it so deep and so pure that for a time I didn't even feel pain as I struggled to get them on.

The hate drove me harder. I dragged myself, scooting on my arse and palms to the scrap pile and yanking out the crutch I had made from three broken lance sticks -which she collected for no reason- and wadded rags that she hadn't been watching carefully enough for me not to steal out from under her sleep spot.

She'd kept my boot too. That was a bitch to pull on, it made the jerky of my back stretch and I swore that I could feel skin cracking. Now came the part I knew I might not be able to force myself through, tying the makeshift crutch to my stump-thigh and taking a stab at standing.

I must have sat staring for ages at the rusty thing I created and the even rustier space where the rest of my leg used to be. I pulled it into position flush against my hip and hesitated again after feeding the length of a leather belt under the crutch and the stub. I knew pain, it was my friend or had once been. If I had been able to carve the shine skin decals on my arms and underbelly with a razor blade when I was a barely more than a pup then I could do this now, own the pain. I had to. If not I'd never make it to Valhalla. Letta rip and tighten the shit up.

“VEEIGHT! Gahhfuck!”

I'd put the end of the belt through the buckle and pulled it tight in one swift move. It wasn't like cutting a piston or a flaming spark plug into your skin. It felt exactly like what it was, strapping a stick to a bloody stump and probably doing it completely wrong. I'd made the mistake of watching her change the bandages on that leg once and never made that mistake again. It was black and blue all the way to my fangin' sack and strapping something to it was just a stupid desperate idea, but here I was making stupid ideas into reality.

The aqua-cola in my guts roiled up to the back of my throat and Dunes vindictive words almost came true too. I was lucky enough not to spring a leak downstairs but I tossed up most of what she left in the jar for me.
I was laying prone, shivering in a pool of my own sick. What had I become? I shook my head and flung the thoughts away. I had to get up. Had to. So, I clawed my way over to the boulder I slept next to, dragging the thing I had strapped onto myself behind me. I needed something to help me crawl my way up because knew that I'd get nowhere trying stand straight up from the floor without something to lean into.

It was a slow ascent, weak right leg pushing me up only little by little in between full body tremors. When I was there on my fee- foot I felt an undeserved sense of pride at such a small feat. The crutch I had built was long enough that the end which I wrapped the stolen cloth around could be shoved up under my armpit, I'd intended that way so that it could bare some weight. I'd just have to pray to V8 that it could hold together long enough for me to get on that bike and head toward the canyon. That's the plan. Get on the bike, go to the canyon and die with an engine between my legs like Joe intended. Rock Riders never hesitate to snipe off anything passing through their camp where the canyon bottlenecked.

Then Valhalla.

Just have to get there. The hard part is over. Just have to get there. I leaned on the thing a little, then a lot, and finally took a clumsy step. Yes, the crutch could take my weight. I'd been worried that my hands were too ruined to make anything that wouldn't just fall to pieces.

I felt almost fully alive again, even if the walk was slow, and even if I fought dizziness and the shakes constantly. The tunnel was dark so, I took the torch Dune had left burning and held it in my teeth. Had to do it that way because my hands were busy, one kept me steady against the wall and the other gripped the shaft of the crutch.

Little by little. Step by step. On and on until I came to an unexpected obstacle. A fork in the path. Damn it. I didn't need to get lost, not fuckin' now.
Chapter Summary

Dune does a dance and brings home the bacon.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The wastes and badlands are wondrous places. Never know what you might find. “Shiny baubles for mama, grub for the homestead, Salve for Ducky.”

I had a shopping list. Though come to think of it- What's shopping? Ma used to use the phrase when we went out looking for particular things. Old word dialog is a strange relic.

Well, the first item on the list was rather important. I couldn't make the burn salve myself. Didn't know how. I had a man I could barter with for the stuff, another survivor from a far off place said to be better than this one.

I had traded with the man many times, ma had traded with him too way back when I was the one layin' at home all cooked.

Best announce myself at a distance as always. Just safer that way for the both of us. I parked the sled one hill beyond his camp and whistled a quick tune. I whistled again when there was no immediate response. Finally, the tune was echoed back and a figure appeared at the top of the hump of sand.

I felt a smile tug at the corners of my mouth because I could see the morning sun glint off the Winchester in his hands. “Dune comes to trade! Same supplies as she's been getting all month from Wilson!”

Wilson was a special scavenger. Nobody out here with half a brain shot at him because he had the know-how to mend flesh. A mind like that is too valuable, even Buzzards left him alone and came to him in times of need. You could tell by the name that he was a man from before the world fell. He was wise, though, didn't trust no one.

“Hands up Dune. I'm not doing business with you if you've got any sharps or pistols.” He called sternly and I complied, hands up and grin wide.

“Knife off the leg Dune. Leave it in the sled. You know my rules.” I dropped my hands and threw my head back with a groan. So much bloody effort just to get some goop for a half dead War Boy.

When finally Wilson deemed it safe to let me approach I felt naked. No bullets or blades. I hate that shit, but this was necessary. We met at the crest of the hill. His face looked like a clipping from an old word map, wrinkles so deep that they could swallow up half the desert and keep it tucked in the folds forever.

“Kid, as much of that shit as you've bought, I'd say whoever you are buying it for is better off if you just put them out of their misery. Then again, your mother was just as stubborn with you. So I don't expect you to take my opinion to heart. What do you have to offer me, girl?”
It was impossible to resist a jest, flashing a lascivious grin and poking my cheek out with my tongue as I made a lewd pumping gesture with my hand.

He pounded his knees with his palms released a laugh that echoed miles across the dead world. “Cruel girl, you know my fun stick don't work no more! Not that anyone wants to brave those teeth of yours anyhow... Alright, no more jokes. What else you got?”

“A gallon of water and a pint of guzz. Like last time.”

“Skip the guzz, got enough to get by. I want something else.” He pointed at me and at first I turned around and looked back, wondering if there was something he wanted from the sled.

“The hair fog head. I want your hair. I could make some twine outta that.”

My first reaction was to clutch at my tangles in both fists possessively. “No deal. Dune don't need the sun cooking her dome.”

Wilson shook his head. “Nah, not all of it. We could leave some on top.”

And that's the story of how I ended up with a bloody scalp. The dreaded locks had to be broken apart and combed through before Wilson would take them. Whatever the hell he was needing twine for, it had better be forkin' important. I was there damn near until nightfall getting my hair pulled on.

Well, for all the effort and inconvenience I was rewarded with enough salve to last Slit another week and new strips of linen to bandage him with. The extra cloth was a surprise perk. Wilson must have felt poorly about the line of red seeping past my hairline and between my eyes now as I sailed away on the evening sands.

Now to take care of that other necessity. Food. There was one thing I could do to make the grub appear fast and I'd make it to the place where such a thing is done by the time the sun retreated behind the horizon. To make it work I needed the daylight, so I'd be spending the night out there and waiting until dawns glorious light returns. It wasn't a problem to bunk down there, but I wasn't keen on leaving the War Boy alone too long. I knew he wasn't going anywhere fast but their kind can get rather creative and they have absolutely no self-preservation instinct. I had War Boys in my brain for the entire trip across the least inhabited zones, remembering the things I'd seen them do when I watched the war parties go by. Maniacs, all of them crawling all over speeding cars, defying death yet embracing it too.

“And people call Dune crazy.”

As I arrived I kept my ears pricked and my blade at the ready. It's always best to make certain that you are alone. No stranger in the wastes should be trusted. Once I was certain that no one was there, I looked at the shape of this landmark's silhouette against the starlit sky. The place was a rock formation which looked as if the largest stones had all fallen together in an embrace over their smaller brothers and sisters. I liked the visual poetry in it. I also liked that it was close to a path that many travelers took to skim around the mountains and avoid the Citadel. It's the perfect place to set some bait.

“No fun yet. Must wait for tomorrow to make my grand performance. For now, a prayer that the wastes will provide once again and then sleep. If the goddess will allow it, be kind to Ducky while I'm away from home. If his jacked up face is any indication then his life has been complete shit.” said I before rolling out a mat in the sled and pulling the tarp over myself to fend off the cold desert night.
The morning was chilly. My breath had become a dew under the tarp, wetting my shoulder and dampening what was left of my hair. I stumbled out of the sled and began the climb up the stone formation to bask in morning’s first light and warm up my shivering limbs. I also wondered how my Ducky had fared through the night.

With Mama’s Enfield in my lap and back turned to the sun to catch its heat I began digging in my pockets for the bullets. The first order of business was to load the rifle. It was hard for me not to imagine Mum's hands making the same skilled movements, sliding across the wood accents and sleek barrel. It had been her lead slinger first after all. Her fingerprints were branded deep into the worn and pitted metal.

She had taught me to care for it, fire it, and had bragged day and night about all of the sharpshooters she had instructed over the years as one of the many mothers.

Weapon ready, I stood to fetch something I’d left here the last time I had the need to lure in the unwary. I kept an old boob-tube antenna adorned in shinies and reflecting mirrors stored here for those desperate occasions when I had to play the role of the siren. It was wedged in a shady spot where the embracing stones created a deep crevice. I propped up the thing at the top, wedging smaller stones around the shaft to hold it upright. It somewhat resembled a tree if you squinted at it. Almost as soon as the attention getter was set and casting radiant beams of light across the land, I felt the beat of another song Mum used to sing. It was such a fitting tune for today, I couldn't help but dance to it.

Hips thrusting, legs kicking, arms waving and head thrown back as I danced across the top of the rock pile, singing to the sky and the rotten earth.

“Hail! Hail! What's the mattah with ya head? Yeah Yeah! Hail! Hail! What's the mattah with ya mind and ya sign? Oh-woah-Oh! Hail! Hail! Nothin' the mattah with ya head baby, find it... Yeah... Come on and find it.”

There's nothing quite like cutting a rug on a big rock in the middle of nowhere, strutting around like a horny bird. If you can't make your life fun then what the hell is the point?

“Come and get your love! Come and get your lo-oh-uve! Come and get your love. Come and get that love!” You don't even have to sing it right, to be Frank -who the fuck is Frank?- I don't really remember all of the words, just the tune mostly. But who cares? It's just me and the miles of nothing.

I must have sung it a dozen times. I just adore the moments when I could remember Mum's singing.

“Oh yes, come and get your-” The growl of a motor. A car I think, small block V8. Yes, yes. I tore the long lookers from my belt and scanned my surroundings. Yep. I couldn't tell what the make or model right off the top of my head as I'm not very good with naming such things, but they seemed to be carrying quite a lot of crap strapped onto the roof and stuffed into the back seat. Some of that could be ready to eat stuffs. If not then, desperation does funny things to you. Long pig. Enough said.

They were making a wide turn to circle back this way. They must have gotten curious enough to head toward the sound of the song and the glinting of the mirrors. Curiosity is deadly. No matter how
wrong it is to take life, this world isn't kind. Everyone is responsible for a graveyard. The days where I had to deal death felt strange, but it was always my guilty pleasure.

I dropped low, laying upon the stone and feeling the nearly noon heat on the rock warm my empty gut as I snatched up the Enfield and peered through the scope. Two men, two bullets. I prepared to take aim.

_Breath slow, hands steady, thoughts tranquil, mind the wind._ POP!

Driver down. The car swerved in a sharp arc and slowed to a stop. There was return fire from a revolver but every bullet just whizzed by or pinged off the rock. I counted the shots, six. He wouldn't have time to reload. A final bang tore through the silence hanging in the air and the men were no more. I lifted my head, a grin so wide that my lips pulled painfully tight against the points of my teeth.

“Did Dune say, love? She meant lead. Come and get your lead. And that you did.”

I clambered down from my stage, gun still held up just in case of surprises. _Impala_. I found that the car was a Chevrolet Impala now that I could take a closer look without my mind busy figuring out how many heads to put bullets into.

There was no movement, no signs of life, so I lowered my guard and began the work of looking through the spoils. The men were hauled out and laid in the dirt shoulder to shoulder. They were old enough to have hairy faces but I could not tell if they belonged to any particular faction. Oddly, I felt a wave of peculiar relief that they weren't Immortan Joe's war fodder. Somehow it would feel wrong to feed Slit maggots that had been raised on the bodies of men he might have known before I snapped them. These couldn't have been War Boys, there was no branding on their necks and no pretty little doodles etched into their skin. One had long hair and the other had kept it much shorter. Their bodies and their clothes would be of good use. I started up the sand sled and pulled in close to load the corpses and strap them down under the tarp.

With the first chore done I popped the trunk. Guns, ammo, knives and things I could not even begin to recognize. Some of the things in little leather pouches smelled decidedly herbal. Perhaps I could trade that to Wilson. A few of the guns and all of the bullets I'd keep for myself. I closed the trunk, then set to work examining the shit strapped up top. Bedrolls, scrap metal and a lumpy sack that caught my interest straight off. I pulled that down and loosened the ties holding it closed... Oh. My heart skipped a beat and my skull meat processed the smell before my eyes had a chance to make sense of it. Potatoes.

“Glory! Glory! Gods be praised, the wastes bring a bountiful harvest to a lucky scav!”

I hadn't seen the underground tubers of this sort of plant in ages. Not since the Green Place. I sat clumsily in the sand and pulled one of the round, bumpity things to my lips, eating it raw just to savor the taste of a home I once knew.

Where did the travelers get them? Who knows. I'd heard that the local moonshiners had figured out how to grow things in their territory. Maybe these had come from them, an excess that they traded off for whatever other supply such weirdos like them would need.

Inside there were all sorts of trinkets and this and that glued to the dashboard. The back seat held a few more sacks of potatoes, more than Duck or I could eat before it started to go bad. I'd have to barter with it but that wouldn't be hard. I had Wilson to trade to. We might not trust one another nor like each other very much but I wasn't about to hoard this stuff until it rotted. Wilson was a bloody expert at catching lizards anyhow, maybe I could trade some of these for a bunch of squirmy scalys
Finally, there was the matter of the car. It looked to be in alright shape. The tires were a nightmare, once deep wide treads for moving through sand, now nearly bald. The body also showed its age in wear and tear that suggested it had seen many a skirmish on the roads. Still, I'd never lured in a prize of this magnitude before. The best I had done in many, many days was draw in cyclists or the weary ones who walk. Then again after a road war such as the one I had seen, the power might be shifting. People might be displaced. Change means danger and suspicion swelled within my brain. I should take what I can and leave.

“Yeah. No reason to linger now.”

I considered the car for a long time. I didn't think I'd ever have enough Guzzoline to keep it fed, nor the knowledge to keep it healthy. Hell, the sled barely worked and the cycle I had back home ran on luck more than anything. I was no blackthumb. I excel in shooting and salvaging but not much else. I know enough to get by and that's about it.

“A car is a responsibility Dune. You'll be drivin' one day Mum said. It'll be fun she said. Now Dune isn't so sure. But War Boys like Ducky know cars. Maybe it'll tickle his fancy... Anyway, all of this shit is much too heavy for the fan sled to push around.”

I decided to tether the sled behind the car and take a whack at driving something like this. I knew the basic principle. Pedals, steering wheel, gear shift, clutch. That didn't stop the beast from jerking and fighting me, though. It wasn't a smooth ride back into familiar territories.

I stopped at Wilson's. He looked at me as if I had grown a second head pulling up in this thing, but he couldn't say no to the goods I brought and soon I was homeward bound.

There would be lizard and potato stew tonight.

Chapter End Notes

A long chapter written under the influence of Redbone and my liquor cabinet.
Chapter Summary

Slit's plan has fallen through. Now he must suffer the torture of wounds that are all in his head.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was cold and the wrappings did nothing to stave off the chill as it reached deep into me and clenched its frigid fingers around every bone.

Awareness would come and go, so would pain. I might have broken my wrist, I couldn't be sure because it was dark and I couldn't move. The sand itched and burrowed into every centimeter of ruined flesh but it and the ruthlessly cool night air blowing passed me were the only reason I knew that I was close to escape. So stupidly close. I could even smell the grease and guzzoline of the place where the mad scavenger kept her rides.

I was close but I might as well still be lying there useless next to the corpse of Dune's parent. I had gotten lost, the torch had gone out and I hadn't seen the sheer drop. The fall shattered the crutch into splinters, sent a blaze of wretched sensation throughout every nerve and then sucked the breath out of me. That had been hours if not days ago, I still couldn't bring myself to get up.

If you can't stand up you can't do war.

My words, echoing in my brain and feeling like a kick in the ribs. I'd told Nux that. I hadn't wanted him to go because I hadn't wanted him to die. It would have been better if he had just stayed and fueled up on the feral's blood. Then he wouldn't have traitored us all. I wouldn't have to hate him.

If that bitch Imperator wouldn't have stolen the Immortal's treasures, If Nux had stayed, If I hadn't caved in and let him go then we might be lying in our bunk right now, shoulder to shoulder. If anything had happened different, then everything would be the way it should be now.

He's probably dead. Joe probably shredded all of them. Why wouldn't he? What reason is there to hope that what I saw isn't true?

It's all Nux's fault. If that mediocre shit could have just stayed at home and not always be convinced that he was dying then I wouldn't be here right now wondering where the hell he ended up. Because he sure as hell wasn't going to Valhalla now that he's pissed away any chance he had to be awaited.

You filth! You traitored him!

When I shouted that at him I had almost said it wrong, tasting the word me even though it came out him. Why? Why was he helping them? It made no sense and I couldn't force the answers to come together in my head no matter how hard I tried. I'd spent days trying to figure it out.

I remembered the taste of guzz and watching Nux coax the rig's engines a little faster. I watched him hack and retch on the fuel because the idiot had inhaled it. I had laughed at him and he deserved it.
The wind blew in through the cave mouth and down into the place I had fallen to dust me with sand carried in on the breeze. I had long lost feeling from my fingers all the way up to my elbows. I tried curling up and stuffing my frozen hands under my armpits to keep them warm but that helped little. The night is cruel when you're alone.

All of the small details leading to Nux betraying everything we knew kept on appearing and vanishing in my head like a tease. It niggled at me as if I could reach into the past and change it all around so that things would turn out right. Thoughts became restless dreams, I forgot where I was.

I had my hands around his neck. His big dumb eyes rolled back and then I let him have a breath. “Why!? Tell me why, smeg!”

He gulped down air, mouth hanging open and scarred lips blue. “Slit!” He rasped, then choked on the tumors he'd given stupid names.

When he started getting some color back in his traitor face I closed my fingers around his throat again. He wasn't going to die, we used to play this game when we were pups to see how long the other could keep their eyes open. I knew just how long Nux could take it before my grip beckoned his death.

I let go again. The sound Nux made when he sucked in air only fueled the fire in my gut, a combustible mixture of both my rage and his desperation. Now he's desperate to live huh? After wrecking his chance at Valhalla. “WHY?! Why shit for brains? Just couldn't stand the idea of letting me drive could you? Why do you keep fucking everything up? Why didn't you turn the Coupe around to grab me when your bloodbag kicked me off? Were you that fangin' eager for Valhalla that you couldn't waste five seconds to pick me up? We're supposed to cark it historic together you worn out, skull-faced, brake pad!”

Nux managed to wheeze out a response, an excuse, something that I couldn't understand. Everything sounded like it was far away, it was as if I had a rag stuffed into my good ear.

“Look at this!” I showed him what was left of my leg. A scorched stump. I pointed to my left side where weeping red bubbles had replaced my skin. “This is your fault! You did this! If you hadn't traitored him this wouldn't have happened!”

He lifted his arm and pointed behind me, fingers shaking and eyes growing wide like two blue hubcaps. I turned my head and the Immortal was there, breath heavy as his dead breeder hung limply in his arms. She was dropped to the ground, useless and cold now.

He raised his hand and pointed an accusing finger at my driver. It was right and it was just, yet I begged it to stop, for everything to just hit the breaks. I tried to get up to pull Nux away, but when I looked down my other leg was gone too.

Nux howled as if he were being gutted, writhing and kicking and spine twisting in ways that just weren’t normal. His skin changed, going gritty and losing all of those familiar scars. Pieces of him began to blow apart and fly away on the wind like ash. I tried to catch them, but all of the bits of him just slipped through my fingers like sand.

When I woke my face was wet and my blood pump was trying to piston its way through the ribs I had bruised when I fell. This must be what it's like to die soft, this must have been what Nux was so
afraid of.

“Look at yourself. A burnt out wreck. No leg, no driver. Never gonna be a driver yourself. Nothing... Just. Nothing.” I said it to myself. Maybe I said it for Nux too, wherever he was.

There was dim light, the cave mouth must have been even closer than I thought. The night before had almost killed me with cold but now it was almost too hot to breathe. Sweat had broken out anywhere there was still unmarred skin. It must be high noon now if I was sweltering in the shade. Heat I could take, it was the cold that made a whimpering pup out of me. It had always been like that, but I’d always had Nux and his fevered skin to sleep next to before. I hadn't realized how comfortable that'd been until now because we'd always fought over space with jabbing elbows and kicking feet.

The mound of sand that had formed against my back as the wind brought it in almost felt like a body leaning heavy against me. When thirst and sleep came to drag my eyes closed again I dreamt of the shallow stone alcove where my driver and I slept.

-0-

“What are you doin' here?! Aw, Ducky. Dear thing. Come on. Let us get you up.”

The scav's voice stirred me, then her canteen pressed into my face and fully roused me so I could drink every last drop. I should have been angry, should've hated myself for failing to reach Valhalla again. Instead, a guilty sense of relief crept up on me, stabbing quick and bolting away again into the deep holes in my mind. She dusted off the sand and started hoisting me up by the wrist. Nope, it wasn't broken, but it didn't feel any good.

“Ahh! Filthy, loony, mindless, bitch.” It was supposed to come like the roar of a nitro boost. Instead, it fell out of my mouth like sobs as she pulled my arm over her shoulders and began lifting with a long groan.


I said nothing and barely cared enough to obey.

“Ouff!” Dune stumbled under my weight and I had no choice but to collapse into the sand with her. She pushed herself up and started grasping at me to try again. "Come on War Boy! You're gonna hafta put in some effort here!"

I found just a little fight left in me, it resisted like a flame that just wouldn't go out no matter how hard you tried to stomp out the embers. I shouted, jerked away from her hands and took a swing at her with my less charred hand. I had no right to be called a War Boy, and there was nowhere else to focus my shame and anger but at the creature that had robbed me of the chance to mceast with fabled heroes and ride eternal.

She took my knuckles solid to the left side of her jaw and she went flopping back into the sand.

“I'm not a War Boy! I'm nothing but mediocre Nothing! And that's your doing!”

She sat back up and scooted out of my reach, palming her chin and rotating her jaw. I could see red
coating her teeth. She glared at me and took several ragged breaths before saying anything. I could tell that she was deciding whether or not to strike back. Finally, she filled up her lungs deep and huffed the air back out as she made her choice in how to retaliate.

“Slit. We ARE what we ARE. You're a thing that fight, fight, fights. If ya weren't a tough S.O.B. then you'da died before I ever made my way to the trail of death the war parties left behind. You're Kamikrazee, and I'm- Well, I'm just plain forkin' crazy and I'll admit that... Now, shit happens. But it don't change who and what we are. We're not nothing.”

What she said didn't hit me first, it was the fact that she hadn't spoken in the third person. Only after I grasped how awkward it sounds when she talks sane like did the rest filter through. I cut my gaze away from her. I didn't want to hear this. If anybody could be right and full of shit at the same time, it was Dune.

I pretended the sand pile between us was the most interesting thing in the world as she spat bloody spittle and got back to her feet. “Are you going to help Dune lift you up off your arse? Or are you going to force her to carry you?”

I glared, becoming aware of my scowl when the staples in my face pinched. I looked away again, refusing to meet her gaze as I lifted an arm for her to take.

Being helped stung somewhere deep, but it wasn't as if I had much choice. With an arm around her shoulders and her other hand gripping the waistband of my pants tight to keep me upright I was turned toward a gentle slope of rock that wound around the three-meter drop that I had stumbled over in the night. Just a few steps to the left and I would have succeeded in my quest.

No more words were exchanged. Dune didn't need light to navigate, she'd taken this path into the interior too many times. It took half the time to get back to that rustpit than it did for me to get as far as I did on my own, and soon she was propping me against my boulder and lighting the torches.

“If you got those pants on, you can get them off yourself. Dune needs to put away the haul and replenish the maggot farm.” She sighed and shot me a glance before stalking away, wiping the trickle of red away from her chin. “At least we shall not starve.”

I just pulled the button out of the loop and let them fall into a pile around my ankle. Didn't bother with the boot. As sore as my ribs were and as taut as the burns were under their two-day-old wraps I wasn't going to be bending myself in half to untie that again. I slid down the rock and sat in the nest of mediocrity Dune had built around me, resigned to it.

When she returned she yanked off the boot and gave the trousers a sniff before turning her nose up at them and tossing the lot as far away as she could, muttering that they needed a wash. Dune then got to work performing the torture she always suffered me with.

Sometime in between being scrubbed clean -with uncomfortable thoroughness- and smothered in the healing slime, I lost the battle with sleep once again.

Silence never quite falls on the warrens where War Boys sleep. Teeth chatter and bodies quiver with a false chill brought on by the fevers. Every night at least one man will die in his bed and his sleep mates will wake to his body cold and stiff among them. An angel of death lurks in the dark, stalking its next victim.

Can't move. Can't breathe. Can't wake.
“Nux, this isn't fuckin' funny. Get up.” He wouldn't move, wouldn't blink, wouldn't speak. His mouth just hung open and his eyes stared blankly into the distance.

Don't do this.

“Get up you filth! You have to fix this. Make it up to Joe! Get up! Or you'll never get to Valhalla!” I got up and pulled him out of the bunk, but he just rag-dolled onto the floor in a pile. He wasn't even cold yet.

“Witness.” The faceless boys in the surrounding bunks whispered.

“NO! SHUT UP! Nux, get up... Nux? Wake up!” I shook his shoulders and his head just rolled around.

Witness.

“No! Stupid pup. You stupid, stupid pup!” It wasn't a joke. I turned to shout for someone to get the Organic, when I turned back there was nothing left to revive. Just a pile of bones.

Witness...

It's a dream I've had before. Usually after a couple days listening to the weakling whine about his body failing him. It started out hard to take him seriously because ever since we were pups Nux would make a big deal out of any symptom and attribute it to his “imminent demise”. As the days and days went by it started to become clear that plenty was actually wrong with him, and I grew cold, refusing to believe it was true until he needed bloodbags regularly.

How could you trust a driver that might konk out in the middle of a pursuit? I didn't want him to die but didn't want him to drive. I didn't know what I wanted. I was just sick of the confusion. When he declared that he was going to die historic, that was sort of the answer. Fine. I decided that we'd both chuck it in. There wasn't a driver better than Nux, hate to admit it but it's true and I wasn't keen on getting paired up with some green pup after Nux went. We could've kept on like always, just in Valhalla instead of this dump truck load of shit called life. He just had to go and muck the whole thing up. Cancer must have eaten up his brain.

How come every time that traitor pops into my sleeping head he's dying? I scratched at my face, the rags tied around my fingers absorbed the aqua-cola my eyes had wasted while I dreamt.

“Who's Nux?”

I stiffened at Dune's question, not expecting it at all. “No one. A piece of trash. What's it matter to you who he is?”

“You ask for him in your sleep. You beg him to wake up.” She spoke soft like. It was weird compared to the way she'd normally bark out excited nonsense.

Her statement earned her a glare. What happened to all of that mess on her head? All she had left was a mohawk of blunt ended pleats. Didn't matter. I turned my head and resumed looking at the stone wall. Nux was none of her damn business. “You whine shit in your sleep too. Not that any of it actually makes sense.”

I heard her shift and some metal clinking. The brush of a finger running over the whorls and designs carved into my right forearm caused me to flinch and snap my head around to gawk. She flinched
too, retracting her arm quick as lightning. The stare we exchanged was long, neither of us fully trusting the gesture. Cautiously that shine hand reached out again to trace the shape of a wrench in the scars, I tensed to it.

“So many doodles... All so pretty. You do that yourself?”

I didn't know how to take this. Gentle hands and sentiment are reserved only for the youngest of pups, not grown boys with faces like the one I've got. She should be afraid, she should heed the way scars like mine warn not to touch. If I weren't so fucking mediocre right now I could end her just like that. Didn't she know better than to invite snakes into her kip? Still, as the thoughts buzzed in my head like flies, other very not War Boy like feelings squeezed at my innards. All my pathetic self could seem to do was watch the little circles that the fingers traced and nod moronically. Yes, I did these cut-ups a long, long time ago.

It was like the witch had hexed me and I couldn't control what my meat and bones did anymore. Long minutes passed, maybe hours. I felt boneless. She traced every scar that wasn't hidden or scorched away, even those that had given me my name. It was a lazy, soft, rusty, shiny thing of the loon to do. For a while, I forgot to hate her again.

“I'm hungry. You must be starvin' too Duck. Dune's going to make us something to munch now. Yeah?”

She pulled away, wiggling herself out from under how I'd leaned into her and I resented the empty, neglected feeling that spread across my skin when her shine hand was gone. If she kept doing shit like that, I might not be able to keep on hating her like I should.

Chapter End Notes

On a side note I was listening to The King of rock and roll all morning and cried my ass off when In The Ghetto came on. Jaetion, I thought of your modern War Boys while I sobbed ugly.

This was a pain in the bum chapter to do. Not sure how I fared but. Yeah. There you go. I'm taking a break from this story for a little bit to update my other fictions. Thanks a BUNCH for the kudos and comments. I love you freaky people.

4/27/2016 EDIT: This used to be the end of Act 1, but I've since decided to change that and have the chapter titled "Worth" be the final chapter of Act 1 instead because that just makes more sense. I guess you'll figure out why as you read on.
Dune wonders what the scars on the broken War Boy's skin might feel like under her fingers.

We're not nothing. Just because we're broken and hungry and missing parts of us, it doesn't make us nothing. Poor Ducky. So hurt inside, so much loathing for himself and it didn't even have to be that way. I had told the battle fodder that I'd shine him up til he sparkled again. My word is my word and I keep my promises.

I've heard things about the Citadel from the other scavengers when we met on Wilson's territory by chance. His turf is like a neutral zone, no one fights because we all come there to heal. There I'd hear about War Boys and their god-king. Bits and pieces came together in my head like an awful mural depicting child soldiers and a leader who would keep their heads empty of anything but devotion to himself and his legacy.

Slit was a child soldier, fed a steady diet of lies and grown on it until there was only a little boy desperately seeking a surrogate parent's praise while trapped in a man body. I couldn't really hope to change that, the damage is already done, but I could maybe show him other things. Freedom to think for himself, that his opinions are valid, that he's deserving of respect even if he's missing a leg.

After returning and finding him all curled up by the entrance to my home, looking like a black bird whose wings were broken, I briefly considered Wilson's words with seriousness. Should I kill him? End his pain? No. No one ended my pain. A person I loved like the dingo loves the moon had forced life down my throat and refused to answer my plea for a deep cut in the neck to end it all. Mum had known that I'd be alright, make my way and be happy as a murder of crows on a cadaver after healing up. And I was. Life is splendid, gorgeous, worth every breath. He'd learn, just as I had.

He's worthy of a second stab at life I decided as I pulled off his grimy dressings and tidied him up. The unwrapping hurt him because the bandages tend to stick unless I get him damp with water first, but the blisters were fading, parts of him had scabbed over and he was not oozing so badly. It seemed like a good sign.

His leg I worried about, though. I'd never treated something like it. I wondered if it should smell like it did now. It had a thick metal scent before, Now that I'm back from my trip to find food it had changed, giving off a faintly rotten odor. Or it could be the stench of the War Boy in general. He had been slick with sweat and his trousers reeked like musk and piss when I found him laying in that pit of sand.

I cleaned him up real good, hoping it was just my imagination. As always he cringed with his head thrown back and went rigid when I got to cleaning up around the burnt stump. He didn't roar and howl anymore like he once had back in the first days I hauled him into the cavern, but he'd gasp a strained puff of air and mutter profane things. Occasionally he'd also hold his breath and try to kill me with a murderous stare.
I didn't mind, he could not harm me, not like this anyway. Hmm. He could be quite a handful once he heals up. Deadly even. He might just seek revenge on me for the trouble I'd gone through to keep him breathing. I'd still be quicker, though, with two good legs...

*Nah, too much thinkin', best climb that mountain when you come to it Dune.*

Soon the deed was done and I sat there glutting myself on water patiently collected in the basin, just thinking about the way he'd so slack in my hands whenever I applied the burn gloop. What struck me was the way he let his face lay in the palm of my unfeeling right hand whilst the goo went on the milder burns on the back of his head and where they licked up by his left jaw line. Those eyes would go far away every time, like when people stop thinking and the mind goes blank. I only ever had my hands on him when I had to. Since he growled at any move to approach him I figured that he wasn't keen on being touched. Yet, he'd go limp on me and only curse once I had moved on to the task of wrapping him back up. This time, no curses had followed. He had surrendered to his exhaustion while I worked and I let him lay, tossing a rat hole riddled afghan over his legs to give him some dignity. The necessary nudity didn't bother me any, but when he slept the thing in his lap had a mind of its own and I didn't feel like looking at it.

That night I'd listened to his nightmares. He'd throw his head side to side and begin rocking on his right shoulder where the skin was still perfect. Then he'd wake, staring at the wall, sniffling and holding his breath to quell whatever had disturbed his dreams. My poor, poor Ducky.

When I asked about the one called Nux -a name I've heard him shout like a filthy profanity and sometimes talk to in his dreams- he looked to me as if I had struck him with my fist. His answer was just as cold as his eyes. He called this person trash.

*This Nux doesn't sound like trash. A treasure maybe, or a brother.*

I moved closer when he turned his head away. The damned war mongrel made me so recklessly curious. Those older scars, I pondered their meanings and how they must have hurt to receive. I wanted to touch, feel the ripples and hard edges of intentional scar tissue. Slit was a delightfully dangerous creature. Like a serpent. I wondered if he would feel cool and strong in those spots where the skin was ruined on purpose. Snakes feel like cold sand wrapped in a silk scarf. *I wonder...*

Suddenly it was as if lightning had struck the spot between us, jolting us fully awake and startling us apart. I had touched without thinking, the hand which still feels had been drawn to the prettily adorned flesh like a compass needle is pulled north.

The electricity of my foolish move still crackled between us, locking us into an eye battle. His features were hard in spite of the wetness pooling on his lower lashes, lips thinning as they pulled tight against his blunt teeth in a fearsome grimace. I found there, looking so closely, that his left eye was a dim shade of blue. I had never really cared to take note of that before. I'd always been far more enamored with the wounded eye and it's streaks of white and red up until now.

I licked my lips, shifting my crouch slowly to sit on my knees as the feeling hand searched forward once more. He did not budge.

He wasn't cool like a reptile, he was warm under my palm. This doodle under my finger was a tool, a wrench carved into his underbelly. I followed its shape, then moved on to the abstract design that trailed from his belly button into the coarse, mildly singed hair of his crotch. I ventured no lower than that since his dick was not something I was at all interested in at the moment.

He started out tense, the muscle under my nails twitching with every move however once I spoke he...
settled.

“So many doodles... All so pretty. You do that yourself?” He slackened, answering with a slow nod as he tilted his head up to keep an eye on what I was doing.

There was a little car in there, lines behind it to indicate that it was moving, little swirls and spirals and senseless lines that no longer made anything at all because the fire had encroached on the living art. He'd drawn all of these little things himself. No, he'd cut them into himself. No wonder he hadn't gone whacko like me from the pain of his injuries, tough son of a bitch knew pain personally and had shaken its hand long ago.

I shifted again, easing myself against his right side and stretching out my legs in front of me. The right leg of mine didn't lay flat. It couldn't. Skin didn't work that way anymore. If I could bring myself to care enough, I'd try to therapize with careful work and bending it like Wilson often suggested. Make it better. But it worked well enough to do what I do. It didn't really matter. Once settled I took to exploring his right forearm. He'd really carved himself up anywhere he could reach properly, hadn't he? I wondered what it might look like if I asked him to carve something into me. It was just a stray thought. He'd probably stick the blade in and twist what with all I've put him through.

He made the same mewling noise in his throat that he'd wheezed when I found him. More bizarrely, I don't think he realized he was doing that when he turned into me and pressed his face up against my kidney. It was like when I apply the salve but more, stronger. Soon he had my legs pinned under dead weight. The thickly bandaged arm was thrown over my knees and his head and shoulder pressed into my guts heavily enough that I almost wanted to lurch up some of that water I had chugged down. Nope, my chuck button is broken, this scav does not waste food or water in such a fashion. He moved like this, all merely in response to the moment I ran a finger around the chunk of metal that held closed a gash in his gut, an older wound that had looked like it was still healing when I hauled his carcass home.

As much pondering as I do about this poor broken Slit, I never really thought much on what might have caused those deep, gnarled scars that made his face so unique. I followed the path that the worst slice made from the corner of his lips nearly to his ear. Poor, poor Ducky. Someone did this to him, it's not something anyone in their right mind would want.

You're one to talk about right minds Dune.

He panted out a low noise, maybe remembering how this wound got there as he burrowed deeper into me. What a mess. Has he never felt a kind hand appraise him before? Hmm. He needed a shave. The stubble on his chin was getting thick and his hair was growing back where his scalp was still unmolested by flame. He'd need to keep some on the top of his head or else one day the sun would cook his brains inside. I'd prefer it if the face stayed smooth so I could keep on seeing these lovely, jagged lines which stretched his grin wide and wicked.

At around the same time I decided that I was hungry, I also resolved to make this touching business a habit. I liked it even better than our hissing and quip matches.

I slid out from under him and fed us then. I'd had a few tin cans full of lizard and potato sitting on a pile of smoldering embers for a while now. Should be cooked up just fine. Ducky ate ravenously and found that he had too much energy in him to sleep anymore. I, however, could not be bothered to keep my eyes open. I barely managed to kick off my boots before falling into dreamland somewhere that wasn't even my sleep spot.
The next morning came, and I found that I had slumbered near to Slit but not quite touching him. A realization that he could have taken the knife off my belt and murdered me while I slept came and left me feeling foolish. I knew how horribly, murderously angry I had been while my very old burns had healed long ago, though I'd have been more inclined to end my own life rather than to end my Ma's.

I thought of the night before, reaching out with the hand that still felt once more to fondle the staples in his face. He was sweating, but almost as pale as he'd been when he still had the war paint on. And he was hot. Real hot.

*Oh no.*

I flattened my palm to his cheek bone and slid it up to his faint hairline, feeling the heat spread through my fingers until my palm was adding its own moisture to the streaks of sweat streaming down. Fear twisted a knot in my bowels as he turned his head into the hand that touched him, wrinkles in his forehead forming under my fingers as his brows turned up.

“Nux?” He whispered with a shiver that rattled him.

“Oh, Duck- you're roasting. On fire all over again...”

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Chapter End Notes

Cliff hanger. Don’t worry, life improves soon enough.
Worth

Chapter Summary

Slit recovers from a major setback in the healing process. Meanwhile, Dune has a surprise in store for him once he's back on his feet... er... foot.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Mary mother of god…”

“Can you help him?”

“No. He's as good as dead.”

“Dune knows you can save him. You have to help. At least try... Wilson?! Say something!”

“You want me to say something? You dragged me all the way here for a man that's as good as dead!... This- This is wrong, and insane EVEN for you! Look at him! Do you think anyone would want to live like this? Even if he heals, even if he beats the infection?? Would you want to live like THIS??”

“Yes. Life is worth saving. Even if it hurts at first to live.”

…

“Support his head woman, and hold down his arms. I have to cut out all this dead tissue.”

“Nux?”

“Ducky?”

“Nux, don't leave.”

“I'm right here Slit. Don't be afraid.”

*Nux, help me.*

I swore that I saw him leaning over Dune's shoulder, reaching out to me. I swore that I heard him too. It was like the day I almost bled out on the Organic Mechanic’s table and my driver stayed right up until they forced him to go. I felt comforted, something our kind seldom feel.

Infection had finally caught up with me, starting at the gnarled end of what's left of my leg and moving through me until I fell into a fever so cruel that dreams came to taunt me even when my eyes were open. I remember little of it, just like I remember little of the week after Dune found me. She had to fill me in on what had happened.

A man called Wilson was there when I woke, a gun across his lap and his hand wrapped around the
handle as he napped sitting up with his head tilted back against the stone.

I was told that he had been staying here for a time helping Dune to fix me. He was an organic mechanic apparently.

“You almost died again, Ducky. Gods be praised, you live again! Like a cat with lives to spare, that's three by my count. You got six left now.”

No, four. I've already almost died twice before winding up in this Joe forsaken cave.

“What the hell happened?” My tongue rolled around between my cheeks slowly, bogged down and sticking to my teeth from the sour dryness. I couldn't move again, there was just no strength left in my bones to so much as lift my fingers. The words came slow and scratched through my throat too, I'd have asked again when she paused with guilt running through her face, but I only managed to cough up something thick and salty from my lungs.

“Infection. Your body went rotten. Should have known better- Dune should have thought about it before... Shouldn't have left you alone so long. Should have told Wilson about the leg sooner. Shut your fucking whore mouth Dune and get Ducky some water!”

She shook her head and gnashed her teeth at the air, snapping them and turning sharply to gimp her way to the buckets which caught the Aqua-cola. She felt bad. She regretted. Good. It's about fucking time she hated herself for this. Her muttering and low ranting at herself seemed to wake the decrepit old man lounging against the furthest wall. He lifted a brow at the nutter, clutched his rifle closer and grimaced at where her mother's bones sat propped up before turning his buzz cut head away and closing his eyes again.

When Dune scuttled back she wore a sympathetic closed mouth smile, hiding her savage teeth. She slid her scar hand under my head and used the shine hand to tip a grimy mason jar full of Aqua-cola against my lips. It washed away the taste of death from my mouth but introduced a chemical aftertaste.

“Wilson says he's going to leave in two days, but he'll come back for check ups once a week... Ohh, rust and dust. Dune owes him MASSIVE. Might never be able to repay it. He gave old world medicine to help.” She said excitedly, and then morosely at the end. All the words were hurried as if there was more jabbering to be done and it all needed to make it out of her mouth quick. Making up for the days that I couldn't hear her beating those ugly teeth together.

“Why is-” She didn't let me finish speaking, she tipped the jar into my lips again and I couldn't refuse.

“Drink. Drink. Don't want you dryin' out, could hardly get any water into you while you were out cold... Hungry Slit!? Yeah? No?” She set down the jar and reached for the metal dishes we ate out of.

“No solids for him yet woman!” The old man, Wilson grunted with an authoritative voice. “I don't want him horkin' perfectly good food back up when there's so little of it in this dump already.”

She growled low. “Well, this is my dump Wilson and Ducky can hork up whatever he wants to.”

“He could fall asleep and then aspirate. Turn him on his side if you're gonna fill him up with water like that.” The old man argued.

“What the FORKIN' hell does that even mean?”
My stomach churned acid and my throat spasmed around my gag reflex. “Stop talking about vomit. Veeight, please stop.”

Dune gasped and dropped the tin bowl in her hands. “Goddess on her throne of seeds... Di- did you just say please? Ahh, shit. Wilson! Dune told you the pain would make him wrong in the head like her. You should'a given him the needle. Don't think Dune could live with herself if he started acting all nice like and forgetting to smite her with profani-”

“I was beseeching the mighty Veeight. Not you, bag of nuts.”

Dune snorted but grinned wide too. “Bag of dicks. Wasn't really even worried 'bout you anyhow.”

“I miss my bunker.” The old organic sighed as he shook his head slowly, wild gray brows lifting high on his head as he attempted to tune out Dune's muttering, then crooning at me annoyingly, and her further muttering.

The two days didn't pass quickly. Dune and Wilson bickered often enough to give me headaches which throbbed all the way down into the sockets of my shoulders. I found out that Wilson was using maggots to -and I quote- prepare the wound for closure.

“They'll eat up all the dead meat that I missed.” He'd said.

The knowledge that they were there, squirming around under loose bandages on my half-leg and chewing at me, almost made me sick. Watching Dune change the bandages to pick out the fat, well-fed wrigglers and pop them between her lips was the limit of what I could take. I'd rolled over and retched up everything she had force fed me that morning, just thankful I hadn't tossed up the acid and bile into my naked lap. She just patted my head and wiped my face with her own sleeve. I wanted to sink into the rock and disappear.

When the time came for Wilson to go I was something close to giddy. I wouldn't have to listen to them bitch at each other anymore.

Before Wilson left he gave the scav all sorts of instructions that I didn't listen to. Then he turned to me, looking my useless corpse over a final time and ignoring any protest I made. “You're a lucky boy. Mostly lucky to run into somebody crazy enough to give a shit about you. I'll be back in a week to suture up that leg.”

_Hate his arsehole already._

Sixteen days later, Dune woke me from a dead sleep by shoving my pants up my leg-and-a-half then pulling me up and helping me to stand. It was easier now, at least it is when I'm awake. Half asleep it's like slogging it through mud to hop around with her arms around my middle to keep me from toppling over.

“Ugh, what the fuck is this? Put me down. Now.”

“Come'on. Quit being a mean little piss-ant. Dune wants to show you something. It's real green- Err. Or maybe chrome is the way you'd put it? Hm? Yeah?”

“Doubt anything you have to show me would shine like chrome,” I growled out as she harried and tugged me along a little too quickly, making my sore skin and aching head throb.
In the darkness, Dune knew the place like she knew her own body. Still, this journey through the pitching and winding tunnels made me a little anxious that every sharp decline would end in tumbling down into the endless blackness and going splat at the bottom.

By the time we got close enough to the surface to see columns of light pour in from cracks and wind-worn holes in the sandstone my eye had adjusted to the dark. This made the dim glow feel like staring straight into the blazing sun.

I could smell the desert. Clean, parched earth and hot, dry air. We stepped around the gaping hole I had fallen into when I tried to escape and I spat into it as we passed. I was still huffing and growling at the memory of that night when she tugged me harder and commanded me to hang on tighter around her shoulders so she could take more of the weight.

“Almost there Ducky! You'll get a kick outta this.”

“Chrysler, what the shit could be so fucking important that you'd drag my hairy ass up to-”

The words vanished in my throat before I could taste them on my tongue. We were standing at the entrance of a chamber bathed in light from a gaping hole in the roof. I had never seen this place before. There was the motorcycle I'd heard her leave and come back on, there was something I didn't recognize at all with a fan on the back, and there was a car.

The body was dented and scratched to shit, the tires were a joke, and it had the sloppiest coat of matte black paint that I had ever seen. It was a 1960 Chevy Impala. Most of the letters on the front were missing or cockeyed. I'd only ever seen one in a torn up old word burger in the garage. I'd liked that picture almost as much as I liked the Mustang page in the old world calendar Nux kept in our bunk with the pictures of Ford models. I never touched that calendar, the pages always stuck together suspiciously.

Dune extended her hand at it and grinned up at me with the most horrifying yet idiotic smile I had ever seen. If her eyes had been blue, not green, I could have mistaken the scav as my driver for a split second.

“Ta-forkin-da. That thing's all yours. It don't like Dune. Just lurches around and fights her.”

She must not know how to drive a manual. Mediocre of her that, but the fact that she was pulling me along and practically carrying me to this beastly vehicle helped me to overlook her fault.

I leaned heavy against it and started looking it over, smoothing my hands over her metal body to feel all of the dents and deep scuffs that were within my reach. Most of the windows were miraculously intact too. She let me go and scurried off, coming back a moment later and pushing something at the back of my knee. It was a wooden crate that she had managed to bolt skinny little wheels onto. It rattled obnoxiously when it rolled over the uneven stone under my foot.

“Sit on this.”

I still couldn't speak. I don't know what to say or feel. It was a car. She gave me a fucking car. Why? She could have hocked it if she had no intention of driving it herself. It was certainly good for trade even in this condition. Out here any car that still runs is worthy of at least three months of food minimum. If you could find somebody to barter with that is. I could drive this, I still had a right foot. I could still drive if I wanted to. My bare toes curled into the rock at the thought.

My blood pump was thudding like a war drum, I could practically hear the Doof warrior shredding out the Immortal's commands in my head. Wait. No.
“I don't deserve this...”

“Hm?” The scav grunted as she pulled her head back out of the passenger side window and tilted it at me.

“I Can't. I failed Immortan Joe. Fate shouldn't have me behind a wheel again. I'm not worthy 'cause I couldn't even fangin' die right.” I spat and curled my hands into fists against the trunk. Vision blurred with wasted aqua-cola as I realized where I really stood in the world now. Excommunicated War Boy. Worthless, useless, one legged-

Without warning, she had turned me around at the shoulders, pushed at me til I sat on the trunk, and then slid her shine hand around the back of my head and pulled our skulls together. I might have thought this was some sort of attack had the actions not been so soft and rusty on her part. Her forehead was sticky with sweat and her breath bad, but I didn't have the will to pull away when that damn shine hand touched me.

“Come on Duck. Do lighten up? The choice does not belong to fate, it belongs to you. You're not nothing, so stop pissing and moaning that you're unworthy, 'cause you're startin' to step on my nerves with this tripe.” In spite of the harshness of the words, the voice was soft and dripping with a sentiment that made the contents of my gut curdle. She let me go and began fetching bins full of salvaged tools, most broken or useless.

It was like she had no idea what the significance of giving away a car to a War Boy was. Then again, I wasn't really a War Boy anymore, was I? A scav's pet maybe, a spoilt one now. The threads that held me together inside were getting clipped in half one by one. In a sudden and completely unexpected string of thoughts that gave me chills, I realized that... Well, at least when I drop dead I'll be going wherever Nux went. It was a fearful relief to know that.

END OF ACT 1

Chapter End Notes

Can't wait til he finds the giant blood stains in the seats from when Dune shot the two A-holes who owned it previously.
Hey there. I fast forwarded to the future because I'm a butthole. Lots of taunting, smack talk and the angry lizard equivalent of flirting ahead. Enjoy.

When I was a kid I loved the sun. Still do, even if it kills whatever it caresses for too long.

“You're baking yourself. Get in the shade nutter. I'm not rubbing you down in that old man's burn goo again if you get toasted.”

I looked back at where Slit lounged in the shade of the rock formation, half snoozing. This was a very different creature from the one I hauled home seven hundred and twenty-four days ago. To protect his scars and pale, unpainted body from the cruel fireball in the sky he wore a long sleeve shirt salvaged off the two men I killed when we ran out of food. Over that was a patchwork leather vest that was missing most of the bottom and two of its buttons, and he had two inches of hair on the parts of his head that hadn't burnt or had healed enough to let it grow back. His left temple couldn't grow hair anymore. It grew in with curls when it was clean. When saturated with sweat and grit and grime it laid straight and limp against his head, and it was dark.

“You know you love it when Dune asks you to slather up her ugly hide. Scar fetishist.”

“Scars are shine. The rest of you is rusty as fuck. Not interested. At least put your shirt back on.” We bickered a while longer until finally all he would get from me in retaliation was a low hiss. I'd know when the sun starts to roast me.

He resigned himself to oiling up the gears and cogs in his metal leg. He undid the straps and pulled it off, laying it across his lap and unzipping the leather sheath that protected the delicate parts from getting sand logged so he could tinker with it. We'd built it a little more than six hundred days ago, well, he built it and I just salvaged the parts. It was far better than the first version which was just a wooden stick with straps and a slot to slide his stub into. This prosthesis -as Wilson called it- was a thing of beauty. It gave him a functional knee again with a knob that he could slide up and down to make it work for running, or to fold completely to kneel, or lock straight so he could lean on it while he worked on the car. There were also two rods of steel that could slide into each other and a heavy duty spring fashioned around it to absorb shock. Real shiny-green and pretty.

When he first got this leg together, he'd taken the Impala and sped off, not returning for more than a month. I thought he was gone for good. A crow nursed back to health and set loose to make his own way. I'd felt a sting in my heart, but I knew it was only fair that he was free to come and go. Had to remind myself that I wasn't a slaver, people shouldn't own people. Yet, return he did! I'd never been so delighted, but he did not match my elation. He didn't speak for a week after he got back. I swear to this day, he was in mourning. I never asked why because I didn't need to. In the time he was gone, I'd overheard from the other scavs who frequent Wilson's place that the God King Joe had fallen. My Ducky must have felt that there was nothing left to go back to now.

“You see anything yet?” He interrupted my wandering thoughts.
I lifted my long lookers and did a quick sweep of the territory. “This scav sees not a thing shimmering on the horizon. Sun is done rising, soon it will begin its exodus.”

“You're full of shit then. You lost the bet, your turn to clean out the maggot farm.”

“Ohh, sod off Slit. I know what I saw, and I'm still bettin' that it's now a convoy route. I see um leavin' the Brewer's old territory with bushels and bushels of green shit every month... Wonder if they killed the moonshiners for their spot. Haven't seen those hooch runners around almost since I found your ornery arse.”

“I haven't seen shit of what you're claiming. You're imagining things because the sun is cooking your brain.”

“You don't see things because you're always slacking off in the shade like some lazy lizard. Can't scout the lands with your eyes closed. Good thing you got Dune, or else you'd make a real mediocre scavenger.” I said and I meant every word. Without me, he'd be dead to start with. Secondly, if I abandoned him now he'd starve to death in a week. Goddess grant mercy, failed War Boys swallow up food like sinkholes swallow up sand.

“Says the ONLY idiot in the wasteland who can't drive stick. Calling me mediocre. Tch, You're mediocre.”

“You suck ass and swallow at everything but fixing cars and driving them Ducky.” I taunted, but it was affectionate. His knowledge was precious. He'd even taught me to repair and properly care for my Mama's old motorcycle.

“Would you shut up and get in the shade already? You're wasting Aqua-cola sweating out there.” He was starting to get crass about it, but I really liked sunning myself. Felt good. Could almost remember working the fields with mum when I felt the burn of the noon light.

“Fine. Fine.” I shouted. Then pulled my shirt back over my head and shrugged on Mama's vest before making my way to where the overhanging rock created a narrow strip of shadow. I had to kick at his boot for him to make room.

Still, there wasn't quite enough space for two. Slit took advantage of that and turned himself around until his head was practically in my lap. Ah, he'd had an ulterior motive in beckoning me over here. You see, long ago when I had begun tracing the shapes of his scars and calling him pretty where others might say he was an ugly milk-mother fucker, I'd created a monster. He was almost always asking for contact like this. Maybe it was because of the place he came from where he didn't know life without countless other white painted bodies pressing in around him. Alternatively, I might have simply spoiled him rotten on this brand of affection.

He even kept his face shaven now so that I could follow the path a knife once tore through his cheeks easily with my fingers. I never asked about where the scars came from either. Part of me didn't want to know. Enough of his life had been bad and confusing. He didn't need to be reminded of it in the midst of learning the true scav way of life.

He wriggled and arched his spine to grind the back of his head deeper into my thigh as if to remind me that he was there waiting for what he felt he was entitled to. Needy war fodder. I relented to his desires and ran my thumb over his lower lip, next dragging my fingerprint up the side of his face and stroking the two remaining staples. One of the three chunks of metal had fallen out about a hundred and eighty days ago. He had been gloomy about losing it but later bent the metal so that he could hang it like a bead on a slender cord around his neck. I circled the two deep pock marks left when
the staple fell out and he grunted like the happy lounge lizard he was.

From the look of us now, life in the bountiful wasteland might seem like nothing but lazy days in shady spots and sweet touches, but that's just not true of us. Nope nope nope. The sun was no longer behind us, and the shady spot was shrinking just as I started to enjoy it. I jerked my knee up to roll his head out of its spot.

“Hey! I was comfortable!” He grumbled and tried to scoot back onto me, now threatening to pin me under his back so that I wouldn't be able to shove him off so easily.

I pushed back. “Get off of Dune you fatass! You've had the shade all bloody morning and it's not big enough for the both of us anymore so shove off!”

“No!” Slit flipped over onto his belly and spread out his three remaining limbs, pushing me out of the shadow as his lips pulled into a malicious snarl. “I'm not movin’ so, you'll just have to lay right on top of me if you want a piece of the shade!”

Don't challenge Dune.

I growled back, a long rumble from somewhere deep as I kicked at his shoulder with everything I had. Oh, it was on now. He managed to launch himself out of the shrinking shadow with all the strength in his single leg and land like a boulder on top of me, grappling for my wrists.

We've broken fingers and created gorgeously colored bruises with this game. I kicked up my left knee and threw my head forward, cracking him in the temple and mashing him in the only spot that's soft on a man.

“Ahaww!” His scarred fingers released my wrist so he could press the heel of his hand into his now bruised crotch.

Twisting out of his other hand was relatively easy now that he was distracted. Once free I scrambled out from under him, bolting for the gradually narrowing strip of cool stone.

“GAH! No, you don't!” I felt him lurch into my legs, sending me crashing in a belly flop onto the hot rock. Ah! A knee in my back, an elbow grinding into my shoulder. The son of a bitch was crawling over me back into the shadow.

“AHH! CUNT WAFFLE!”

“What the fuck's a waffle?”

“Dune don't know!” I screeched, reaching out swiftly to wrap my good hand around the cockeyed rat tail on the back of his head. The pretty little beads he let me shove up onto the length of man fur tore out as I dragged him back out into the unforgiving light.

“Bitch!”

“Dickhead!”

Things had disintegrated into hair pulling and cheap, dirty moves quickly. The fun ended abruptly when his rough hand shot up my blouse and twisted my right tit. Oh, bad form Ducky. Bad form.

My sharp and yellows sunk into his bicep and I twisted my neck to pull. He yelped, shouted, cursed and when he finally tore free of my teeth he was just as done with this game as I was. I was physically flung away and nearly rolled right off the stone pile.
Lucky me. I dug in and managed to hang on with nothing but fingernails stopping me from dropping several feet down into shale and things that like to break ankles when you land on them. I clawed my way back up and spat in his general direction as he rolled up his sleeve to check the damage. A small red crescent of blood had already bloomed into the once lightly colored fabric.

I'd been preparing another slur when a distant sound hummed in my ears. I turned my head. Squinting at the horizon. There it is. The convoy.

“Hey. Slit.”

Once I had his attention I tilted my head toward the northeast where a line of black dots in the distance was moving fast toward the canyon, kicking up plumes of dust.

“Looks like Dune won't be the one clearing out the bones and sludge from the maggot farm after all.”
Flight of the Storm Riders

Chapter Summary

Trouble is lingering beyond the horizon. Slit has become a sand sifting bottom feeder just like the creature who pulled him from the wreck 724 days ago. He's still adjusting.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Long ago, I'd known what I was, who I was. Now I'm not so sure. I lived, I died, I lived again. Valhalla was not what awaited me on the other side. There had only been pain and disgrace and a lunatic who forced me to go on breathing. I used to hate her but love myself and the God who called us half-life warriors his children.

When I heard the wretched cry a rogue Imperator's name, call her the boltcutter, I knew there was no reason to approach the lift guardians. No reason to care. So I returned to the dark, safe place where a hideous grin and a bowl full of maggots waited for me. I came back because there had been nowhere else to go and no others like me left in exile. Everyone I knew was either with the traitors or dead. There was only that loony scav and her ability to touch with a shine hand which helped me to forget.

Now, I'm just the prideful coward who wouldn't go back to a world that had changed too much for me to go on in the way I remember it. Maybe I'm just hoping for the Immortal to rise from the ashes and smite us all for failing him.

She passed the binoculars my way after a long look through them. Well, fuck me. Looks like the boys back home have expanded their range. It used to be that supply convoys didn't travel through the canyon. But with the Rock Riders scattered to the winds after the same road war that brought me here, it seemed that they were now willing to make trips out here to scav country on a regular basis.

I hate cleaning out the maggot farm, and I hate being wrong, and I hate that I had to watch crews painted in white bounding between war machines as they made their way back from where they came. It's hard to help myself from trying to spot boys I knew, or Nux if he's still kicking. Luckily they were too far out to see clearly even with the long-lookers. Just white blurs riding escort vehicles. It's easier if I don't see their faces and feel the pangs of jealousy.

“We could set a few traps like the Buzzards do. Wait for their next run. Watch them fall into spiny pits, yeah? What'cha think Ducky?”

“I think that's a lot of diggin' I don't wanna do.” It's true that I didn't have any desire to sweat nuts and bolts out in the middle of nowhere with a shovel as my only sane company, but an equal part was that it wouldn't feel right setting traps for them. Even if that one armed bitch was leading them now, I wasn't about to set a pitfall for boys who might once have been brethren. I didn't want to because I'm not traitor filth like some people.
“Lazy. Well, they either killed the moonshiners or absorbed them. I think that's where they're going to and leaving from. Never was terribly sure where they actually made camp, but that general direction anyway. Must be some reason for the Citadel to send crews out there. I wanna know what they're hauling back.”

“Don't think you should get too curious about that. You wanna get your head ventilated with a bit of flying lead?”

“You'd dance on my corpse if I did. Can't have that can we Duck? Guess we'll just watch. Who knows. Maybe we'll get lucky and one of them will crash. Mmm, could use some shiny metal from wrecks like that...”

I tuned out her chatter. Kind of had to learn to do that a long time ago with my smeg of an ex-driver, a trick like that sure as hell comes in handy living with a mouth like the one this hermit has got. She talked to her mother's bones seldom now, thank V8, but that was only because she had what's left of my ears to gnaw off with her yammering.

I focused instead on the path traveled by the convoy, a line of dark shapes that the cargo tanker and escorts made just below the horizon. There really was something green strapped up to their rig, bushy bales barely leaving enough room for the gunners and crew. What's this? Faint sounds of explosions and the orange flash of thunder sticks. They had raiders on their back.

“Let me see! Are they under attack? Dune hears the pop, pop of black powder on sticks!”

She tried to wrench the binoculars out of my face. Swatting at her arms did little to fend her off. She pulled at the strap and that earned her a clack of my teeth as a threat. She bit me not five minutes ago, I owed her a good chewing for that and wouldn't hesitate if she tried my patience.

“You should have brought your own long-lookers Slit.” She crowed my name like a curse. Electing not to have another round of clawing and biting I shoved them back into her hands.

“I don't have a pair, those are the only ones we have.”

“Then you should learn to share.” She took another look and sucked on her dry lower lip. “We should start heading out there now if we want to be the first to pick through the leavings.”

Dune had a talent for making certain that she would arrive first at a wreck site, but long enough after the action that none of those involved in the bloodshed would still be lingering. So I could trust her judgment there. We had the fan sled and the cycle, the car would drink up more than twice the guzz we had in our possession to bring it all the way out here so it had been left back at the homestead.

Climbing off the misshapen stone formation jutting up from the earth was no fun. The damn leg still needed a few mods so that it could do more than just basic motions and it wasn't making the descent easy. I still didn't have the range of flex and automatic movement that I wanted. Dune insisted that it was a quote, work of art, but I felt that there was a lot of room for improvement. Maybe I could put a motor in it with a button in my glove to control the fucker instead of letting gravity make all the decisions for me. Electronics and tiny fabrication jobs like that were never my strong point. I'd need a certain skull-faced smeg head to help me figure that one out, and he was long gone traitor or dead so I was shit out of luck on that front.

Riding the cycle wasn't a challenge, I had installed pegs to rest the folded metal leg on when in motion, riding that was as simple as falling off the back of a pursuit vehicle. Easy. The fan sled on
the other hand? It handled like a Model-T in a mud bog. How Dune could manage to control that thing but remain unable to grasp how a clutch and gear shift works is beyond me. Tried to teach her to drive the Impala once, either I'm a shit instructor or the loon is a shit learner.

By the time I was at the bottom and straddling the bike seat, the scav was already in position to pull the start cord and get the fan blades spinning. We were off. I rode point, she occasionally checked ahead of us with the long-lookers as she drove her air propelled monstrosity. Upon arrival, something caught the seasoned scavenger's eye straight away. She set off a whoop and hopped out of the sled before the fan had even throttled down entirely. Dune kicked gingerly at the corner of a fuel jug, then lifted it for me to see as I leaned the cycle against the sled and pulled the knob up on my metal leg, flicking it forward to unfold it.

“HAH! Glory to thee who scours the wreckage! Full jerry can. We could give Shurely a decent meal with this.” As always, a bottom feeder like her is excited by any useful find in the sand.

“Don't call the car Shurely.”

“Oh, you like Debbie better?”

“No, I don't.”

“How about Misty?”

“Where do you keep getting these mediocre names from?” We'd been arguing over what to name the car for as long as I'd been given the right to work on it.

She dug into the inner breast pocket of her mother's vest and produced a small, half burnt word burger. As if I could even make out what it says.

“You know I can't fangin' read unless it's a user manual or blueprints.”

She snorted. “You could if you tried long enough. The cover says *Popular Baby Names of 1969.*”

“Baby names. Pups used to get their names from word burgers? No wonder *Before* names are such shit. Where did you even get that from?”

“Found it in one of the wrecks from that Buzzard on RoadKill mashup a few months back. Remember?”

I recalled the wrecks and wondering why I was seeing Roadkill men so far north but not the inconsequential stuff.

“I remember the metal from that savage. Not the useless crap you always pick up.”

“Ouff. Says you... Hey, Slit.” I looked up, squinting through the painful flare of white that the sunlight created in my ruined eye to see her hold up a twisted steel bar from a roll cage between her legs as if it were a cock. “Suck it.”

Perverse little- I showed her my favorite finger and continued on, hobbling over to the nearest wreck with the hose and an empty jug under my arm to see if there was any guzz left to siphon out of the tank, which appeared to be intact for the most part if only a little dented. The more Guzzoline the better.

Dune leaned into the driver side and started hauling out a corpse that wore a leather mask and goggles. Red and white shown brightly against the naked steel of the pulverized pursuit vehicle.
"We’ll replenish the maggot farm with him. Poor boy. Couldn’t be more than six thousand days old. Not a scar on him that wasn’t on purpose either. Could’a been his very first time in road fight. Poor babe."

The first thing my good eye searched for was an engine carved into him. When I found no such scar, the relief came and went, leaving a bitter taste in my mouth. I didn’t recognize him, he’d probably been one of the faceless pups that I didn’t care enough to memorize the name of. He had a bullet right through the melon, a finger sized dot just behind the ear where a chunk of lead entered and a gaping hole of gore dribbling out the other side where it exited. Bits of gray skull meat fell out of its shell as Dune pulled him along by the ankles toward the sled.

“Mediocre, dyin’ like that.”

“You could have some respect for the dead Ducky.” She scolded through a chorus of grunts and groans, palms rested on her knees and out of breath once she had the body pulled up into her sand boat. “Heavy forkers they are.”

“If you die rust on your first call to war then you're not worth any respect. I’d have thought you’d known me long enough to understand that factoido.”

Dune humphed. “You're the one who snaps at Dune anytime she calls you War Boy. Yet here you are, talking reverently about it all as if you were still a follower of the Veeight cult-faith-thingy.”

I didn’t have to justify anything to the psycho. Especially not this. “Just shaddap and dig around for something useful woman. Before I break off the only foot I’ve got in your arse.”

After that, we moved in silence from one totaled war chariot to another. The raiders didn't look like any group I'd ever fought on the Fury Road. They were probably just a random rag-tag gang of bandit thugs, which was not uncommon out here. There were three wrecks total, only one had been a Citadel pursuit car. The other two just rust buckets cobbled together from various junk parts and built around an engine block.

Some of the metal was salvageable, could be strapped onto the bike or tethered down in the sled. We filled three small jugs with guzz and found an intact can of nitro. Not a bad haul at all. Not the best, but not bad. Dune found a few bits of green stuff in the sand as she followed the deep troughs left by the wheels of the rig. She declared that the green stuff was choof after we each had a few sniffs. She tucked that into a bag at her belt and muttered something or other about fashioning a pipe for it. It had been a while since I had a toke, since before Nux got sick as hell and decided that he wanted to die historic. Years was what Dune called vast collections of days like that.

I heard something growling out loudly in echoes across the wastes, pistons pumping and exhaust stacks rattling. When I looked up Dune was standing erect and had her eyes buried in the binoculars. She shook her head and tossed them my way as I approached the crest of the shallow hill where she stood.

What I saw in the distance wasn't a convoy or bandits. It was two low-slung, heavy armored monsters rolling on tires that were extended far out of their wells with modded out axles. Something that you’d never be able to flip over.

“What the hell are they?”

“Storm Riders.” She supplied. “Harmless chaps really. They believe riding out into the fury of dangerous weather conditions brings them closer to their heathen god.”
They cruised on by at last two miles south of us, oblivious to our keen eyes watching them. “Jesus Chrysler. Their rides must weigh like tanks with that much leather and metal welded on.”

Dune looked to me and nodded, then turned her eyes toward the direction they were headed with a weary sigh.

When Nux had been serious, his big, dumb, blue eyes made him look bat-fuck crazy. With Dune, the only time she didn’t look insane were the moments when her beady green eyes narrowed and she thought carefully about her next action. She was scanning the horizon with what appeared to be serious consideration of what lies beyond it.

“We should find shelter. If the Storm Riders are out and about in broad daylight, then trouble is coming on swift wings for the unwary. A storm cometh.”

Chapter End Notes

Shit’s gonna get real.
Maybe I Should Let Her Go

Chapter Summary

This is an odd chapter. It's not going to make very much sense and it's basically dumping you lovely readers into a situation you weren't in any way prepared for in the last chapter. However I wanted to do this realistically from Dune's perspective, since she has no friggin clue about what happened either.

Slit's perspective will explain everything in the next chapter (already partially written and promising to be long AF) and it'll hopefully give you the context you need to understand this.

Also, if you squint and look carefully you'll see why she uses the word Ducky as a term of endearment.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The world was alive, roots entangling around my bones and pulling me down into the earth. A part of it all. Cool, sodden soil replaced my flesh, seedlings pushed and twisted their way through the sutures of my skull, and a willow tree grew from my fertile mind.

There was peace and there was clarity. The disease in my skull meat from which was borne a persistent denial of the truth that the world was ugly, black, horrid, poisoned, and devoid of good had slid away. I was whole again. Scars scoured and scratched off, soul cleansed, ills cured. I was not crazy anymore.

I saw into the vast expanse of eternity. Time was no longer linear but curved around, forming a spiral which presses through itself and stitches it's blunt ends together. Birth and death. They are the same.

“Up ya get kiddo. Lazing around in the shade of a tree when there's so much yet to see and do. An' your brothers are waiting to see you, been waiting around for their slowpoke sister for ages.”

Mum? Yes, I felt her hands thread through my fingers and pull me up from the earth, wrapping her arms around my ribs tightly whilst a second set of hands wiped the grit out of my eyes.

“Jesus you're filthy. What were you up to? Making mud pies with your face?” The hem of a shirt replaced the calloused fingers swiping over my face as I struggled to recognize the voice which spoke now. Thick drawling accent from elsewhere. Pa? When I could see I was sure. Tawny hair reseeding back towards his crown and eyes like pools of clean water.

“Aw, what'cha cryin' for baby duck?” He said. It was then that I knew I had died.

Ma pulled back and looked into my eyes, brows knitting together seriously over her dark brown peepers. yet her lips quirked into a smirk. “It can't be that bad. Coming home and seeing it whole again.”
Around us, grass grew, flowered, and dropped seeds in the span of seconds. Beginning the cycle anew again and again.

I looked up, seeing the willow tree branches spreading wide and letting down its leaved tendrils. In the boughs sat two men who were not much older than boys to be fully truthful. Russel and Flick, older half brothers who used to carry me on their shoulders. They smiled down with mischief in their eyes and thorny seed pods trapped in their shaggy hair.

Over Mum's shoulder, I saw the shipping container Ma and Pa had made into a house before I was born, sitting serenely on the hill.

"Don't you die on me! Feckin' shit. Shit!"

Lightning crashed, wind whirled and howled all around, tearing the familiar people away and replacing them with horrific scars bearing down at me. Something hot and sour pressed into my mouth. I saw spittle fly out of the cracks in his face in wet threads as air was forced down my throat.


Without warning, I was falling. Tumbling down into a dream that wasn't a dream but a recollection that stood in stark contrast to the fantasy which was home. I was dumped into the sand head first. The sound of iron shackles rattling around my wrists and mum's tired face pleading for forgiveness as the men undid my restraints.

I knew what came next, this is the clearest memory I possess. I tried to run, bare feet treading through loose sand and sinking too deep to gain any measurable speed. I could hear the engine revving, the flames crackling, and the slavers laughing away as they screamed passed in a blur of red and quicksilver. I was burning. Set aflame and then mowed down under a tire.

"Breathe damnit!"

I was home again, but it wasn't right. Fog strangled down the light and turned everything into a sickly gray swamp of forgotten joy and shattered good intentions. I stood there, sinking in the muck until it swallowed up my legs, my arms, my eyes. I fell through the world again, landing once more in the grit of unforgiving sand, just another layer in hell I supposed.

Huge hands rolled me over, pressing flat against my chest and threatening to crush my ribs to dust. It was a child soldier, a man-boy from the Citadel painted in white death with two terrible scars twisting his face into a never ending snarl of terror and hunger.

He vanished again, like a specter that was there and then not.

As I picked myself back up I found that I was standing at the apex of a hill of sand. My namesake. The familiar fog crept in at the foot and climbed toward the summit like rising water. I wasn't alone. A creature stood at my side, grinning like mad with teeth like razors, wearing my mother's vest and carrying her rifle over its shoulder.

“Staying or going? Up to you ducky. Lots of shiny scrap to pick up still.”

She was me. I watch her tromp down the slope, whistling a tune and fading into the mist that swept throughout my eroded mind.
When I opened my eyes I saw stars momentarily, then blackness pulsing and swarming over the world in front of me like a hive of furious ants. Finally, when the shadows receded I could see the support struts and wooden framework which lined the dirt burrow of the local doctor and prevented the tunnels from collapsing.

Wilson's place.

Something heavy and feverishly hot was pressed in around me. It stunk like someone who prefers to wash with sand rather than a damp bath cloth. It was a thick, musky rank that could curl nose hairs, under that was the scent of machine lube and guzzoline. I'd know this reeking funk anywhere. It was Slit.

My temple was flush against his windpipe. I could feel his throat bob as he muttered something in unintelligible V8 cult speak. His most thoroughly scarred arm was slung over my ribs and my legs were propped up on his knee. The hell is this? It's not normal. Not right. Ducky and I sleep back to back and never touching. The blessed times when one of us was being coddled it was always him sprawled over my legs to receive many careful touches, and we never stayed that way through the night.

Dune is not to be held and squeezed.

It took some convincing to will my arms to obey commands. Everything was so slow, every muscle and thread of sinew working on a three-second delay. When I managed to twitch my hands to push them between us Slit jerked awake, sitting upright and allowing my head to loll over in the absence of his mass to lean on. This was what I wanted, to get him the hell off of me but I hadn't expected my neck not to work.

“Uuunnn?” Get out of my fucking face mongrel. That's what I meant to say as he leaned in and lifted my eyelid with his filthy thumb. Now my eye itched with his sweat and grime and there was nothing I could seem to do about it with these arms which behaved like dying snakes, writhing without purpose.

“Hey. Hey, old man. Wake up. She's movin' around.”

His hand circled my wrist like a scalding cuff made from steel. It was a reminder of the shackles Mama and I wore before the world went sideways and twisted in on itself within my soiled brain. I didn't like it.

“'You're gonna rip that needle out. Quit wriggling.’ He sounded furious, his lips tight and quivering over stained teeth but his eyes betrayed something else that I had never seen before. I couldn't identify the look on his face. It was like yet another senseless divergence from reality. Ducky doesn't get looks that mirror worry on his hard, beautifully ruined features. This expression is unbecoming of him.

I looked down to my hand, futilely trying to pull it out of his grip. There was a cannula stuck into me there, a dust yellowed tube leading to a bag of fluid hanging from a nail in a support beam.

Wilson soon appeared, leaning over me to take his turn pulling up my eyelids and waving a lit match back and forth across my vision.

“She's not blinded. Good sign. Might be hard of hearing from now on, though. Just have to wait and see. We thought you were gonna leave us, kid!” Wilson said it a bit louder than necessary. Even if
things did sound a little muffled and distorted I could still hear them just fine when they were two feet from my goddamn face.

How had I gotten here? What the forkin’ hell happened? I didn't know, I didn't have the story. You'd have to ask Slit.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaand sorry if I scared you guys with talk like “I was not crazy anymore.” Dune might have kicked the fourth wall a little bit on that very last sentence so she's definitely still whacko.

I'd also like to thank my readers for all of the lovely comments and compliments and kudos and chrome things. You guys are the very best. You're shiny, chrome and awaited.
Chapter Summary

You know that bumper sticker that got real popular in the 80's? Just that white sticker with the words SHIT HAPPENS. Well, these two need that sticker on the back of whatever they choose to drive around in.

Slit almost ends up the most lonely, angry lizard in the world.

Also... HOLY HUBCAPS THIS CHAPTER IS LONG.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

-Day 724-

I remember asking how those Storm Riders would know if a storm was coming when it still dwells beyond the limits of sight. Dune merely gave her best guess, something along the lines of they got a sixth sense 'bout it- which doesn't really answer the question.

I was half convinced that there was no real danger at all until a dark blot formed on the horizon, growing wide and tall with electricity crackling through it as we made the mad dash for cover. Her aqua cola dripping cavern was too far to reach before the rage of the black storm caught up with us and there was no outrunning it.

Dune knew the territory, however, and she had bolt holes to scurry into when she had no other options but to spend a night out here, or take cover from something she can't put a bullet into.

The place we stopped was somewhere between the decrepit old bastard's hole in the sand and the flat lands beyond which she insisted we never ventured into. There was a tall, round-topped boulder and the remains of a tanker wrapped around it as if a previous storm had picked it up and blown it into the rock. It didn't look like it had ever been a war machine. Made from rust more than anything else, it was ancient enough to have been a part of the old world.

Dune pulled the sled in close and hopped out. The rifle was in her hands as she approached the cab of the broken down rig, which was miraculously right side up and sitting on bare rims. She gave the door a few taps with the barrel. The pistol on my right thigh felt heavy while watching her ensure that no one else had taken refuge inside. I undid the clasp and curled my fingers around the handle and bone grips.

Dune clambered up and pulled at the door, putting her full weight into her attempts twice before it came open with a plume of red dust. Something scaly with too many legs skittered between her boots and dropped into the sand. It got shot on reflex.

“Gah!” She shouted then glared back at me as the gun smoke floated away on the rising wind. “Clear. Nothin’ but a mutated forkin’ monitor lizard.”
“You mean dinner.” Couldn’t help the smirk that tugged on my split face.

“If we have time. Get your goggles on Ducky. The fury of the dead world is blowing in fast and we need to tie everything down before taking respite.”

The interior was completely gutted, no seats, no steering wheel, nothing. Just floorboards and wads of trash. Dune grabbed her canteen and the oil lamp she kept in the sled and put that up into the cab of the wreck, then she started pulling out coils of rope and the tarps. One tarp she tossed into the cab, the other she threw over both the sled and the bike. The scavenger started throwing stones onto cargo and around the edges of the covers to keep the wind from tearing it right back off.

“Duck, take the rope and start feeding it around the rock and under the tanker!!”

It was a simple enough chore, but the damn metal leg was being difficult, it liked to get caught on everything.

“Could you hurry the fuck up Slit? We've got minutes! Maybe less!” She bit out over the wind at me with her hands cupped around her mouth.

I was busy tying knots and trying to get the second rope around the gigantic, stupid fan so that I could tie that onto the back of the rig. Anger pooled in my mouth. “Oh, you think I can't see the WALL of shit coming at me? You've got both your legs, come do it your-damn-self if you think you can tie a fuckin' knot faster!!”

She hurled one more heavy stone into the sled to hold down the blue tarp and started around the wrapped up pile of our crap, throwing curses as the flying sand started to bite and the sky began to go dark.

I expected to have something chucked at me, be it a slur or a rock, not to almost get blown up. Burning white light, a boom that tore air and dirt and rattled my rib cage.

My right ear rang in sickening shrills, like metal scraping metal. I saw streaks of light dance and play around me like a pack of freshly painted warpups. My blood pump did some unsettling hopping and shuddering types of things inside me. Every hair stood up and prickled. I'd been knocked on my ass, but by friggin' what?

I rolled over and rose onto my hands and knees, both flesh and steel. What the hell had that mind-screwed bag of fodder done to me? Did she throw a grenade? Set off an explosion with a jug of guzz? I shook my head, found that I was drooling and wiped the slick line away from my lip.

When I looked up -growling and ready to start a brawl despite the storm rolling in- I didn't see Dune on her feet with fists up. What I saw instead sent the cold of night crawling through my veins.

There are some things you just can't un-see. Like your driver on the hood of a rig full of traitor scum and spitting guzz into the engines. This was one of those things.

Dune was laying face down in the sand. Smoke raced away on the wind from the top of her head and from the heels of her boots. I looked around, trying to spot who was responsible. There was nothing, no one. Thunder roared and nearby flashes of light brought me to my senses.


I forgot that I was missing a leg, got up, forgot to pull the shitting knob into walk position and fell on my mediocre face. Just as well, I ended up scrambling the rest of the way there on my hands and knee because the wind was threatening to grab me and throw with everything it had.
The moment my fingers touched the back of her head where her hair was still smoldering, it hit with all of its prowess and might. We were in the throat of the storm and being swallowed whole. There was no light, could hardly breathe, and even if my ear wasn't ringing I still wouldn't have been able to hear a damn thing.

I don't know how I got myself and a limp body to the cab of the wreck. There was no thinking, just do and don't mind the way the blood pump almost hurts as it hammers away till your ribs crack.

The door swung wildly, clanging and smashing itself around. I couldn't get up there with her held under an arm like a sack of dirt. I had to literally throw her inside, like the heaviest and floppiest lance I'd ever flung.

Inside, with the door pulled shut, the sound started to make it through the whirring in my head. I could hear sand and debris pelting the outside, finding its way in through cracks in the windshield.

I didn't care that something could smash through the weakened windows, that every time something crashed into the side of the tanker the whole thing rocked. She wouldn't move, I shook her, cursed, looked for her pulse but I couldn't tell if it was hers or mine jumping in my fingers.

Goin' soft Slit. Shut it Nux.

“Hey. Hey! Say something!” Nothing, I shook her harder, still nothing. She smelled like burnt hair.

“Don't you die on me!”

I tore down the zipper and threw open her vest, pressed my good ear against her cage to listen for breath. Didn't find anything, not even the thudding of her blood pump.

“Feckin' shit. Shit!”

Not breathing. Dead. Dead just like my smeg driver. Everybody is going to go traitor or die soft on me.

Lightning struck nearby, lighting up the bare interior of the cab as I grabbed her head, sat on her legs and forced her mouth open with my face to blow air into her still lungs. I'd seen it done before in the blood hall. A War Boy brought in for being found not breathing after getting high as a polecat on paint fumes. One of the Organic's assistants had done this. I had not a clue what the treatment is called but it got the air moving in that moron's chest again.

Her teeth cut my lip. I barely felt it. A crash of lightning revealed that her chin was smeared in my red stuff when I leaned back and started trying to press the air back out. Couldn't tell what I was doing, I squished her guts before I had the center of her rib cage under my palms.


“Breathe damnit!”

Why? I was the one standing on higher ground, I was the one with a leg made out of fangin' metal. Why did she get struck?

I gave her another breath, crushed it back out of her, and then understood that I'd be going back to her kip alone. No. She did this. Dune made me live when I honestly still can't tell if I really want to or not. She doesn't get to just check out like this and leave me here like that selfish bastard revhead did. I still haven't made her regret keeping me. Anger came back, beating down the panic I was just beginning to realize was there. I gripped her open vest in my fists and slammed the corpse down into
the floorboards.

“Don't do this! Nux- Dune, FUCK!”

The body under my hands spasmed, arms flailing wildly as she coughed her bloody lungs up into my face.

_Not burnt out yet. Alive._

Nux said it, maybe from inside my head, maybe as a ghost that isn't allowed through the gates and fated to linger.

I still had a hold of her vest and used that to yank her off the floorboards and prop her up. Dune wroth and retched and gulped down air as she slumped into me.

“St—ing. Going. Up to... Duck- shiny scrap to... pick...”

The loon pretty much just died and still she mutters nonsense. Despite all of my efforts to wish shit like this on Dune, the sound of her rambling came as a deep and guilty relief. War Boys are supposed to embrace death, feed on it, venerate the departed as they are now beyond our realm of suffering. Then again, I'm not a War Boy anymore. I'm just a mediocre, one-legged, sack of manure who lives with a hermit.

Couldn't find room in my head to care that it was soft as hell, what I did.

I grabbed the tarp she'd stowed in here and pulled it over us to fend off the sand that managed to find its way in. I kept her close, her lips next to my good ear so I could make sure she was still breathing, just like I had to do with my idiot driver night after night.

_Day 725_

The storm lasted until just before dawn the next day. The wind was still strong when I felt it was safe enough to venture out, but not so violent that it could pick you up or knock you over.

I still kept my scarf tied tight around my face and the cracked goggles on to keep dust out.

Dune was still breathing. I'd made sure of that, counted every pull of air she drew in and gave her a shake whenever it didn't sound like she was getting enough.

I didn't sleep, I wasn't tired. I was too busy shaking like some scared warpup to let thirst and hunger and lack of sleep catch up with me.

The sled was flipped over, the tarp was torn in half, the body and all of the metal strewn about in a mess. The bike was half buried. I laced my fingers together over my head in prayer before trying to pull it from the sand and beat the dust out of it.

“Start. Just start. Don't need more rust luck.” It had to be push started, no battery. Key in, kill switch flipped, clutch down and walking it as fast as I could manage to go with one good leg. A quick release of the clutch and the scream of the engine revealed just how lucky I could get.

The Immortal in Valhalla must have granted a boon to my prayer. V8 be praised.
I circled the wreck and shut her off, flipping the kick stand out where I was pretty sure the ground was solid enough to support it while I hauled my loony scavenger out of the wrecked rig.

Dune was still unconscious, no longer muttering or making any noise as I pulled her neckerchief up over her mouth and put her goggles on for her. I had to cut several thick lengths from the torn tarp and feed them under her so that I could tie her to my back, sitting between her legs and pulling her up against my spine as I triple tied every knot.

Once she was secure I slid my fingers under her knees and picked us both up. A hell of a feat when you only have one leg.

Starting the bike a second time was a bitch with the extra weight, but as soon as I could manage it I fanged it to the old man's territory. The scrap and maggot food I left behind be damned as the sun rose.

-0-

Upon arrival I could see him, he often sat in plain sight after a disaster that might bring the locals in for patchups. He was sitting in a foldout chair under a thing that looks like an upside down flower on the top of his hill of dirt. There was a box with a big horn on it spewing out a tune that I didn't recognize. The sight was like something out of a fever dream. He turned his eyes our way as the sound of the cycle got his attention.

“WILSON!” I didn't give a shit about the formal greeting. Couldn't whistle ever since my face got shredded anyway.

I let the bike fall over after killing the engine and stumbling off to untie the nutter from my back.

He was halfway down the hill with his sawed off in his right hand and a canteen in the other. “The hell happened??”

“Lightning.”

“What!?” He forgot his precious rules and made the rest of the way down with just as much speed as his old carcass could summon. He saw the charred hair and examined her head first, found a burn there. Next, he checked her pulse to confirm that she wasn't a corpse and then pulled off her boots, revealing deep, yellow and black scorches in the soles of her feet that I didn't even realize were there. “Jesus you're lucky. You idgits were out in the storm??”

“No, we were in Bartertown having drinks at the Atomic Café. The shit does it look like!?” I've never actually been to Bartertown, but I was aware of its existence from overhearing discussions held by the crews that had attempted trade there.

“I don't need snark from you. Let's get her inside.”

-0-
“Pick up ’er legs, lemme slide this box under’um. Yeah. Like that. Here. Blankets. Need to keep her warm. She's in shock.”

“Is that supposed to be some kind of joke?”

“What? No, it's a legitimate medical term. Just do as I say, boy.”

“Is... Is she going to live?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Lightning can pretty much do whatever the hell it wants to a person. Way back when I did triage at a bonified ER, we had a guy come in struck by lightning, slept for three days and woke up speaking french. A couple years later, a woman came in after a getting struck on a hiking trail, neuropathy got her an' she never walked again. It can cook your organs, scramble your brain, tie your nerves into knots, stop your heart or leave you unharmed. Whatever it decides it wants to do to you... Hey, don't ever do CPR again unless I show you how. You're lucky her ribs aren't broken.”

“Well, whatever the hell I did I must've done it right. Blood pump wasn't even working when... Veeight. Fuck.”

Why? Why did I even care? It was physically painful to look at the scav like this. She looked wrong, weak, frail. She might have been a rusty bucket of stripped screws but she was never frail. How come I always ended up with people who turn into fragile smegs? Just like Nux, a war machine building badass one minute, a skinny wreck hooked up to a bloodbag the next.

She was so pale that she was even starting to look like my ex-driver, with that round head and purple bags under her closed eyes looking almost like dark rings of war paint.

Wilson's fingers waved across my vision. “Hey, war boy. I'm talkin' to ya... You're shaking, sit down. Drink. Before you fall out and I wind up with two patients instead of one.” He pushed a canteen into my hands and turned an overturned chair the right way.

There wasn't much left in me to protest, I was still going but on fumes. The chair wobbled and I didn't think it really had the strength to hold any weight, but neither did I any more so it had no choice but to seat me. The numbness that the chaos wrought was slipping away, my stump throbbed and howled with a sharp ache. I'd left the metal leg on all night.

I undid the straps and pulled the girdle I had to wear over my pant leg off. It tingled and I could almost feel the ghost of a foot curling as I peeled off the shrink sock Wilson had fashioned for it after sewing up the stub six or so hundred days ago.

“Hey, you can rest if you want. She isn't going anywhere like this. I suggest you just bed down and catch a few winks. I'll give you a swift kick if anything changes.” The organic said as he started prodding at her inner elbow with a needle.

“She need blood?”

“Nah, just fluids. Lay down over there on that mat before I drug you.”

I never made it to the mat. My eyes slid closed as I watched him clean out the burns on her feet.

There were two figures standing at the top of a dune. The sky was streaked in black. Like an oil slick that shimmered muted colors with the rays of silver light cast over the wastes by a burning blue sun.
I walked started the cycle and headed for the people standing on the hill, but if I blinked, or took my eyes off them for even a moment the distance between me and them doubled. I wondered if I’d run out of guzz before I could reach them, the needle rested heavy against the top corner of the E already.

I had to keep my eyes on them, to will them closer to me. At the bottom of the dune, I let the bike drop and the tire spin wildly, I didn’t care. The engine shuddered out a final wail and petered out as I started climbing, stumbling when my dumb metal leg sank too deep in the sand.

At the top they each turned to face me.

Nux. Dune. One tall, bald and blue in the lips from cold, the other barely reaching the top of the driver’s shoulder as wisps of smoke rose from the smoldering embers in her dreaded up hair. Nux was leaking red from his nose, ears and from under his fingernails, the blood rushing out of his body faster than any bloodbag could replace it. Dune’s lips quivered, and flames licked their way up her back as they each reached out to one another.

They stood hand in hand. Opening their eyes to reveal empty sockets, maggots squirming through the hollows and falling down their cheek bones in a grotesque cascade.

I couldn’t move. Couldn’t blink. Couldn’t wake

Dunes lips parted, revealing more than just her fearsome teeth. The long, arrow-shaped head of a goanna emerged from between her jaws. Looking at me with one blue eye and the other stained with blood and cataracts. It had three staples in its face, holding its scaly lips from falling open as it flicked its thick pink tongue at me.

It opened its mouth in a yawn, almost like it was going to speak. “Witness.”

-Day 726-

I almost slugged the old bastard across the mouth when I woke up to him shoving at my shoulder.

“Hey HEY! Damnit. Durn war fodder reflexes... Look you were having a nightmare or somethin’. Kept whimpering witness, witness over an’ over. Here. Eat that.”

He dropped a charred thing on a stick into my lap. Roasted lizard. He dropped down into a fold out chair by the cot Dune was laid out on. It was probably the same cot where Wilson usually slept. He tore bits of lizard apart with his fingers and ate slowly. He barely had any teeth.

“From what I can tell, it went right through her into the dirt. The lightning bolt. Honestly, you might have gotten a good zing from it too if you were standing as close as you say, but she got the brunt of it. By all accounts, she should be dead. Not the first time I’ve said that about her, though. Too stubborn to die. Gets that from her mum I suspect.”

“You knew that pile of bones?”

“Yep.”

There was a long silence. I had time to finish the lizard, chew the stick into splinters and get a good look at the place. There were boxes everywhere, filled with things I didn’t have names for. A shelf
loaded with years and years worth of MREs. A few word burgers. A table full of surgical cutlery like the Organic Mechanic back home kept on a bandoleer around his thick chest. Further tunnels leading to Immortan knows what. Everything was lit up with real electricity, light bulbs and lamps. He had a generator somewhere. The locals had furnished him damn well for his services.

I looked at the body laying there, helpless as a warpup dying a quarter-life. Immortan I felt like a two-month-old turd. I scratched at my face, nails catching on scars as I scrubbed the wetness and sleep from my eye sockets.

“You know. She wasn't always like this.”

I lifted my face out of my hands and grunted a noise that was supposed to come out a whole question. “Wuh?”

Wilson dipped his head at where Dune still lay, unmoving. “You know what I meant boy. She wasn't always- Ya know…” He pointed at his own head, crossed his eyes and whistled dramatically. Oh, she wasn't always crazy. Yeah, I figured that.

“Met her and Kay, her mother, 'bout ten years ago. We and a dozen other full-life unfortunates were just cargo on a slaver caravan headed for Gas Town. This was back when Scabrous Scrotus just started makin' all that noise Southwest of here. I was gonna be slaved out as a doctor on a chain. In some boss's pocket as his personal surgeon. What have you. Doesn't matter. Kay was looking forward to hard labor for the rest of her life. And Dune... Well. She was gonna get wifed off to Scrotus himself.”

I wouldn't have thought it. I mean she wasn't particularly ugly in the face but... That nasty grin of hers. It was an honor to be given a position so close to the Immortan or one of his sons, yet the look on Wilson's face said otherwise. I knew better than to open my mouth about that. That old man always had a gun on him, and I didn't trust him with it. I raised a question instead, one that had an obvious answer and was meant simply to goad him along to finish the story. Dune never said a word about history, just the future. It's not like I'd ever asked but still, can't help being curious.

“I guess that caravan never made it to Gas Town? Or else you wouldn't be here.”

He closed his eyes and nodded strongly, entire body rocking with the movement. “Right. We never made it there. Praise god. That's thanks to Kay and her instinct to protect her kid. We used to have a saying back where I came from. Never stand between a mother bear and her cub, it's a dangerous place to be. Back then, oh, Dune was an easy girl to look at. But much too young for the business of men and their ilk. Big green eyes, skin like creamed coffee, and chocolate hair to top it off. A real pretty girl. Too pretty for her own good…”

I wasn't sure what coffee was nor chocolate for that matter, but I guessed that it was some sort of way to describe something colored dark and dun like Dune.

“...So, her mum got this idea into her head, that if she could ugly her daughter up a bit, then maybe she could be spared from the fate of a child wife. See, Scrotus wasn't like his daddio, he didn't collect women for the sake of siring healthy babies. He took them for pleasure. And he was hard on those girls. Not an altruistic bone in the warlord son's body. Somebody had a file in their boot, Kay commandeered that, held Dune's head tight between her knees and started chiseling her teeth down to sabers.”

Well, that explained some things. I tongued at my teeth, they itched at the gum line when I thought about how that must have felt. By now I was pretty keen to hear the rest, wondering how the hell a band of slaves managed to defy Immortan Joe and the finest of his sons. I didn't really give a damn
how he'd mishandled his breeders. I had respect for Scrotus, hard not to. The man was a fucking war legend.

“Did it work?”

Wilson nodded, a grimace further aging his wrinkled face as he sat back in his seat and pawed at his ribs with a wince. “Yep. After all the hushed cryin’ and crocodile tears shed in the night it did the trick. They saw her fucked up smile the very next morning, took her shackles off and pulled her out of the chain gang. Just left her standing there lookin’ lost and scared as ever as the caravan started moving out again. What Kay wasn't betting on though was how they circled back and set the kid on fire in retaliation for their profit loss. Just ran her down and lit her up like a match. They left her like that, face down in the sand.”

I looked back to Dune's cot, watching her pull in and shudder out shallow breaths. I tried to remember what it had been like in the wreck where I must have been stuck for hours burning up and dying. I'd seen her bare many times. While her front half looked alright, the back half was ruined from her heels all the way to the back of her neck in tight, white and pink scars. She must have been trying to make a run for it when they torched her. The long healed aftermath was pretty shine but had a somber grace to it. The story fit the scars, but having never seen Dune without them, it was completely disturbing trying to picture her in white wife garb.

Wilson started once more, finishing the grave tale with reverence in his voice as I watched her lay in what could be her death bed. “I can still hear the screams when I'm alone, Kay's screams. They keep me awake. She broke both her thumbs the following night to get out of her shackles, stole back her rifle and put lead in every face that got in her way. That's why you don't fuck with a woman Slit. When a woman picks up a gun to do war, she does it to protect her family. And there is no fire in hell that burns hotter than the blood of a bereft mother.”

I know nothing of mothers. I was raised in a pile of pups and only knew the cold faces of caretakers who gave us food to squabble over and stagnant aqua cola to lick up out of a trough. Supposedly the caretakers I got were a couple of negligent bastards, but I thank them. Wouldn't have turned out so chrome if I'd been brought up soft.

Dune didn't get it soft either apparently. I'd only ever heard really weak, pussy ass tales of coddling and soft kisses when the word mother came up among warpups who could still remember the ones who bore them. I wondered what it might have been like to be raised by a parent who'd hold me down and shave my teeth to fangs if she thought it might do me some good. Maybe I'd be crazy like Dune. Maybe I'd have known what it's like to be protected instead of doing all the work protecting myself.

-0-

“How long have you had that bump under your ear?”

None of your damn business. “One thousand four hundred days. Give or take.”

“S’it hurt any?” He asked, getting up and rummaging through his boxes, then picking up things from that table of knives and pokers to place on a tray.

“When I chew. Sometimes.”
“Hmm. Haven't seen much of you since I patched up that leg of yours. I saw the bump then but was more worried about infection taking you at that point. I'd like to get a look at that now.”

He was washing his hands and instruments in a bowl of dingy water. I knew what was coming next, I'd seen the Organic back home work. He was fixing to hack it off.

“Don't fucking touch me old man.”

He snorted, looking back at me. “This is my house. My rules. You're gonna be a good boy and sit still. I guarantee this won't even pinch.”

I seethed at his tone. If I didn't need him to get Dune back on her feet I might have walked right out and told him to get bent.

He shucked a plastic wrapping off a needle and dropped it onto the tray. Twenty minutes later most of my face was numb and he had me holding a handful of clean-ish rags to my neck.

“That has got to be the record for the biggest Trichilemmal cyst on this continent. I feel like I just delivered a gad-durn baby. Any bigger than that and I'd have asked what you wanted to name it.”

Actually, it already had a name. Nux used to call it Jerry. I had hated that back then, now it felt weird that I wouldn't have that last trace of Nux on me anymore. It felt good, but it also felt really trashy.

“That smaller little lump under it, I'm pretty sure that's your lymph node. That one doesn't look any bigger than it had been the first time I saw it. Probably swelled up when you. Uhh. Got your face put together the way it is, then never went back down. Sometimes they do that at a nasty infection and never get quite normal again. Or, ya know. Could be cancer. There's nothing I can do about it. But at least your ear can drain now. Won't ever hear out of it again, though...” He went on and on about it as he washed his hands.

It made my skin crawl to keep being reminded of my half life. It was sort of wild that I wasn't needing blood yet, but that could start anytime. Or fevers. Or cancer. Or I could just drop dead for no reason like some do. I was never afraid to die before. I never gave a shit about my stunted lifespan. I'd always known in my guts that I was going to die young, chromed out, and historic. Now that Nux had wrecked it for the both of us I wasn't so sure about how I felt looking down the barrel of my own mortality. Hell, I didn't even like considering Dune's mortality despite how our- whatever we are, is founded on death threats and bloody knuckles.

Wilson groaned, leaned back and let his spine crackle, then turned to me and pointed at Dune. “After I'm done slapping a bandage on that ear, you're on duty. I've been up all night keeping an eye on her. It's your turn. Keep 'er warm, if she moves, or tries to sit up, stop her, wake me up.”

I didn't bother to nod. I just let him finish what he was doing, I let him tape up my ear and started pulling on my leg. I stood for a while as Wilson bedded down on the mat he'd offered me the night before. I should have taken him up on that offer, my ass and lower back were sore as hell sitting up all damn night. No wonder I dreamt I was on the motorcycle.

I got sick of just standing there after a while, then took to sitting on the edge of the cot she laid in. It was quiet, nothing to do but think poisonous things that made my guts grind.

“I wouldn't dance on your corpse.”

She looked cold, being all pale still. Nux used to get like this, sleep like the dead and look like a corpse. Keep him warm an' comfortable was what the slobbering Organic would say. I did with Dune what I was told to do with Nux at the end, but I bitched about it considerably less. Maybe if I
hadn't made him feel like shit for dying then he wouldn't have left my ass behind with nothing but a smelly feral's boot in my hands.

I pulled my leg off, propped it up on the wall, yanked off my worn out boot and replaced the cardboard box under her knees with my leg. The rest of her fit easy under an arm. She was unlike Nux who was too big, bony, twitchy and awkward to ever fit against right but I had made it work, 'cause I never do anything half-assed.

This was better than sitting across the room. Could hear the loon breathing. Good. Would be easier to keep watch on her that way, then I could just close my eyes and listen.

I dozed off again, but it was brief. Every time I closed my eyes I saw their empty eye sockets again. This time, it was a union of the old dream where Nux was lying dead in our bunk and the new one where they were together and dead on their feet.

I pulled the maniac closer. Damn it all. It was easy to blame Nux for this too, but it was easier to wish he was here, leaning against my back like a snoring blanket made of idiot. Traitor smeg. I missed him, his dumb face and his kamikrazee shouting behind the wheel. That hurt to admit to myself. I'd probably miss this crazy bitch too.

Soon I was hearing Nux chant the sacred words in my head. Hard not to join in the mantra.

“He is the man who grabbed the sun. Live, die, live again... You know, you'd probably get along with the raging psycho better than I do Nuts, but if you find her over there where the mediocre go when they're dead, send her back. I ain't through with the wench yet.”

Her breath had picked up, blowing hot against my Adam's apple. Then her arm twitched between us and wrenched me out of my thoughts. Her eyes were open. She was awake.

That was bizarre. Holy hubcaps, I wondered if his ghost really had heard that. Oh hell, her eyes were just rolling around in her skull and she was writhing as if in some fever spell.

“Hey. Hey, old man. Wake up. She's movin' around.”

Praise V8.

- Day 727 -

Wilson kept us there another day for something called observation. Dune was not okay. Wilson had said she was bodily alright considering that she'd been blown up by lightning. She could walk to the piss pot on her own despite the burns on her feet. I was thankful for that, I didn't want to relive the horror of being helped to the can from the opposite perspective. She shoved Wilson away at the face when he tried to help her once. I said nothing but kind of approved.

She didn't speak, though, and that's how I knew she was not okay. Her not beating her teeth together constantly was like a treadmill rat not begging for aqua cola, that's when you know something ain't right.

Wilson told me she might just need time to put herself back together. Whatever the hell that means. He insisted that there really wasn't much else he could do and that I should take her home, that it might do her good to be somewhere familiar.
It got weird after that. She pulled her boots on and gimped away before Wilson had even finished dumping parting instructions on me. I had to chase her down and grab her wrist before she reached the ladder which leads back up to the surface. She glared but didn't retaliate.

She got down the hill on her own as we left. Looked around and clenched her fists a few times. She was probably searching for the fan sled and annoyed that it wasn't there. Wouldn't trust her driving that right now anyway.

The old man emerged after us and jogged down the hill with a lumpy sack in his hand. “Wait! Here. Take this.”

He held open the bag under my face to show me the dozen or so MRE rations inside, then started tying it onto the bike as I looked to Dune for some sort of explanation. She just stared blankly off into the distance, facing east.

“Why? We owe you now, not the other way around.”

“For what now?” He asked, three toothed grin flashing as he spoke.

I pointed at Dune, then jerked my thumb at the deflated thing under my ear. “You've done all that without asking for payment yet. From the way Dune talks, you don't just give shit away.”

The old meat mechanic sighed and shook his head.

“Kid, I'm seventy-four years old. I have heart palpitations, I get up to piss at least thirty times a night. How much longer do you think I got left? Just. Take it. Just take it and go home. And take care of yourself and that girl. Alright?”

He waited for some sort of affirmation that I understood. I could only nod, I didn't know what he'd been expecting me to say to that. He turned away and started back up the hill then as I sat on the bike. I could see it in his eyes, he sensed his fate looming.

Dune looked forlornly at the motorcycle, then at me as if she had been stripped of her dignity. Couldn't say I didn't understand that. I've barely got any dignity left myself, I covet and defend what's left of it from her violently if I have to.

She didn't argue, didn't say a thing. She just got on the back and held on around my middle, her hands clenched in tight fists against my ribs and breath ghosting against the holy brand on the back of my neck.

Chapter End Notes

I wasn't 100% happy with this chapter and the way I organized it, but if I kept procrastinating and reading through it to doctor things that I didn't quite like then it would never have gotten published and I'd have started going loony like Dune. The ordeal already has me growling and snorting out lizard noises like Slit, so it was really time to just throw down and post it up.

If you're curious or want me to do math, Dune's in her late twenties. 27-ish. She just behaves as if she's the same age as Wilson.
The lump on Slit's ear. If you look closely, it's more like two, with the smaller one down by his jaw in the general vicinity of a lymph node. The reason I wanted Wilson to get rid of the bigger one is the fact that it's actually squishing his friggin ear closed. Ears make earwax and stuff. It freaks me out that he probably has a MASSIVE build up of sand and gunk in there that can't get out. Plus, I wanted to find a way to bring up how in my head-cannon, Nux named Slit's lump too.
Chapter Summary

I went through like, nine versions of this chapter. I was just having a really, really hard time writing from Dune's perspective on this one. She fought me 100% of the way because I wanted to convey that she's pretty shaken up by the near death thing, but not bastardize her personality with a completely out of character chapter. She's having a hard time, Yeah, and Slit is getting all of the fallout from it, but I didn't want to kill her perpetually and sometimes inappropriately sunny disposition with a lot of needless introspective angst. Maaay have failed at that.

Don't get me wrong, the angst is there but... I dunno, I made an attempt at willing it into a balance that's true to her nature. This chapter is the hate baby my laptop and I made. :/

To make up for any dissatisfaction this chapter may inspire, there's a present for you guys down at the bottom as a special thank you for reading my trash fiction.

If I closed my eyes and held my breath so that I couldn't smell the dead air of the wasteland, then it almost felt like I was hanging onto one of my brothers and riding through the lush fields of home, not clinging to a broken War Boy.

When I had no choice but to take a breath and open my eyes I could still see the green things haunt my vision like a mirage. I tried to hide my face against the back of Ducky's neck. It helped only a little.

The homestead came into view and I shuddered in surrender to the desire to curl up somewhere warm and dark. I was practically plastered to the battle fodder's back as we passed under the wind-worn columns and arches of stone, then slipped through the easily overlooked passage into the underneath-world.

The rumble of the cycle echoed against the bare stone in here, sending waves of confusion through my skull as we stopped. I moved to swing my leg over and dismount but stumbled when my cooked foot reminded me of how fucking wrecked I was. Walking was a torture but, I was not about to allow myself to be carried around.

I've been to that level of hell before. No one would ever be forced to look after me in such a way again. Never.

My limbs still worked slow, body trembling as if we were having an earth shaker. Slit did not try to help. He knew better, thank the goddess. He let me struggle back to my sleep spot without so much as a single word. He just followed and kept two steps behind my agonizingly slow progress with a lit torch in his hand.

Wouldn't wipe that bothersome look off his face, though. It itched and niggled at my nerves. He didn't look right. He didn't act right either. He brought water, brought clean rags and dumped into my lap the things that Wilson had ordered us to treat the burns on my head and heels with. Then he just stood there shifting his weight uneasily between his flesh and mechanical legs, staring down at me as I sat. When I merely stared back, his lip twitched and crinkled the worst of the scarring on his left
cheek. He pushed the knob of his metal leg into the lowest position in its slot and let it collapse under him as he sat and started pulling at my boots. He was going to do it for me.

Something burned white hot in my center and my unfeeling hand of scars lashed out, slapping hard across his ruined mouth. Slit's entire body jerked forward and his reflexes immediately had the strength of his fist crushing around my wrist as the clap of sound had faded into dull echoes. I had meant to say words, not strike. I meant to hiss *I'm not incapable* but instead, the words caught on my windpipe and had to find another road to escape from me, choosing the path of my arm instead.

Silence fell like a smothering weight in the cavern. We fought with our eyes, the jump of jaw muscles, the twitch of eyebrows, the steady glares of blue and red and green. I wanted a fight. I wanted to expel the feeling that the dream of home left in my chest, I wanted Slit to tear it out of me and make me forget what peace was. He didn't. The failed War Boy grumbled out a noise with a meaning I didn't understand and tossed the boot he'd yanked off my foot into my lap before getting up and stalking down the passage.

Soon I could hear the clank of metal and faint curses. He was tinkering with the car. Sulking. I turned toward Mama, reaching out to brush my fingertips around her hollow eye sockets. After tending to my pain, I gave in to the listlessness that weighed down every limb.

*He lay against me, the wind made the grasses around our nest whisper softly. He tasted like fuel, I tasted like dirt. He moved like death coming to claim a disembodied soul. I sank into the soil like a seed throwing down roots.*

*We lay in the grass, ear to ear, letting thoughts pass between us. Fire, war, death. Scrap, sand, life.*

*A thunder stick lay in the dirt between us, mama's Enfield sitting across the shaft of wood. Vines grew around them, holding them tight and claiming them for the earth.*

*He took my hand and pressed my fingers around the shaft of the thunder stick, and when I looked down between us, our arms were dusted in white.*

It was just a dream, yet it had felt so real, enrapturing every sense and then a few which didn't have names. Was it a vision? A prophetic dream? I blinked into the darkness as awareness returned. *Pain.* Oh! Glorious, torturous pain that slithered through my flesh like poisonous serpents. I crumbled forward, hands flying forward to catch my fall into the sand. It was more gravel than it was loose dust, it bit my palms. I hardly noticed the new cuts in the heels of my hands what with the ghosts of flames blazing through my legs. It felt like I had been wearing iron slippers, heated red hot like the ones that the evil queen in Mama's bedtime stories had danced in. I tried to pull my feet up into my lap to see but, the moon was too weak, a waxing sliver in the sky. My whole and feeling hand told me that they were wet with spilled blood but gritty with sand caked into the now torn open wraps.

I had been walking yet asleep. Strange. Strange. I had left the safety of my kip under the spell of the sleeping walkabout. What is safety? Just a word.

It was dark and it was cold. How had the chill of the desert night not woken me? Or the tenderness of my heels as I tromped on them through the wastes barefooted? I could barely make out the
horizon, thanks only to the light of the stars. I recognized nothing. How far had I wandered from the cavern?

There was no time to let concern float through my head. A voice called out in a tongue I could not understand.

“Привет?”

I shot upright, stumbled and choked on a curse that could not escape as my scorched feet screamed for a reprieve from their duties. I turned my head left, then right, then spun in a slow stumble whilst holding onto my frozen arms.

“Рад тебя видеть.”

The voice was not a friendly one. No no no. It was hungry, for what I could not be certain. Two red orbs popped up from over a sand drift, a black form rising from the dirt as if it had been lying in wait like a trap door spider. Eyes. Buzzard eyes.

I palmed at my leg where the sheath of my blade should be. My knife, not there. My backup weapon, not there. No bullets, no blades. Fear closed in tight around me.

I saw starlight reflected in a shaft of metal. Deadly, deadly sharp and swaying back and forth, hand to hand. It moved like a spider too, slow at first, till it was certain had its victim within grasp. It moved like the fucking wind with fangs ready to sink in.

I tried to dodge the mass barreling toward me but my bloody feet had none of it. I fell onto my rear and the Buzzard tumbled over me onto its head, rolled quick to the left and leapt upon me. The blade tickled at where my rotgut filter should be before being parried away. The weapon was tried at my throat next but not intended to kill. No. This was not the scene of a prospective murder, this was far crueler. When realization struck it was only because of the stench of naked and unwashed flesh. I forgot to care that the razor edge of a knife was whispering a death threat into my windpipe, I might be lucky that I hadn't slit my own throat on it. My sharp and yellows sank into something in the dark as I clawed for the blade. It shrieked a curse in its nonsense words as the taste of hot copper coated my tongue and spilled over my lips. Fury roared in my veins. This was not the end of my story, No.

I felt the killing tool drop from its hands, the point leaving a red-hot prick just below my breast bone as the creature tore free of my teeth and fell onto it's back. It was pawing at what I'd nearly bitten off. Stupid. Should have kept a hold of the knife. Should have slashed deep. Should have ended the game with a wet gag and settled for having its way with a cadaver.

If I'd been born with a cock, I'd have scooped out his eye and skull fucked him right there in the sand. Instead, the blade slid in and was twisted both left and right as he choked on his last breath. The danger passed, I slumped into the sand alongside the body, panting out the insidious thrill of feeling the life fade from a man under my hands.

I sat by the corpse for some time, shivering, still waking from the dream if I'm to be completely honest. When Ducky had taken me back to the place I called my territory the day before, I had wanted to fight him, to throw fits and goad him into throwing them back just to feel something besides the ache for my real home. The frantic struggle to defend myself from a dirt dweller did not do what Slit could, I only longed more for the place beyond death, the only way I'd ever return to the Green Place.

I might not have been all in the right order upstairs but I had enough gears and cogs turning in the correct direction to understand the peril of my situation. Eventually, I would have to get up and walk
or else the cold would weave itself so deeply into my being that I'd never move again. Would that be so bad? Would I go home again? It would be so sinfully easy. I could hardly breathe or walk as it is. I could just give in to how tired and ruthlessly sore I felt, to succumb to the desire to just stop healing and go still.

No, those that choose death willingly go to the void, not the blessed places after departure from this realm. I made my choice, pulling off the dead one's boots as the sky began to lighten ever so slightly.

The filthy Buzzard was even more raggedy and ill kept than most I had seen. No others had appeared, so perhaps it was one of the lonely ones. If a Buzzard is left behind, it's forgotten by its clan as if it had never existed. Pack animals they are, perhaps recognizing one another more by scent than sight as creatures who thrive in darkness and live in the sunken ruins hidden under the sand. All speculation on my part, wild prejudices and fearful musings.

I considered taking strips of the layers and layers of bandages it wore to bind around my viciously throbbing feet but the fabric looked absolutely revolting, caked in dust and salt and very possibly shit. Not that I was spoilt for cleanliness but this was just too grimy to consider. I tore off the bottom of my blouse to try and put a layer between the wounds on my soles and the filth which no doubt lurked in the boots too.

So began the march along the trail I had left in my wandering slumber.

The green. It kept coming back to steal away my sight, It would come as if springing up from the parched earth after a hard rain, something I've only ever heard about in tall tales. The imagined visions would flash before my weary eyes and then dissolve in an instant as I reached out to touch the freshly grown shoots. Oh, no no. This was not helpful.

I got turned around twice, forgetting where I was in the midst of these ruthless, intrusive memories. I found my way back to the trail of my footprints the first two times but, not the third... The sound of a motor roaring through the rolling green hills before me came secondary to the sound of Ma calling from over the next mound of grasses. A little more, just a few more steps and then I'd see her. I hardly cared that I was headed away from the cavern, from Ducky, stumbling east toward the rising sun.

“What are you doing?”

*I'm going home.*

“STOP!”

*No.*

A hand tangled into the hair on the back of my neck and pulled, twisting my head back. No! Everything was fading, turning gray and dead and then falling to pieces into the sour dirt! It was gone, the grand, beautiful illusion was gone. The hilt of the Buzzard's blade was still gripped tightly in my fingers, it was lifted high to carve whoever had torn me from my waking dream. Useless, my arm was caught and twisted around until I could no longer hold onto my single salvation from this attack on my person.

*Ducky.* It was my Ducky, fury written on his face in the language of not quite human expressions.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?! Are you out of your frickin' mind?” He stopped and shook his head harshly at his own words, perhaps realizing the absurdity of them.

“Errrm. Mmm. Nng.” *That was a stupid question, Ducky.*
He saw the blood, I could tell because his eyes had changed. The anger in his glare slipped away for
but a moment as he turned my chin to look at the tiny, shallow cut against the tendon in my neck. He
then pulled up the back of my torn shirt to look there. He was searching for a greater wound.
Something to explain the blood which was still slick in my palms or the red crusted around my
mouth like war paint. His breath was heavy, ragged, I could feel its heat and moisture on my face.
An unflattering squeal of sound escaped my throat as he shook me by his grip on my hair.

“What happened!? Say something damn it!” He was shouting now, demanding answers.

“MmMMRR!” S’not my blood.

He let go, shoving slightly with the action and throwing me into a feeble stumble. Paws hurt, and the
boots they were in fit too loose. I looked down into the dirt, feeling robbed of the swoon of peace
that had held me when I saw lying green mirages sprout from it. A chill crawled up my spine,
prickling at my skin as Ducky muttered words of no import.

He threw something with a guttural yowl, a rock that flew into the nothing as he spent up the
frustration that I could practically smell on him. A minute later he was slipping out of his vest and
pulling his shirt up over his head to reveal the full extent of his healed upper body. He wadded up the
shirt and flung it at me, it just slapped against my face and tumbled down my breasts into the sand.

“Put it on, and get in the car.” He gruffed, then turned toward the Impala, boot thudding so hard that
it left deep pits in the sand alongside the grooves left my his peg leg. He opened the driver side as I
carefully guided my burnt head through the collar of the much too large pull-over.

He looked at me from over the hood, face twisting into a scowl that could kill weaker mortals merely
from fright. “Get in. the car.

He's not pissed. He's scared.

Hey, would you look at that. It's the face of crazy. Dune speed paint. No reference used.
Oh, look, here's a half shaded, rushed doodle of Slit after a couple years digging around in the sand.
with his very favorite bag of cats. Most of his good ear was burnt off. He looks mildly pissed off. Who whizzed in his bowl of maggots? Also, yes, for the doodle below I needed a reference. You can probably find the exact picture I was looking at just by typing the actor's name into the google search engine.
And finally a teaser for my lovely readers. Will he ever don this warpaint again? Hmm? Keep
reading and find out.
Chapter Summary

Slit and the Scav work out new issues as well as old.

Chapter Notes

Secret title: The Conflicting Emotes of a Selfish Lizard

We all know Slit would be the rat that pushes the pleasure button instead of the food button until he starves to death.

This chapter alternates between the perspective of the Scavenger and Slit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-Slit-

I thought the loon was just in a mood. I thought it might pass, that I’d sleep in the car since she was being a thankless bitch about the whole thing. I also thought that I’d wake up half way through the night to her dragging me back to the interior, jabbering the whole way. Nope.

I woke up freezing my nuts off on the back seat of the nameless Impala in the earliest hours to find that I was alone. I checked every chamber, every passageway, and every narrow squeeze in the underground for the little rustlicker but found nothing. I even looked around by the reeking maggot farm.

Now here I am, watching her stumble over to the passenger side door to pull it open and get inside. I found the little idiot's trail leaving the cave. I followed her tracks and drops of blood wicked into the sand under the shine of the still working right head light. Around the time the sun had risen a knuckle's width from the morning horizon I spotted her. There she had been, meandering around covered in blood and clutching a crudely made shiv to her chest.

She might have killed someone or some fool tried to whack her and bit off more than they could chew. She was all bruised up and sporting new scuffs, which was her own fault for leaving unarmed and damn near naked. Those boots weren't hers, dunno where she got them but they stunk even from a distance. Her feet are going to rot off her damn legs in those. Couldn't rip them off now, though. It was cold as hell and the wench was blue through the fingers, ears and lips.

She must have walked right by the parked car in the middle of the night and moved on foot heading east for a straight six hours until I woke up. Why?

Didn't care. I was too fucking aggravated. Lightning warped her head even worse than it was before,
and now she wouldn't even explain herself. Or maybe she couldn't. Great, just fucking chrome.

I was still freezing my ass off and the car had no windshield so it wasn't going to get any warmer in here. I could probably cut steel with my nipples if I wanted to, they were so hard. That was also Dune's fault. She'd shot out most of the glass when she killed the previous owners.

I had to switch out the foot bit on the stupid metal leg again before we left, then slide the curved hooks of the driving foot around the clutch so I could shift gears properly. Once we were moving I found just enough self-control to ask a question without roaring it, but only just.

“You wanna tell me what I'm looking at here? Huh? The fuck is this about? You're acting like some pup.”

She turned her head slowly to meet my gaze, eyes narrowed as she curled her arms around her kneecaps for warmth. “Mmph.”

“What. What!?”

A grunt, that was all the more I got. So, I turned my attention back to the lack of road ahead, following the tire tracks I left to get out here like bread crumbs. I could hear her breath, shuddering from the frigid morning air. We were maybe a month away from lean times when the wastes got cold and stayed that way for what would feel like forever. We'd have to burn garbage just to keep warm enough not to freeze at night. It would be another hour before the sun rose high to become an oppressive haze of burning light and rising shimmers of heat. I thought I was irritated enough to let the little bitch shiver the whole way home. Was wrong, usually am these days. For a while, in the beginning, I wondered if this was just life after death. I had entertained the idea that I hadn't gone out glorious enough for a place in Valhalla and that this was hell. Condemned to pick through scrap and chunks of rust for all eternity and that the loon was somehow the devil incarnate, suffering me with the torture of her incessant prattling.

I was wrong, or maybe too accustomed to the sound of her voice. Hearing nothing was worse than the raving. Worse than the hell of living with her for seven hundred and twenty-eight days, minus the time I spent spying on the Citadel from among the Wretched.

She shivered again, a noise passing between her raunchy teeth which almost sounded like a word.

“What?” I didn't like how gently it fell off my tongue. It made things in the bottom of my gut tighten as if I should be expecting a flogging for going as soft as a breeder. Yet, no matter how hard I fought it, hearing something akin to speech coming out of the loudest mouth in the wasteland was the a relief second only to quenching my addiction to aqua-cola.

“Died?... Did-”

She chewed her tongue and worried her lower lip between her fangs so strongly that I wondered if she'd draw her own blood. She was struggling, voice hoarse and flat. I swallowed the dry knot in my throat as I looked at her, the tire tracks ahead and back again. She managed to repeat the first word twice more in stutters and slurs. It hit me then that it was a question. She wanted to know if she had died.

It was rotten to be reminded of how I felt when the nutter wouldn't breathe and had no discernible pulse. Like my insides were being squeezed out under a tire. Feelings like that made me doubly unworthy of Valhalla. She hadn't any fuckin' right to make me feel this shit. Having no right to do something to me never stopped her before. She healed me, touched me with a shine hand, called me her Ducky like she had some moronic claim on me. Damn her. Damn her to fucking hell to burn
again and again in an endless cycle till her bones are reduced to ash. And my weak, half-life corpus just reveled in the attention, totally independent of how my skull meat interpreted the happenings outside its shell.

Again, the flesh on my bones acted of its own accord. An arm made more from scars than skin stretched out, the fingers on the end of it snapped a few times to get her attention when she stared off into the nothing with a blank look on her face. My fingers curled, beckoning her closer.

“You're obviously a weak rust spawnling that can't keep herself warm without help. C'mere.”

Dune snorted, then brushed off my hand in protest until I gave up. She only inched closer when she thought I wouldn't notice, tucking her head under my arm and leaning heavy as she could into my side. Dumb, weak, pathetic half-life body kept on betraying me. This felt just as good as throwing a lance and hitting the target dead on balls accurate. Sinful, rusty, mediocre, unworthy.

I was still rip-roaring mad that she had strolled out of her kip like that. She'd wandered around, gotten herself into a fight with Immortan knows what and almost undid all the work I'd done keeping her alive and dragging her limp carcass to Wilson's for a patch job. Had to keep telling myself I was pissed, or else it would slip away and wind up forgotten.

Her shine hand pushed aside the kutte I had replaced when I gave her the shirt off my back to cover her near nudity and torn clothes. A finger began drawing lines in the wind cooled flesh around the scars on my gut and ribs. I should have told her that it was a waste, like pouring aqua-cola into the thirsty dirt. I wasn't going to forgive her. Not for saving me, not for keeping me, not for almost dying herself. Hell no... Maybe, a little.

Her fingers stopped and lifted away to tug at something stuffed into one of my pockets. It came out into her hands and uncrumpled. It was that vest she always wore with the patches all over it. I'd had it in my hands as I searched the cavern, like an assurance that she could not have gone far because she never left the place without it. I hate being wrong.

She pulled away to put it on. She probably felt as naked without it as I would without the flip blade and bracer on my wrist. She only gave that back four hundred or so days after dragging me out of the grip of holy death, kicking and screaming. It took her a while to trust me with a weapon, which was not unwise. I truly burned to watch her suffer in the beginning.

When the loon pressed back into me and tried to continue tracing the shapes of my cut-ups I snatched her hand away from them and brought it to where I really wanted it. For all of this trouble, I deserved something in return for going out to fetch her. Her fingers stunk like dried blood and they were cold as frost but my face was where I wished them to do their work, where I liked them best. It could almost make up for missing out on Valhalla, having my hands on a wheel, the rumble of an engine around me and those shiny little fingers gliding up and down the splits in my chrome face. I'd accept nothing less.

I didn't let her stop and wouldn't until I could park this rust bucket. I didn't care if all the blood ran out of her arm by the time we got back, she owed me all the touches that the shine hand could give. Anytime her palm tried to drop away I'd put it right back.

Eventually, the homestead appeared within sight. I had let my thoughts wander in the silence. I was sick of it, hearing no litany of insanity in my left ear as we made the trek home. Would she try to speak if I started? I thought of her question, she could still be waiting for an answer. I considered what had happened four days ago long and hard before opening my mouth. That weird twist in my guts left me feeling like I needed to take a leak as I answered her finally.
“When the lightning got ya, stopped breathin’. Couldn’t find your bloodpump beats either. I had to do your breathin’ for you.”

Her hand stopped, fingers twitching against my lips with what felt like agitation. I turned my head into her knuckles to look at her. Horror spread had across her face. At first, I thought it was a natural reaction for a non-warrior to learn that they had been, for all intents and purposes, a corpse. Then the look faded away as she leaned back and retracted her touch. Mortification was replaced by lips curled back brows pinned low. There was something feral about those eyes, pupils blown wide and jaw clicking.

I didn't see what came next. I'd stupidly shifted my gaze back to the sand ahead, giving her the opening she needed to ram her fist into my eye with strength I was never aware she had. My vision actually spun momentarily as the car swerved to a stop. When I realized what she had done I tried to snatch at her hair again but, she was already pushing open the passenger side door to make her exodus and slamming it shut.

“The shitting FUCK Dune! What the hell was that for!?”

She didn't answer. The psycho walked just a couple hand widths from the front bumper of the car and stumbled the last ten minutes of the way to the cavern. Stubborn, rock headed little-

I fought off the urge to run her over more than a few times, instead revving the engine to get her to speed the fuck up. Couldn't just go around and leave her to her own devices. I didn't trust her not to wander off again without supervision. If she wanted to wear her messed up feet through until those boots were filled with blood then so be it. It was hard to give a damn about her what with my good eye threatening to swell shut and render me temporarily blind.

It was a long half mile drive to the cave mouth.

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That punch in the eye was the last time the shine hand reached out to touch me for twenty-five days. That's not to say I didn't try to reverse her shitty mood or win back some favor. All the trying earned me were four new red crescents on my arms and fingers from her teeth. It wasn't long at all before I exiled myself to the garage indefinitely. She looked after herself, I made sure of that. Watching as she wrapped her feet and cleaned out the wound on her scalp. She still filled a bowl with maggots and bits of lizard for me after I ran out of Wilson's MREs to feed on by the Impala. We just existed in the same general vicinity, except at night when she walked in her sleep. It explained her wandering off that first night, but it was no less frustrating. I had to set trip wires to drop bundles of cans and scrap to wake me she stumbled toward the cave mouth. Then I'd have to put her back into her sleep spot. She seldom fought me in those moments because she was not aware enough to get pissy and lash out. Every once in a while, she'd cling to me instead of trying to evade listlessly. That inspired confusion in me.

I worked up the nerve to leave once so that I could salvage what we left behind at the wrecked rig. The body of the War Boy was useless. It had long been bloated, picked by blackbirds, and then all the juices sucked away by the persistent thirst of the wasteland. The fan sled was also worthless. Twisted beyond recognition by the winds. The fan and the motor were barely worth the effort of hauling them home on the back of the Impala. Dune had run her fingers over the remains of her preferred ride sorrowfully. A faint echo of the feeling I used to get watching brethren mourn over lost
war chariots spread through my limbs at the sight before she vanished into the maze of tunnels once again.

So many days of silence passed that I considered leaving for good. I wasn't too dense not to know when I was unwelcome. It burned to realize I cared that I had been wanted somewhere, but no longer was. I'd been nothing but fucking tolerant of her this whole time and now this. For what reason? That's what I wanted to know.

On the twenty-fifth day, I ate at an arms length away from her, watched her change the wraps on her feet and then left the place where we both used to sleep. I meant to go prepare for another night in the cold of the garage-chamber.

-Dune-

Days blurred together. He left once to salvage the belongings we left behind somewhere I can't recall. I'd had an inconsolable itch to get on the cycle and head east. When I ventured into the chamber where we kept our rides, I found that he had taken the key and the front tire off the bike before leaving in the Impala. The bastard, the clever bastard.

His return was... Disappointing. My sand sled had perished. There was barely anything left to salvage. Wasted. Ganked. Kicked.

Something else nagged and scratched at the back of my mind. I never woke up where I fell asleep. Sometimes I was standing up in the middle of one of the stone corridors when I came to, or I woke to the sensation of being lifted and finding that Slit was rolling me into the sleep spot.

More time passed. My feet began to heal, so did my scalp, my voice didn't.

It took twenty-four days before I forgave Ducky for dragging me back from the other side, where my kin waited for me. Realizing that this was where my anger flowed from, that it was the reason my lips curled back into a snarl whenever he came too close, that was what gave me the power to let it go. It didn't change the fact that the memory still had it's claws dug into the flesh of my soul so deeply that it was all I could think about. I still felt swindled but I had the willingness to stop my Ducky from slinking off to the car to sleep in it on the twenty-fifth day.

We had been eating when I resolved to break the cycle. It had been easy to fall into a routine. I'd shove a bowl full of maggots and lizard into his lap every evening and then turn away to pick at my own meal. He'd watch intensely while I checked over the wounds on the soles of my feet as if he could not trust me to do it right. Then there came the weight of the silence which pressed into every pore of healthy skin. After all of these daily rituals, he would get up and leave so that he could skulk around by the car. At night he spent his time taking apart things I could not name and putting them back together for the hundredth time until he exhausted himself and slept on the back seat, curled up for warmth.

I waited until I could hear that he was done eating. He always chewed and swallowed loudly for some reason. Sometimes the cracks in his face would bubble with spittle and make flatulent sounds that I used to think were funny. He was licking his bowl clean when I turned to watch. He looked
like shit under the grease smeared across his face, smelled like shit too. I wondered if he'd even been making an attempt to look after himself.

Lightning stole my voice. I couldn't say these things to him. He was so engrossed in the last morsels of his dinner that he didn't notice as I reached out. He was up and clumping away before my finger could even graze the shell of his deformed ear.

If I let him, he would stay in the space he called the garage until dawn let down ribbons of light into the hole at the top of that chamber. I felt sick with shame. He'd tried a few times in past weeks to get my attention, to seek out touch or try to taunt words out of me, and all I could do was shove him away or nip him hard with my sharp and yellows because my tongue wouldn't work.

Rust and dust. Everything got snagged on the green things in my head, lost in the foliage.

I rose to my feet with a wounded growl. Wrapping them tightly seemed to help a little, but not enough to quell the way the stone bit at the tender scars. I made my way to where I knew he'd be.

When I entered the chamber I found him leaning under the hood of his precious ride and cranking something or other. I had little understanding of the mechanical works in there. I suspected that he once had the desire to teach me more than just the ways in which the motorcycle worked but had given up quickly due to his low threshold for frustration. Slit was a creature that thrived on instant gratification and I was too slow to learn new things.

He didn't hear me as I closed the distance between us. I seldom heard his approach anymore either. There was always this persistent low whooshing in my ears ever since the storm. It made for many startles to have two half deaf people living together.

His hair was dirty, his skin a patchy mess of engine grease and red dust. My fingers curled anxiously at the sight a few times. Ducky stayed much tidier back when we first met and I had to wash him myself. I wondered if he'd let me run a wet rag over him despite his being entirely capable of doing the work himself.

It was just like the first time my left hand reached out to feel his skin without reason or warning. I sought out the feel of a little swirl in his arm under the pads of my fingertips. He jerked away on reflex and looked at me as if I had struck him. There was electricity crackling between us as our eyes met.

God that had to be the word that described everything we wound up doing to each other. Like fucking wretched, blissfully blinding electricity. Painful and beautiful all at once. It's only fitting that the emperor of that element would tear us apart. Damned lightning.

He scratched at the spot I'd touched and sneered a few harsh words that I should have been expecting. “Come to bite me again? Ungrateful cunt.”

A nasty sensation pulsed in my chest, between my ribs, and through every limb. I tried biting my tongue until it bled. Then I tried turning away to leave again. I could not will it to pass. The feeling swelled up like a rotten body in the unforgiving sun, swelling and bubbling until it finally pops open and spews out something no one wants anything to do with. I was halfway across the chamber when I tripped over Slit's mess, tools and parts scattered all over the stone floor in no sensible order.

I fell flat on my breast bone and chin, which caused me to truly bite down on my tongue. As I licked the back of my hand to check for blood I heard it. He laughed at me. It was a harsh gravel of wicked glee and disdain. This was what sent me flying over the edge of reason and... It happened, it tore through me and escaped from every possible avenue out of my being. I rose, hand wrapped white-
knuckled around some tool thing that I’d fallen over. That went flying too. It might have blackened
his face with savage bruises had he not ducked just in time to be missed by the torque wrench sailing
through the air.

“FUCK YOU AND FUCK YOUR UGLY, MEDIocre FACE!”

He gawked at me, ruined mouth agape as if those words had been bullets. Did I hurt him? Morbidly,
I hoped so. I spat on the ground between us, wiping a line of pink slime from my chin a moment
after.

“What did you just say? What the shit did you just say to me?!”

“Dune called you ugly!”

“What?” I could see the flame in his eyes. The fire in his temper amassing heat and brimstone to
smite me with. “What is this?! You want me to regret saving your worthless skin? IS THAT IT?!”

“Yeah, I do! I went home you bag of dicks. I was home,” There was still so much more to expel, to
vomit out and make up for the twenty-six days I couldn’t bring forth the words I needed to say. I’d
almost let it go and I’d almost been able to forgive, but it was not to be. We weren’t like that. Ducky
and I don’t sort ourselves out easily. “You think I like living in this slag heap!? This, all of it is
nothing but a shit show and you stole my out! I haven’t seen the color green in fifteen years and you
cheated me out of it! Why couldn’t you leave me dead?!”

It was selfish and hypocritical but I couldn’t bring myself to stop the flow. He was just standing there,
leaning on the fender for support as if every word threatened to knock him down like a blow from a
great fist. When he finally made his reply it shook the very ground with his blistering rage. Slit’s
response was not one of words. His flesh spoke for him, charging forward with a roar that was not
quite of man nor of animal. I could not move out of the way quickly enough.

It felt like the ground had risen up to slam against my back. My head bounced and the sound it made
was just awful. A dull thonk. I was dazed, seeing stars through the hole in the roof although the black
of night had not yet risen into the sky to reveal the twinkling lights. The sting of teeth closing around
the mound of my shoulder brought me back to the struggle at hand.

“GAHH! Is that the best you can do!? Cheap move Slit! CHEAP MOVE! Stop being such a pussy
and hit me!” I cuffed at his ear. It really takes less force than one might think to tear an ear off. I was
tempted. So, so tempted to grab it and twist.

I shouldn’t have said what I had. He eased off his grip on me with his teeth but reared back and
brought his brow down into mine mercilessly. I was dazed again, barely making out what he shouted
next.

“You bitch. I was awaited! I could hear a thousand voices calling my name! I was awaited in
Valhalla and you might as well have blown up the fucking gate just as I was reaching out to it! And
you’re whining like some simpering pup about a ruddy ugly color!? I COULD THROTTLE YOU!”

“Valhalla is a bad JOKE! You were going straight to the flaming lake of hell for all the meaningless
killin’ you’ve done FAILURE WAR BOY!”

His fist was my reward for that comment. I tasted copper. Saw the stars again too. I gave him a fist in
return, feeling his nose break and my knuckles split open in tandem. The pain was irrelevant, just an
inconsequential symptom of the flurry of blows.

“You threatened to eat me! I’ll drag you down to hell myself!”
It was an old sin he spoke of but he was not wrong. Somehow I managed to kick his metal leg off. Tearing a strap in half with the heel of my foot and reopening the jagged scar there in the same move. Slit howled an inhuman battle cry as the tendon in his groin was pinched by the straps being torn down the stump.

He spat the blood dribbling down from his nostrils into his mouth in a spray against my eyes before rolling the both of us. He used the momentum to toss me into the trunk he'd built for his tools. The corner bit into my spine like nothing I'd ever felt before, short of the touch of fire.

-Slit-

“I did war in the name of a God!”

It was true. I'd been on the holy path, the one true course for a half life so that I could live again in a new body which wouldn't die by lumps or radiation or dust filling up my chest. Did I cheat her? No! She cheated me! My blood boiled and the pump that pushed it through every vein sent my head spinning with its speed. I saw the color red even in the eye that wasn't forever busted.

Dune was sprawled on her belly like a lizard that had been stepped on, choking up pathetic noises and clawing at the stone to slither away. No, I had her right where she needed to be for a good thrashing. I was burning too hot in the skull to think, like an engine running hard and loose under the sun much too long. When I lurched forward to pin her, a barefoot lifted and struck out. One of the staples tore out of the long closed slice over my ribs. Couldn't breathe. A relentless coughing fit brought me near to blacking out. It had been a solid blow and I had launched myself right into it.

The clank of tools crashing around me brought me back into the fight. Dune was throwing anything she could at me but she still hadn't been able to rise up off the floor.

“Your god was a just a man. A pig king!”

Blasphemy.

I dove forward again, more carefully this time to avoid flailing feet and made a grab at her ankles as she tried to scramble out of my reach. I dragged her back under me, doing what I could to ignore the little fists rapping against my skull and shoulders as my fingers closed tight around her scrawny neck.

Time slowed, I watched the light begin to fade from those crazy eyes. For a moment, she struggled, kicked and arched her spine almost violently enough to throw me off. Then in the renewed silence she looked at me with peace in her green gaze. It was acceptance, gratitude even. She was ready to die, for me to kill her. It made me sick. Literally sick.

I let go.

The silence was broken with retching and involuntary gasps for breath. I lost my meal in a shallow bucket that I used as an oil pan as she gulped down air. It felt like days we sat far apart, breathing shallow, ragged breaths in between full body shakes.

“It's a r- real place. Dune was born there. A Green Place... It won't leave her alone.”

The floor under us was smeared in oil and spatters of red. She huffed and heaved in deep lungfuls of air for another moment before flopping onto her back again. A roar was let loose, long, mournful, but
furious. It ended in a broken sob which riveted my attention. She was curling spasmodically on herself with tremors. *Cries.* I'd never seen Dune cry. I'd never thought she was actually capable of anything but restless excitement and amusement at herself. She ground the heels of her hands into her eyes as if the salt and aqua-cola flowing out of them would burn her skin if she left them there too long. Couldn't find it in me to call her mediocre for it. Of all the reasons to whimper like a pup, being denied your right to die is chief among them.

I spoke the thought as it appeared in my head, not thinking about the consequences of such a suggestion at all before voicing it.

“Show me. If it's real then take me there and show me how your green whatever is more real than Valhalla.”

Her head just rolled around on the ground as she shook it to say *no.*

“Why not?”

She swallowed hard, voice hoarse but now controlled. “It's not the same as it was before. No point. It's like a barren womb. Nothing grows there anymore.”

Well, that made me right in a sense, didn't it? If it was a real place but isn't as it was, then that sort of makes Valhalla more real. A victory here still tasted bitter after I reasoned that in my head. She was talking, and *that* victory tasted better although I couldn't identify a legitimate cause for it to feel sweet next to being proven right.

I was still curious about this *Green Place* and how it could be the root of all this not-Dune-like behavior. Hell, she hadn't even spoken like herself while she ranted. It was like the nutter had been possessed by someone else, maybe by who'd she'd been before the scars and the ugly teeth. I made a snap decision in spite of the enlightenment she supplied.

“Take me anyway. We'll drive Shurely.”

Chapter End Notes

Apparently the Car is officially named Shurely now.

Trivia time: Dune was almost named Phyllis. In my first draft of chapter 1, I used Phyllis as a placeholder for the Scavenger's name. Had I not come up with something more fitting, it might have been a name that stuck.
**Don't Make Me Agree To This**

**Chapter Summary**

Dune and Slit form a new habit. Slit is used to being way too close to somebody at night anyway.

**Chapter Notes**

I will agree that this chapter is almost totally unnecessary. I could have just forged ahead, mentioned this and that which happened in the time between as they made their way to the Green Place but... I had a really shitty last week and I'm emotionally wrecked and rusted out. This chapter is obscenely fluffy and disgusting and I am not sorry, cause I kinda needed this. The story gets back on track toward the end of this update. If fluff is your thing then this is the chapter for you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Dune felt your arms around her - felt safe - felt that all was right with the world and then she woke up wrapped up in him... Sorry Dune hasn't come to talk in a while. I hope you haven't had the chance to missed me, Mums.”

When I turned my head Slit was there, watching as I relayed the tale of recent weeks to Mama. I felt a little embarrassment burn at my cheeks, he was often mentioned in the tales I told to my Mumsy but always in annoyance or concern. Seldom did I mention him in adoration, approval or confusion like this time. Usually, Duck was an easy beast to understand. I still could not fathom why I would wake to be held tight and all tangled up in his limbs at Wilson's. That had been nearly a month ago yet it still made about as much sense to me as Buzzard speak.

Right now he was bloody, black and blue blooming across his face from his nose out to his cheekbone. I knocked his face around good but from the feel of my own head he might have bashed my skull in just as bad. I had a nice knot on my forehead, at least as big as a crow's egg. His nose was crooked. If I didn't put that back the way it should be then it would heal that way and stay cockeyed.

“Come here Ducky,”

He needed his face fixed up. He was probably expecting the good touches he always enjoyed and I let him believe that was what awaited him as I extended both hands, waiting for his cranium to fill them. He had trouble with his metal leg. It was jammed up so, he fell on me more than he did sit properly.

Ah, yeah. I broke his nose real good. My fist ached with the memory. Whacking him in the face was like punching a boulder. My hand still wept crimson from the split across my middle knuckle. I gave him a gentle touch or two, to bring sensation to his lips with my thumb and watch him be lulled into trust before I pushed his nose back on straight. He uttered a guttural stream of curses as he slapped my hands away. Had to shove a rag under his face to catch the new gush of body fuel which
glistened black like oil in the torch light. It pooled in the hollow between his throat and collarbones.

“A little warning would be frickin' chrome, bag of nuts...” His words were muffled by the rag.

He groaned and began pulling at the mangled straps of his metal leg as I held the bloody cloth to his nose for him.

“How bad did Dune bust it up?” He needed that leg, I hoped that I didn't wreck the thing completely.

He growled as he lay the thing across his lap and started exposing all of the delicate inner works. “Bad enough that I almost wanna pound you again... I'll need the rusty wooden peg leg for a few days while I fix it.”

“Dune is-... Damn.” Sorry wasn't something either of us threw around lightly. I didn't say it but he seemed to get where the words were going before they got caught up. He just grunted and shook his head ever so slightly in a refusal of the half apology. I always found things like that hard to say, even before all of the aftermath of the lightning.

“Say you're sorry Dune. Apologize to your brother.”

“He started it!”

“Well, I started you, so do as I say.”

The memory came on strong. I saw it flash before my eyes, Mama with her arm around Flick's shoulders. He'd been eleven, her stepson, but already taller than her. I'd bitten him for something or other. A childhood squabble I don't remember a reason for. I tried to shake it out of my head but they only blurred before coming back into focus, gaining more clarity and color. Green crept in around the edges, escaping through the cracks in my skull and overgrowing the cavern.

“You still there? Hey, Maniac. You with me or off somewhere else?”

I shook my head again, scratching at the fuzz that grew on the sides of my dome. Slit managed to come in clearer through the vision. Only a messed up face like that could possibly be a sight vividly real enough to break the spell.

“No. N- not entirely. Either way... Green shit everywhere.”

I had dropped the now sodden rag and Slit had to replace it himself, sopping up the last drops of life liquid seeping from his face. His nose and brows scrunched up the best they could after the wallop's he had endured. He was going to have a black eye. I probably would too. He looked confused, maybe a little put off too.

The blissful flickers of home kept on trying to overwhelm my vision at every blink, fading out and coming in stronger each time. I was about to get lost in it again when Ducky's face grew closer and closer until - forkin' shit. Something wet and hot slid up my chin and over the corner of my lips.

“HEY! Gross.”

“What?! Your mouth is leakin' red.”

“So you're disgusting, war fodder solution is to use your tongue?”
“Well, the rag's already full of my red stuff, which was your doing, a tongue is better than nothin’.”

“UGH! What is that smell? Is that your breath? Gods you stink!”

Well, if nothing else, he was accomplished in pulling me out of a near waking dream. Maybe that had been his intention. Slit tended to be somewhat transparent without realizing he was -and shallow too- but as a general rule so was I. He was grabbing at my face and licking his own lips as he tried for a second sweep across my cheek bone where his knuckles had opened me up. I twisted out of the hold and flung myself toward the water basin. I yanked a clean rag off the drying line and dumped that into the water to wet it, then hurled it at him. It made a wet smack against his face, at once stained in smudges of red that had almost been dry before the damp rag found them.

“Scrub yourself, for the love of seeds. And rinse your mouth out when you're done. Scrape all that gunk off your teeth.”

He swatted his hand through the air to dismiss me. Finally something normal. Sure, we almost never bloodied each other up so thoroughly, but this – THIS is our normal. Nothing but bitching and moaning at each other. I'll call him filthy and repulsive, he'll call me mental and then we'll sleep back to back, a hand width apart like the hundreds of nights before.

He pulled his shirt up over his head and threw it in my general direction, probably to egg-on another round of smack talk. I didn't honor him with snark. This time, I simply gave the discarded garment a sniff -goddess I must be a glutton for punishment- then chucked that toward the metal basin where I scrubbed clothes every once in a while. Slit just stunk so strongly, especially after a fight for some reason. He was being lazy about the whole washing thing, not scrubbing near hard enough at his skin. I knew he hated doing this because he was quite the little weenie when it came to feeling cold after.

“Get your reeking pits too, Duck.”

He threw his head back with a reptilian sorta snort. I could practically hear his eyes rolling in their sockets too.

“If you're so fuckin' concerned that I can't even wash myself right,” He thrust out his hand at me with the hole-riddled cloth wadded up in it. “then why don't you just do it your-damn-self?”

I'd been readying my eating bowl with a little water and a rag so that I could clean up my own face as he said that.

“Can't do anything without Dune's help. No? 'Cept fixing cars.”

I snatched the rag from him and started by scrubbing the dust out of scarring on the back of his neck. It was a symbol of how the fallen king had owned him. There was more scarification below that, it was now barely discernible through the newer scars made with flames. The faint traces of the design followed the length of his spine, hard not to focus on cleaning that when I was curious to know what it was. He said nothing of it and I moved on to the rest of the expanse of scar tissue sweeping from his left side toward the right of his back without overtaking it entirely.

I soon became aware that I'd been lured into fulfilling Ducky's touch fixation. A badly suppressed groan or a sigh that I could barely hear would buzz in my ears as he leaned into every pass of the moist scrap of fabric.

“Dune knows what you did there. Nothin' but a wicked and needy deceiver.”

He leaned heavier into my knees as I crouched behind him, dropping his head back to glare at me
upside down and show off his teeth. Yes, now that's the look which belongs on his delightful face made of nightmare fuel. I hissed back. It was a custom between us, as good as far more innocent gestures of acknowledgment among companions.

This was sort of what we'd both wanted. I'd thought about tidying him up myself earlier, before our ass kicking match. The only reason I'd wanted to do it myself was to make sure it got done well and proper, there was no other reason there. Nope. Although Mama's eyes were long gone, I could somehow feel her gaze burn across the back of my shoulders as if she was amused with me.

“Just bein' friendly, Mama. Not that kind of friendly.”

“Hmm?” Slit's eye cracked open and his head tilted once more to look up. I could feel my lips twisting into something that was neither a scowl nor a grin. I dragged the rag over his face to stop his gaze right there.

“Wasn't talking to you, battle fodder.”

“Nut-job...” His gruff mutterings had to come to a halt as well when I began scrubbing the black smudges of grease out of the puckered scars through his cheeks.

Habits are easy to make but very nearly impossible to break. After two days back to business as usual, Ducky found it far simpler to tie our wrists together than to set up noise makers to wake him when the sleep walks came for me on a nightly basis. My dreaming adventures became incredibly short. I'd wake only as I was being pulled back into the pile of sleep mats and worn out bedding. I was often still confused by bizarre dreams of acceleration as I was forced to lay still. This I was moving faster and faster across the endless stretches of sand as if I was leaning out of the window of the Impala while Ducky downshifted and then fanged it up into the sixth gear. My hands would open and close, looking for Mama's Enfield for it had been in my hands as I dreamt.

“Need to reload... Duck. Bullets. Dune's got a target wide open. Let her go so she can shoot this asshole.”

“You're dreaming Nut Bag. Hold still. Stop squirming.”

For those two nights and the ones that would follow, green would not encroach on the edges of my vision. It seemed that they couldn't so long as Slit's left arm and remaining leg held me fast to the now shared sleep spot. Being tied together at the wrists made it difficult to sleep back to back. Side by side was not an option either because Slit snored like a chainsaw when he laid on his back. I hated being the little spoon at first but It soon became normal, even reassuring since like this I could never wake up in the middle of nowhere at the mercy of alluring visions. Even the reek of engine grease and his body odor became a small comfort in a world where such luxuries are few and far between. Still, appearances had to be kept lest the battle fodder begins to think he is the one in charge of things. He had to struggle each evening to get a hold of my wrist long enough to tie a cord around it. The one he went for was always my left hand, the one he liked better for some odd reason.
On the fourth night, the game of keeping my hands out of his reach ensued with fervor.

“No, Slit. Sod off!”

“You mean, Yes Slit. Rescue me from my nightmares. Blah-bluh-blah.”

“Dune don't talk like that! An' they ain't nightmares. Them's memories, or maybe prophecy. She don't know which but they're pleasant and nightmares ain't ever pleasant!”

“Whatever, just give it!”

“No!”

“I swear to the mighty Veeight that I will hold you down and-”

“FINE! Rust and dust here. Take it.” I gave him a hand alright, palm slapping under his chin to push his head away.

He hissed as he wrapped his thumb and forefinger around my right wrist like a shackle. *Seeds and sprouts*, it was incredibly bothersome and insulting when he used only two fingers to restrain an entire limb of mine. He did it because he could and he knew it annoyed me something fierce that our respective upper body strength was so wildly unequal.

“Other one. I want the shine hand, not this scarred up one.”

Needy, whiny, grabby bastard. “If you don't release Dune by the time she counts thrice, she swears by the light of the goddess that a song will be sung!”

I shoved my free hand under my bottom to keep it away just a bit longer. “One.”

“Oh, come on. Give it.”

“Two.”

“This is stupid.”

“The HILLS are alive with the sound of- MMMHHnhg!” His other hand clapped over my mouth to stop the flow of classical lyrics from Mama's favorite musical. My natural reaction to such a counter-assault was to scratch at his fingers. It was my undoing. He quickly had a hold of the phalanges he so desired and slid the loop of cord over them swiftly, tightening it and sliding his own into the second loop.

“You're nothing but a pain in the dick.” Slit grumbled.

“That must be an awful lot of pain, seeing as you're a whole ruddy bag full of dicks.”

Slit let loose a growl as he shoved at me to roll over toward the wall. There was always a great deal of wriggling involved when getting comfortable like this. I was not accustomed to sleeping on my right side and the ex-War Boy's hands tend to twitch as he drifts into a true slumber. His restless fingers were an issue for me, as with our wrists bound together his arm had to lay over my own. Slit's fingers curling unexpectedly against the back of my hand would startle me awake, so the best fix I could come up with was to lace my fingers through his and hold down that fidgety paw. Much to my ire, he seemed to enjoy that. He'd practically frozen solid the first time. The second time I grabbed his hand Slit managed to thaw himself, then wriggled in closer until I could feel his breath tickle my neck and the thumping of his heart against my spine.
It became yet another thing he silently demanded, just like the times he threw himself into my lap and wouldn't leave it until I caressed the little doodles in his skin. Goddess, are all of the creatures Immortan Joe raised in a pith of ignorance so starved for a gentle hand?

Now, after only a few days it was already typical of him to waggle his digits under my palm until I obliged and grasped them tightly. He always makes himself into the initiator when he discovered something he wanted more of.

Sleep would come to me far easier than it did for him. I was nearly walking in a dream world when he shifted in a way that must have been intentionally disturbing to my rest, then he asked a question I didn't want to hear.

“When are we going to your Green Place?”

“Aww, Slit... Go to sleep.” I kicked at his ankle in my annoyance, he kicked back.

“You never agreed or said no. I want to know if we're going or not.”

“The answer is no. Now sleep, damn you.”

“I wanna know why not.”

“Gah! Pain in the cunt!” I lifted my hand and flung it back, still gripping his in it and forcing him to smack himself in the head. “Are you that thick in the skull? Can't you understand that Dune doesn't want to go back to that place and see it as it is now? Yeah? No? She doesn't want to remember it so... so- Wrong!”

The rumble climbing up his throat helped to quiet me. He reversed my hold on his hand and pinned my own back down. “Yeah. I understand that. Prolly better than you think Loon.”

I turned my head and looked back up at him as he braced on his elbows over me. “Your Citadel?” I asked and he gave a curt nod. I could only sigh as I turned back toward the wall.

“We're still busted up from that fight.” I reasoned.

“That'll heal.”

“Your leg ain't fixed yet.” I tried a new reason.

“Find me some leather scraps and I'll have it fixed by morning.” The war fodder had an answer for everything, didn't he?

“We don't have enough guzz.” This was my ace card -whatever that analogy means- and I'd intended it to end the conversation.

“I can get more... Trust me.”

“Trust you?? A Slit has never said that one before. And just where do you intend to get extra Guzz from? Hm?”

“I got a source. Don't question it. How far do we have to go?”

“What does the distance matter?”

“Just answer the question nutter.”
I wanted to slug him across the mouth. He was still hovering over me, healing nose no more than an inch from my ear now. “Too far. A two-day ride to the east if we haul arse. A week at a leisurely cruising speed... Forever at our usual meander.”

“That's fine. I can make it happen.”

He was so insistent on this. Why? Gods why? Why the hell was he so obsessed with seeing that awful place? It's not like I could ever describe enough to truly make him understand what it was before. I couldn't bare it to see the devastation there, to see the stilt mongrels which replaced we of The Many Mothers.

“Slit, don't make me agree to this. Please.”

“Please?” He mimicked my tone. It was infuriating. Usually, if I could force words to come out sane like it took him aback. Not this time. He was determined. “A lunatic has never said that one before.”

I tried to ignore the cruelty of his taunt. “Why are you asking this of Dune?”

“Because. You're not well. Might help to see it, even if it's rusty as fuck.”

That was unlike Slit to say, so much that I considered whether he could have a few rocks in his own skull, rolling around and making a mess of him. Maybe I was the rock tumbling about in his head.

“Fine... Okay.”

He nodded once more and flopped back down. “Seven days. Then we go, no pussing out.”

I wasn't looking forward to it. Yet, I could already feel the hundreds of stories teetering on the edge of my sharp and yellows, waiting to be said.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry that I've been really non-conversational for several days. Now that this chapter is up, I'll reply to everything and post some comments on works that I read in the time I've been silent.
Needs

Chapter Summary

Slit has a hard time dragging this hermit out of her hole in the dirt. Their journey starts today, no excuses.

Chapter Notes

As much as I'd like it to be, this trip can't be all in Slit's perspective. I only realized that once this chapter felt completed. Dune's perspective needs to happen, because character development on her part is happening now (Even if it seriously resembles National Lampoon's Family Vacation at the moment)... She took a big step in letting go of things and I need to address that. I really wanted to zoom through this and get to the point I'm itching to get to, with blood and violence and life altering bullshit like I love to do but I guess this fluffy shit needs to exist as well. AND. I guess they need to re-bond a little before the stuff I have planned. So, what I'm saying is, this trip will have to be three chapters minimum.

Thank you for sticking with me even though the chapters have been SO weird lately and quite possibly (Extremely) out of character.

P.S. There exist deleted scenes from the Fury Road movie that you should see. They are awesome and happen to be what inspired me to write this weird dream that the angry lizard had.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

dreamt I was with the war party on the day the Organic and the Immortan put the old history woman to the torture. The sun bared down on us with all its scorching fury. As if the Immortal himself willed it to express his outrage

“There's a new world coming! She's already on her way!”

The history hag's words. She'd declared it proudly as Immortan Joe came to the end of his patience. These had been her words but the voice I heard hadn't been that of an old woman. It came in a painfully familiar wheeze. Nux. My driver was shouting them as Rictus jerked him around on the bungee cords from which he hung on the Doof Wagon. They were torturing him, attempting to twist out the word of where Furiosa is headed with the wives.

This is just a dream. Nothing but memories mashed together to create a realm of nonsense.

The Immorta rallied us, revved us up. The Immortan wanted us to search every inch, every rock, and hole in the dirt. Turn every grain of sand he said. We chanted to him, shouted his name so loudly that the honored in Valhalla could hear us.

Immorta I shouted. Immorta, Immorta, Immorta. Another War Boy came to stand at my side. He
was short for a warrior and had hair woven into a mohawk of tendrils. He was shouting something else and the V8 salute he signed was wrong, hands flat and wrists crossed.

“GREEN PLACE! GREEN PLACE!” He looked at me with green eyes beaming from their black adorned sockets and it was then that I realized he was not a he but a she. It was Dune all painted up like a war ready brother, grinning like mad with a mouth full of fangs.

“You! Climb aboard.”

I turned my eyes to the Immortal but found he was not there. He’d been replaced with a rogue Imperator, that one-armed bag of nails. She was pointing at my scavenger, beckoning her to join the lead team in a pursuit. Dune’s eyes darted back to me before she shouted with her hands cupped around her lips.

“Dune don’t go nowhere without Ducky!”

I looked back to the Imperator. I found that she was now leaning out of the driver side of the War Rig. Joe’s corpse was strapped to the grill like a blasphemous hood ornament.

“I’m sorry Slit! About before. Come with me this time!” It was Nux, now poking his head out from among shiny creatures wrapped in white linens in the back. He extended a hand to me. Dune was clambering up into the cab too but halted to take a position hanging onto the window.

“He said he was sorry. Come on already Duck, we’re wastin' daylight here!”

They both reached out to me, wishing to pull me up but I could not move forward nor back. I was stuck, my metal leg was sinking into the sand under me. The more I pulled the more it was swallowed down. “NO! WAIT!”

“Can't wait forever. We keep moving!” Shouted the Imperator.

Everyone was revving up, shouting praise to V8 and pumping nitro through their war chariots to catch up with the War Rig as it sped ahead. Everyone was moving but me. There was a boot in my hands. It was the only thing they left behind with me.

“WAIT! I'M STILL USEFUL! TAKE ME!”

I woke up soaked in sweat and panting as if I was about to burn out and die. Dune was laying there with her head back, open mouthed snoring and blissfully unaware of my terror. It might have been true that it was just a dream but I was pissed at her anyway for saying one thing and doing another in it. Really, I probably couldn't get rid of her now even if I threw her off a cliff and if I were being honest, Nux would probably never say he was sorry for leaving me behind. Fuck, I wouldn't apologize to that seat-belt wearer either if I had the chance to ride with the Immorta. I'd probably have left his ass in the dust in a hot second too. Maybe not. Or maybe. I don't know anymore. Shit is different now.

I looked back down at the scav after sitting up and untying my wrist from hers. If - in some unlikely twist of fate – the reincarnated Immortan showed up at the cave mouth today looking for the last loyal boy who was still true to the faith, I'd grab the loon and toss her up onto the Gigahorse first. He'd need a longshot as good as Furiosa in order to take that bitch out now. It was a stupid line of thought, a self-congratulatory kind of fantasy that Dune would chide me for entertaining in my mind
for more than a minute. I'm quite possibly the last believer in Immortan Joe. There was something
great in that, and also something mediocre as fuck in it too.

I got up and left the space where we slept to get all of that crap out of my head.

Today was the day we were meant to begin this journey across the wastes to her homeland. After
loading jugs of aqua cola and guzz into the trunk of the Impala I stood there looking at the worthless
interior, wishing I'd thought to rip out the unnecessary seat a long time ago. This was going to be a
four-day round trip at minimum and we'd have to sleep sometime. Without the back seat, we could
probably throw bed rolls back there and sleep in the car. With both bench seats still in there I could
probably get away with putting her up front and tying her wrist to the steering wheel but knowing
my luck I'd probably wake up to both the maniac and the wheel gone. I could sleep in the front. This
was a two door hard top so, she'd have to climb over the seat and me to get out if she got up to dream
walk. Bed rolls got stuffed into the trunk next to the guzz even if they might not be used. If I had the
proper tools I'd have installed a gas tank that could hold all this. V8, I felt so... domesticated. Still
better than being a traitorous wretch, though.

I was still sore from the fight. Double sore now after going to get the fuel we'd need to make a this
sort of drive. Oh, it was a monumentally moronic move, stealing from Buzzards. Dune was still in
the dark about details but she had to realize that I'd done something foolish on her behalf. I put my
neck out there just so that she could see some place that's apparently gone to shit since before she left
it. Her debt mounts. I'd told her to stay behind yesterday, left and came back with two full jerry cans
and new bruises to go with the old ones that were starting to turn yellow. Immorta, I'm lucky. Or
maybe just that fucking chrome that I could crawl into a Buzzard den and crawl back out with the
goods and only a few bloody bits to show for it. She said nothing but had tended to the minor
wounds with far rougher a hand than usual.

The filthy Buzzard den was what I expected to appear in my dreams. Standing there in the dark,
trying to sink into a wall and avoid being sniffed out as I held the heavy cans at my sides for what
may have been hours. A single mistimed breath may have given me away to the ones pacing about in
the darkness looking for the thief who stole their guzzoline. The dream that got me last night was
just... Weird.

Dune ambled out into the garage looking aware enough that I didn't feel compelled to stand in
between her and the exit. Her eyes weren't quite open yet but she was coming at me with a purpose,
a dented metal bowl in one hand and a gourd canteen in the other.

"Here. Breakfast of champions."

I never stopped missing the pale gruel and green sludge they fed us every morning back home.
Looking down into a bowl of live maggots was no more appealing today than it had been the first
time the nutter shoved a handful of them into my face.

"No potatoes? Or lizard?"

"The plants are still immature and the rest of the lizard jerky is for the trip... Good stuff in the canteen
will make up for it."

"Mmmf. The hel-" I wish she had told me there was something else in the aqua-cola before it was
running down my throat hole. "That tastes like... boiled ass."

"No, it does not. Big baby."

"What is it?"
“It's tea. Excuse Dune's maternal grandmother for being incredibly English.”

“What the hell is tea and what are you making it from?”

“Dune may have steeped it but she didn't make it. Had it for a while. From Wilson.”

“Tastes like the dirt hole he lives in.”

“Your mother...”

“What?”

“Nothing. Just finish the canteen. It's good for you.”

I didn't do as I was told. She wound up finishing the stuff for me as I ate. I asked why she didn't have a bowl. Her answer was that the maggot farm was running low. It was easy to see that she was going to treat this like a scavenging trip, she was insisting that we should keep a lookout for corpses or consider hunting birds while we traveled so that we would have something to turn into crawlies. I argued that we could just eat any bird we shot. She just grunted indignantly at my pointing that out.

“Did you gather your munitions? Guns cleaned and ammo at the ready?” She had been taking apart, scrubbing and oiling anything that could shoot for the last three days.

“What do you think we're going to come up against out there? If I didn't know better I'd think you were revving up for war.”

She shook her head. “Just uneasy. Got a bad feeling... Nothing out there but easy targets, honest. Getting caught in the middle of that shit-hole with her pants down 'round her ankles, though? Dune might be crazy but her brain wasn't put in backwards. She'd rather pack heat if we're goin' somewhere we know life ain't welcome.”

Well, it didn't matter how she felt about it, this was happening whether she liked it or not but I couldn't shame her for being prepared. That – and luck - was no doubt what had kept her alive this long. She spent her morning arranging weapons in places she felt they belonged in the Impala. A pistol in the glove box. A hand full of bullets sitting in the ashtray within easy reach. It was likely that her rifle would stay in her lap for the length of the drive. Procrastination set in. She checked everything twice, opened the trunk to see for herself that I'd already stowed the wet stuff and the fuel in there, then some back and forth bitching over when we should go. Now or after the sun fled behind the horizon. The midday sun was hot but that had never stopped her from letting the both of us roast while we scouted the territory before. She was just dragging her feet about this.

“Could we just go already? We got enough to feed and wet the mouths of a whole fuckin’ hunting crew for a week. We're ready. Just get in the car and start giving directions.”

“Dune ain't ready.”

“You agreed to go. I will tie your screwy arse to the hood if you don't.”

“You're in my kip Slit! Ain't leavin' it till Dune is good and ready... Something's itchin' in her skull. Gonna go have words with Mumsy about it first. Then... THEN.”

Just had to throw my head back and pull at the hairy mess sprouting from my scalp. I must have been a real flat tire in a past life if fate would condemn me to live out the rest of my half-life days with this stubborn wench.
I counted one thousand, eight hundred, and seventy-one jumps of my blood pump while she was gone to talk to the dead. I wished it wasn’t necessary but the green visions she complained about were getting out of hand. The dream walking was burden enough. Scarcely being able to trust her awake was too much struggle and work for me. I’m not some pup sitter and she was no pup. Maybe going where she came from will put an end to a level of crazy I wasn’t willing to go on living with. I sat in the driver seat and just waited, feeling my patience wear thin.

I lost count of my blood pump thrumming when the sound of Dune emerging from the tunnels caught my attention. What I saw in the rear view was not at all what I was expecting. It took a long look and a quick lean toward the cracked mirror to realize that the thing taking up all the space in her arms and wrapped up in the blanket we had to share was her mother. The fuck.

“What- wh- Is that?” I couldn’t make words in order as I leaned out of the driver side to look at her. She put a whole new shine on the word insane.

“We discussed it. Mumsy wants to go home too.”

“You CANNOT put that body in the car with us. It’s nothing but bad mojo.”

“Ouff, You never loved Mumsy.”

“Because she’s DEAD!”

The next two minutes were spent watching Dune failing to close the trunk with the corpse inside. The trunk was spacious but the issue I think was that the crusty old woman was so dried out that her limbs could not be re-positioned. She had all her constituent parts, just all the aqua-cola was gone. Nothing but dusty old people jerky.

“Stupid rigor mortis.” The scav muttered as she tried to rearrange everything in the trunk to fit.

“Dune, I think your mother is well passed the stiff stage. This is more like... Ugh, stop before you snap off a piece of it in there.”

“She's not an it... This ain't workin'. Gotta put her on the back seat.”

“No way.” Had to stay firm on that. It was serious bad luck to have a corpse inside the cab with you on a long trip. Bodies always get tethered down outside if you have to take them somewhere.

“Well, where the hell else can she sit??”

“If she must go... could strap her to the roof.”

“Absolutely not. I won't let you tie Dune's Mum to the top! That's wrong an' sick!”

“Still sore?” She hadn't spoken again since I started the engine and navigated through the narrow way out. It was starting to feel like it had when she was mute.

“About the beloved family member what sits on the roof? No. Not at all.” The sarcasm was fierce.

“Better that way. Really is asking for something to go wrong riding with the dead.” They could
become trapped in their useless bodies, become angry, unable to escape a road that won't lead to the next plain. Dune's mother surely wasn't Valhalla bound but wherever those not born of war and painted in white go, I wasn't about to call down the wrath of the dead by barring her from it.

“Ducky, why are you doin' this? Dune knows you. A Slit only does for Slit, not for others an' thrice over never for sentiment.”

I didn't know what answers she was looking for. I wasn't even completely sure why I did most of the things I did in her presence. I kept my eyes forward. I kept driving. I kept that compass in my lap so that I could keep an eye on the needle. I didn't find what she was looking for in me, it might exist but be buried somewhere that isn't easy to go rummaging through.

“Why save Dune?” Another question before the first answer could be told.

Never been alone before. Can't live on my own. Might go crazy. Might die with a gun in my mouth. Need that shine hand of yours to forget the shame of it all.

“I need you... alive you know, 'cause according to you, I suck at everything but fixing cars and cycles.” She had no idea, Nux would make me look useless with an engine and he'd do it just to show off and spite me in front of her if he were around. No use dwelling on that. “I have a better question. Why bring your Mum?”

Dune let her head fall back on the seat as if to look up through the roof at her dried out parent. She just breathed and for a moment, I thought I'd been ignored. It seemed that she was having just as difficult a time finding answers as I had been.

“Dune will miss'er. Like she misses home too. Got you to talk to now, though. Don't need to keep Mum tethered down to the land of the livin' anymore. Deserves to lay restin' next to Pa.”

That explained the shovel she stowed in the back as I was chaining the bag of bones down on the top like some ghostly lookout.

I said nothing. Couldn't bring myself to point out that this thing we had going on wasn't permanent. She had time and I didn't. I was half-life and while she might be broken in the head and scarred all to hell she still had good eyes, no lumps, and thousands of full-life days ahead. I could start burning from the inside out at night any time, could have lumps deep in my meat that I'm not feeling yet. I was meant to die young. She had time and I didn't. I was half-life and while she might be broken in the head and scarred all to hell she still had good eyes, no lumps, and thousands of full-life days ahead. I could start burning from the inside out at night any time, could have lumps deep in my meat that I'm not feeling yet. I was meant to die young. She was alone a long time before finding me but imagining what she'd do if she woke up one morning tied to a corpse... Truth be told, I'd probably wind up a pile of bones that sat in the corner just like her mother had been. Hearing her jibber jabber for eternity while I sit on the wrong side of the gates.

Hours passed in silence. A canteen was handed back and forth. Dune rested her boots on the dashboard and leaned against the passenger door in a lounge but the Enfield stayed in her hands as I had expected it to. Occasionally she took aim at an imaginary target beyond the non-existent windshield and clicked her tongue, pretending to pop off unseen hostiles. I found it easy to picture her painted in white, pockets heavy with tools and hidden blades. If she'd been born with a cock and found among the wretched she might have been a war brother Nux and I got on with well. That dream was stuck in my skull.

“Quit staring Duck. It's starting to freak Dune out.”

It was hard not to. If I closed my eyes for too long I could still see the charcoal coloring her eyelids black as night and the white clay sticking to her skin, just like in that dream I'd had. I couldn't decide if I liked the idea of war paint on the scav or if it was just disturbing.
“I'll stare however long I want to.”

“Till you crash into a rock an' kill the both of us.”

“Ye of little faith.”

“And ye of too much... in himself.”

“Fuckwit.”

“War mongrel.”

“Scaly witch.”

“Stink factory.”

“Bitch.”

“Dick.”

These are normal things, comfortable things, things I should have felt ashamed of but didn't. The insult contests usually end without a victor, it's just something to fill up silences and little else. Afternoon faded into dusk and as the burning eye of the sky rolled away to leave us in sands of blue, Dune began to hum a tune. Soon words sprang out from between her ugly teeth.

“So somewhere beyond the sea, somewhere waiting for me, my lover stands on golden sands watching the ships that go sailin'. Somewhere beyond the sea, she's there watching for me. If I could fly like birds on high, then straight to her arms I'd go sailin'”

I should be quite used to her singing. She belted out lyrics often enough but it always came as a surprise and without provocation. I don't think she always realized she was doing it until half way through the ditty. Usually, I'd interrupt the song to get her bad singing to stop but this time... It was just okay listening to the noise. I could almost imagine water on all sides and driving across it in a life after death. Joe promised many things in Valhalla, like endless water, enough to quench even the most aggressive addiction. The world was said to be like that before. Maybe in death, we'd get to go back to that time? I never asked myself these questions before.

I watched Dune as she sung about two people who must have lived far apart in the before times, separated by never ending water. It felt like that sometimes, that we were near but so far apart that we could never really reach far enough to touch. I thought of my driver. The thing between life and death was like that sea she sang about. Nux had to be dead and gone. I'd have seen him on the convoys by now through long lookers, if not the chase across the wastes which landed me here with the nutter then Larry and Barry would have killed him by now.

I'd known that asshole since before I knew how to throw a thunder stick true. Knowing he was gone and that I hadn't been there to witness it -historic, soft or traitorous- was like knowing nothing about a brother at all. I felt guilty for once, although he was the one who should feel all of the shame for what he had done. I couldn't get away from the feeling that he was watching me carefully. It felt like he was still doing the driving and keeping me on the road. Always took that for granted. Did he really hear it when I prayed to the mighty V8? Was he there when the scav wouldn't breathe? Did he make a plea on my behalf when I didn't want Dune to die? Was he in Valhalla after everything he had done or was he fated to stay behind watching the living? I wondered about it all long into the drive, until the sky turned to blackness dotted with flecks of shimmering steel flakes that others called stars.
Dune slept with her rifle in her lap for a few hours. I kept driving even after my stump felt like it was made of blisters from wearing the metal leg too long and the oddity of using it in such a way with the clutch. I had righteously uneven soreness in the ass from holding it off the clutch between shifting. When my lunatic companion woke and wiped the drool from her lower lip the sun was just beginning to rise.

“How long have you been driving, Ducky?”

“How long have you been driving, Ducky?”

“Through the night. Obviously.”

“Mmm. You’re tired. Can see it on your gorgeously ugly face. Let us pull over and find respite in the shade of a stone formation. After morning comes noon, with noon comes heat. We can sleep through it.”

“We're making good time.”

“All we have is time, Slit.”

It was not entirely true in my case but it was hard to argue. The more she talked the more I agreed that few winks were a good idea.

Like always, she saw the right spot to park before I did. A pair of rocks worn by the wind with an overhang that we could sit under and probably go unnoticed. Not that anyone else would come this far out into the big nothing and find us anyway but it was better safe than dead.

Dune was climbing into the back and grabbing the torn blanket I'd chucked back there before I could even pull into the shelter that the stone provided.

I got settled, undoing the straps of my false limb and digging my fingers into what was left of my leg to work the pain out of it.

When I lay on the bench seat up front, letting the night spent with my foot on the gas catch up to me, I felt fingers moving across my face so softly that it may have only been a bug crawling on me. When I open my good eye, Dune was leaning over the seat and reaching down to touch.

“Slit. Come back here with Dune.”

I did. I tied my hand to hers. The seat was narrow and she had to more or less lay on top of me. It was hot when the sun rose. We both sweat out bullets as we slept yet, I couldn't have been more comfortable. There was sin in such a thing but I cared not.

Nux was somewhere in the next plain, pointing and laughing at me. I'd laugh back if I could, 'cause he'd never be able to fathom how good her shine hand felt whispering across scars or holding onto mine tight. When she spoke I jolted under her, startled by the motions of her lips against my good ear.

“'Member what you said before when Dune asked why about all you've done?... Figured out that she needs you alive too, Ducky.”

Felt good to be needed.

Chapter End Notes
I wanna shout back at a writer here on AO3 that has been awesome to me, and has seriously helped me to keep writing so, so much about these two jerks.

secretagentstarchild is simply the best. Love this writer to pieces. I suck at links and stuff on this site so go there and read this person's stuff---> http://archiveofourown.org/users/secretagentstarchild/pseud/secretagentstarchild

And totally read Fire and Ashes. Do eeet.

I need to make you more arts soon dear. Soon.
There's No Going Back Now

Chapter Summary

Mama has a lot to say for a dead person.

The shade helped a little although, midday is still sweltering no matter what shadow you found to hide in. When I felt that I had slept enough I had to peel myself off of the body under me. My face itched from being smushed against his sweaty neck all through that day nap.

It had been quite nice at first light to curl up tight together in the back like a couple of cold children. It had been warm and comfortable. Slit had practically mewled like a tame cat under my fingers as he fell swiftly into sleep, a slow and steady growl akin to a purr. Now it was just... Sticky and thirsty.

As I moved to pull my wrist free of the cord which bound us together his reflexes kicked in. I was grabbed by the shoulders and crushed back down into that scorching, sweat moistened body of his.

“I'm awake! Done sleepin' so unhand me.”

His grip only tightened and his leg joined the fun by wrapping around my own, heel digging into my calf. “I'm not done yet, woman. You need adult supervision at this point. No deal.”

“Adult sup- You can take those words and shove them where the sun won't kiss!... Slit, the thing in your pants is trying to stab a scav in the belly button. Let go. Now.”

“You like it. Pervert.” He said and I could practically hear mama laughing away up on the roof.

“Argg! Let go, we're sweating like pigs back here.”

“Do pigs sweat?”

“Dune doesn't rightly know nor does she care. Canteen. AIR... She's getting out.”

Halfhearted struggling became full force flails until finally, he had no choice but to release his hold. Too bad, if he'd been cooperative he might have gotten a few more hours of sleep. Ducky was fully awake now and not at all amused as I made my exit and slammed the driver side door on my way out with the canteen.

It felt like I hadn't taken a piss in years. I was on my way to the other side of the boulder when I heard him snarl out.

“Don't wander!”

Neither of us were particularly pleasant just after waking.

“Dune's going for a leak. You can watch if you want. Kinky bastard you.”

It was not a real invitation, he knew that but even if it had been he'd still have flown that middle finger for me to see as he sat with the driver side door open putting his leg on.

As I took my squat and decanted myself I also emptied what was left in the canteen onto my tongue.
Not sanitary, I know, but thirst overrides the desire to live a clean and proper life. I kicked some sand over the dark spot I'd created and started making my way back to the car only to find that Ducky had the same idea to unload his bladder.

*At least your man is bright enough not to whizz into the wind kiddo.*

Could hear Mama whispering in my head. She's been doing that all through the trip, perhaps looking forward to home and seeing Pa again where I most certainly didn't.

“Ain't mine like that, Mum. Don't even insinuate that.”

*Well, with the way he's acting lately, maybe he wants to be.*

“Ma. Enough already. Startin' to embarrass your daughter here.”

“What the hell are you on about woman? You have any idea how weird it is to listen to you yap at a corpse while I'm trying to piss?” Slit was griping over his shoulder at me from the other side of the Impala.

“Aw, does poor Ducky have a shy pecker?”

“No. Everything's just a dick joke with you isn't it?”

“Well, with the way he's acting lately, maybe he wants to be.”

I looked East. It was a mistake. I swore that I saw Flick and Russel grinning by the rear bumper of the car, behind them rolling fields of sunflowers rising toward the light in the sky as if in reverence. No, I was never this crazy, I never saw shit like this outside of dreams before that fuckin-forkin’ lightning.

My heart felt like it was trying to explode. I could even feel it pulsing inside my skull as I ground my forehead into the back driver side window, trying to get my head on straight and my breath under control.

“Dune? Dune...”

Ducky's hand landed soft on my shoulder but gripped it tight. My eyes just stung and my nose filled up with snot at the gesture.

“Green shit... Everywhere green shit and faces I thought I'd never see again.”

He only grunted in response to that but his other hand joined the first to pull me away from the window I had to lean heavy on to hold myself up. He was steering me around the car to the passenger side. I winced as we passed through the mirage of the two boys just standing there watching us with smirks on their faces.

Slit pulled open the door and practically pushed me down onto the seat before taking the canteen from my hand. “Sit down and stay there psycho. Gonna refill this. Then we're gonna keep moving.”

*He seems real concerned 'bout you. Won't let you out of his line of sight, wants to protect you, even from yourself and even when he's asleep.*

“It's smothering, Ma. Not endearing.”

“What?” Slit was calling from the around back where he dug into the trunk. He must have heard me
rebutting against Mum's opinion on things.

“Nothing.”

*You seem to like it too deary, being watched closely and held tight.*

It was getting bothersome now, lighting a fire in my guts. I pounded the roof with my fist a few times to quiet her. Slit had been sliding into the driver side when I lashed out against her words in my head. He gawked at me as if I had ants crawling out of my ears.

“She won't shut her trap. That's all.”

He glanced up at the roof, back to me and then turned his head slowly to focus on the way ahead as he cleared his throat and turned the key in the ignition. “Okay...”

Ma was talking straight out of her ass. Ducky and I were never like that. We'd become confidants, we co-existed, we worked together, we fought out our problems and then clung to one another if we needed to but there was no... There wasn't more to it. We simply were what we were and we didn't try to find deeper meaning in existing at the same time in the same places. Of course, I cared about the failed War Boy. Wouldn't have saved him if I had no empathy for his plight, wouldn't have delighted in his ornery presence if we didn't get on well, and... What if he was getting too close? What if he thought- No. Couldn't be like that. A War Boy would know even less than I did about such partnerships, right? It felt shameful just to imagine it... Goddesses, it would be like taking advantage of a child's naivety. His kind know so little.

The point of saving him from the perdition had been to show him how to live a real life. Part of living was the stuff Mum spoke of. Never experienced that side of life myself so it was one thing I could not teach.

I was the one who beckoned him into the back seat this morning, though. I must admit to myself that I was only exacerbating any confusion he might have had. I was growing accustomed to it all, the sleeping all tangled up. I was even beginning to like it.

The journey continued. Thoughts swarmed my diseased brain and created a small but ferocious storm. Ma had more yet to say, her commentary struck like bolts of merciless lightning.

*It's normal, you know, after so long together. You told him you needed him alive too. Why do you think that is?*

Because I'm accustomed to his company. Because I obviously can't be trusted not to kill myself in my sleep now. I adore the forker, just not like that. It's practical to need him around.

*Natural you mean. This ain't something that needs to be taught, love. Admit the truth, 'cause it's there. He needs to know it.*

What truth? Fuckin' hell.

*Look back. Think about who you are now and about who you were when it was just us in that cave. Think about it kiddo. Just try.*

Tortuously pleasant visions of home aside, things had indeed changed since that lucky day scouring the wrecks. I no longer sat still, absorbing the silence of my singular existence and drinking in the feeling of my identity cracking in half. I spoke to myself less, instead speaking to the other living, breathing thing sharing the space with me. I felt the fog in my head dissipate just a little whenever he spoke back. Now, he was the only thing that had the power to chase off the green things which
haunted even when I was awake.

Slit was the greatest treasure I had ever pulled out of the sands. The best and shiniest haul of my scavenger life.

“Slit,”

“Huh?”

“...you make me less crazy. ”

He didn't reply with his mouth, not verbally anyway. He looked over, chewed on his tongue a little and slid the end of it over the corner of his lips as he scrutinized me.

Mum was silent at long last. I looked up toward the roof. “There, Dune said it. Happy now Ma?”

“Hah! Wow. Really? Having whole conversations with your dead mother in your rusted out head right next to me? I wouldn't call that less crazy, bag of nuts.”

“Oh, kiss my arse Slit.”

“Hell no.”

Back to normal, it seems. There was, however, this very badly hidden hint of pleasure in his expression. A smug little smirk twisting the scar through his face.

“Of course, I make you less crazy. Because I’m that fuckin’ chrome.”

“Your ego never ceases to amaze and... just slightly disgust Dune.”

His grin only showed more teeth at that.

Directions were simple at this point. Keep east. Keep east. Keep east. He was getting flustered with the simplicity of it but he also seemed to be thinking, the wrinkles in his forehead deepened as his brows pinched together.

“There's gonna be a shit ton of mud. Isn't there?”

I hadn't told him all that much about the place. I probably should have, seeing as the mud could easily become a real problem for Shurley's tires.

“Yeah, There are paths up off the worst of the muck but they're hard to find in the fog.”

“Hmmph. Think I've been there before... Went through a mud hole like that going after the bag of traitorous nails when she stole the Immorta's Shiny Things.”

“...Three war parties chased a war rig carrying shiny stuff all the way the hell out there? I find it hard to believe that a man like Joe didn't have something better to do than chase just one tanker of stolen goods.”

“Not stuff. Breeders. Shiny breeders.”

“Okay, suppose that makes more sense... Did that rogue Imperator take them against their will?”

“I never paid much attention to the specifics. All I had to know was that the bitch took his women and we were gonna get 'em back. Nux and I almost did it. That old geezer Ace was in the
way otherwise, she would have had a face full of lead.”

“...What was that Imperator's name again?”

“Ain't calling that filth by her name.”

This conversation came to a fast close. It was one of those topics that got Slit really skull-hot. He had a great deal of hate in him for the Imperator who wrought the end of the false king's reign. I let my curiosity go as I looked to the dead world around us, watchful for the hungry and desperate who'd think us easy prey. We were still alone as can be. The evening was already turning the sky to a blaze of fire and amber behind us in the west. Ahead of us, the eastern horizon faded into darkness.

“Probably about time we chewed up some scaly jerky. Yes? No? I can hear your guts churning empty Ducky.”

He just clacked his teeth at me as I fetched the sack I kept the jerky in from the floor between the seats. He expected a piece to find its way to his mouth without taking his hands off the wheel.

“Lazy.” He got poked in the ear with a stiff strip twice before he jerked away and snatched it out of my hand to feed himself.

Two bites into my share and I lost my appetite. Every minute that passed brought me closer to home, closer to saying goodbye to Mama, closer to revisiting all of the memories I had made a hobby of trying to forget. I was getting a headache.

“Aren't you gonna eat?”

He seemed to have noticed my sudden lack of care for bits of salty sand critter. “Ehh.. mm. No.”

I handed the rest of my share over to him. He took it and I heard him chew but his hand came back and closed tight around the collar of mama's vest to pull me across the seat and into the strength of his curled arm.

He was quiet but for a snort and a grind of his teeth here and there. He wasn't pawing at my left hand to ask for attention, this wasn't a demand for touch. It took a few miles put behind us for me to understand that I was the one getting attention for no particular reason. Actually, the reason was pretty clear, a glance in the rear view mirror told me plain that I looked like I'd been dragged through hell chained to a bumper. Frankly – Seriously, who is Frank – I looked like I had been crying for an hour. Did I black out and lose time somewhere along the ride and sob my face apart or has it been all internal whimpering? It's been nothing but internal screaming in protest to be truthful.

“Maybe this was a stupid idea. You wanna turn around? We can just go back home and forget the whole thing.”

I considered his offer seriously. I selfishly yearned for that option. I wanted to just forget it and go back, circle my territory, find something to throw into the maggot farm and call this venture a forgivable mistake. We've come too far, though. We'd reach the fringes of that once grand place by morning.

“No, we're close. We've gone too far to turn back now. And Dune needs to do right by Mumsy... Thank you, Slit.”

He didn't reply and I never expected him to. His own tension seemed to ease, though. It was fixing to be a cold night. We stayed close, shared body warmth. The way his arm was wrapped around my ribs made it impossible for him to reach the gear shift so I did that for him when he asked. I'd foul up
and jerk the knob into the wrong position every once in a while and earn myself a nasty pinch in the side or a bit of scorn. If I got it right, however, he always gave a low rumble of approval and that arm tightening around my middle. Mum must be thoroughly smug with herself right about now.

As hours passed and the distance between us and my old home grew shorter, the light slowly rose without a discernible horizon. Visibility was shit. We'd been devoured by the fog. We needed to find a proper path or else risk getting stuck in the muck.

“Alright, pedestrian. I need you to be my eyes. Can’t see shit. Get out on the front end and point the way. If we get stuck, we're staying stuck.”

I nodded, this was getting a little dicey. I could already hear the tires sliding through sand that was more slop than it was grit. I clambered out onto the hood through the not-there windshield and reached back with my fingers opening and closing. Ducky knew what I wanted. Mama's Enfield. He passed it through the window to me and I took a seat out on the warm hood to look out over the two or so car lengths of dirt that could be seen in front of the grill.

“Left. More. More. Easy... Go, not so fast! We're spinning rubber.”

Both of us were hard of hearing, it became much simpler to extend an arm in the direction I wanted him to go as I navigated us around the worst puddles of mud. I'd wanted to keep both hands on the rifle, ready for whatever might lurch out of the mist at us. I cannot express how much I hate not being able to see what lies ahead at a great distance. This place did not inspire the warm, gleeful feeling it once had. The sight of the place made me nervous, the smell of rotting life made me want to retch.

“Ahead! High ground. I think it's one of the tractor paths! That'll take us deeper in toward the old square. We'll be able to find the right path from there!” I had to shout for him to hear, despite the all-encompassing silence that had fallen on this patch of the world.

Deeper still, minutes felt like hours. A sound caught my attention and I swiveled, taking aim behind the roof and over Mum's shoulder. In my peripheral, I could see Ducky move for the pistol on his hip but he could not take his foot off the gas pedal lest we wanted to sink into the muck and silt.

Fwoomp, fwoomp, fwoomp, CAAAW!

A crow passed over. Then another and another. The battle fodder and I exchanged a look, a sigh too but his eyes shifted and his expression hardened. I looked over my shoulder, seeing what he saw. We were being watched. A monster made of tatters of mud-stained cloth and long legs like a spider stood still as a scarecrow. Head turning ever so slightly as we passed. The fog rolled in thicker, concealing Shurely heaved herself up into the tractor path, finally.

“Sky fishermen... They eat the crows.”

“Are they hostile?”

“Only if you poach their catch... Or answer their riddles wrong.”

We continued on. Slit grumbled with his unease and I kept the Enfield up and tight against my shoulder. Four forks in the path, four decisions, all wrong apparently. It was hard to find landmarks I recognized. When I did see something familiar, green overwhelmed my vision and Ducky had to holler to get me back to reality where he was.

“You're fuckin' lost!”
“No Dune's not! Just turned around. She knows where we are!”

He was damn near leaning out of the front window to snarl at me. This place, it made him just as nervous. That much was clear. I was beginning to regret not taking him up on that offer to turn back.

We argued, loudly. It was not long before we had company. There were two stilt walkers moving down the path toward us. Two became three, three became five. They stood on all sides of the car. Brazen and curious. Did they not see the barrel of the rifle in my hands? Were they armed? I can't imagine that they'd be able to shoot or attack in any meaningful way with their hands busy all the time.

“Lost?” The voice was low, male, rasping as if he'd spent his whole life sucking exhaust fumes out of a tailpipe.

I looked to Ducky, his eyes said it all. He was about to shoot, pistol aimed for the one leaning down and spreading its hand stilts wide so that it could have a look inside the impala.

“Slit.” I needed to stop him from reacting too quickly. We were outnumbered, being sized up. I held my hand up, trying to sign some gesture of calm to him before turning my eyes back to the one who'd asked.

“We're lookin' for an old house. It's on a hill-”

“Dune! No.” He didn't like this. Neither did I but if he shot I wasn't sure what they might do in retaliation. I was still sitting on the hood out in the open for seeds sake.

“Slit. It's alright... There's a tree near it, big ol' tree with branches that hang down. The house is made from a shipping container. You know it?”

The one that leaned down to look in at Slit straightened up. “Did he say your name was Dune?”

It was a woman's voice. She looked at me through thick, dirty goggles and layers upon layers of bandages to conceal her face. I nodded slowly.

“Yeah. S'my name.”

She made her way around the car, shouldering the others out of her way and nearly toppling one who seemed none too graceful with its spindly false legs.

She dropped her hand stilts and let them fall into the mud, acrobatically balancing on the remaining two for a moment before sliding down them with her hands and ankles. I kept the rifle trained on her head as she held her hands up in a sign of peace. Where was this going? I had no reason to trust this.

She pulled off her goggles and began unwrapping the cloth from her face to reveal auburn hair cropped short on her head and a smile with big Irish teeth... Minus one down in the bottom front.

“Ardith?”

“Yeah. It's me, Dune. It's Ardith.”
Trust

Chapter Summary

Slit comes to realize that he's not the only one who can capture Dune's attention.

He must also grapple with new concepts and reflect on past and present interpersonal relationships.

Chapter Notes

So, a year and a half of chaos later... a new chapter! crowd doesn't know what to do. Scatterd clapping.

In all seriousness things happened, not all bad not all good. Things were a mess for a while. I should have kept writing. I should have finished this so that I could start writing an original novel without thinking about how painfully unfinished I left this. Oh well, we're finishing this biotch.

Side note: this chapter is 7,000+ words and I skimmed over it. I'm not doing a fully blown proof read. I love you guys but you're getting it as is, I've been grinding at this chapter for four months in between real life problems.

Thanks again! hope you enjoy the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What the fuck is a tree?

I was somehow surprised that these two women appeared to know each other. I mean, I shouldn't really be that shocked since Dune is supposed to be from around here but when you know somebody like her... well, it's just hard to imagine Dune knowing anybody outside the few other destitute animals we occasionally saw hanging around Wilson's place.

Dune scrambled off the hood of the car and Ardith flung herself forward. Their embrace was fierce. I thought they might crush each other's bones in the tight hold.

The redhead pulled back, bandaged hands cupped around Dune's jaw. I couldn't see the scav's face but I could see that the woman clutching her tightly was wasting aqua cola from the eyes and smiling at the same time. It made no sense to me, she must be confused.

"You look... Different."

"Ey, been fifteen years. Ya look weird too but... Good?"

"Ha, not as weird as you look, Sis!" Ardith laughed and so did Dune.
This was the most bizarre reunion I had ever seen, but I was learning as I went that what I knew to be normal and correct might have been just the place I was raised up. Being a war boy was all I knew, being a war boy meant when you came back after getting lost on a walkabout you were scorned, scrubbed raw, shaven and then reconstituted into the fold after suffering your prayers until the soul is cleansed. You aren't grabbed and looked at and held like a lost pup newly found again.

Then something happened that I recognized. They pressed their skulls together, nose to nose, breathing each other's breath. I've done this, or at least had it done to me a few times. Whenever I got low and that one time when I came back after leaving to see what ever became of home. She'd smiled, took a hold of my head, and dragged me in for one of these. I'd been too tired to fight it.

I found myself leaning over the steering wheel to watch them, trying to glean some kinda meaning out it. Dune turned, a hand still curled around the woman's sleeve. She looked to me and I saw the cola clinging to the deathly bags under her eyes.

"This is Ardith, my initiate sister. And Ardith, this is Slit. He's a friend, a partner... In crime I mean." Dune supplied the introductions with caution in her voice.

I didn't leave the car. I was taken aback at being introduced like this. I've been called a lot of things, friend isn't one of them. Ardith jabbed at Dunes side, laughing again.

"Well look at this, replacing me with a man?! Tsk tsk, Dune." She seemed to say it jokingly, I didn't get the joke. It just made my face twist up into a scowl.

Dune rolled her eyes. "Slit's bettah than a man."

"...not as good as peaches, though. Right?"

At Ardith's words, Dune smiled fondly. It was another joke I didn't understand, something personal between them. I could tell, Dune was remembering. She was somewhere else up inside her skull.

She shook her head. "Nah, he's good as peaches. Maybe bettah than them too."

"Oh?" Ardith lifted her chin and stretched up to look over the top of Dune's head at me. She looked curious now, and I felt another scowl etch itself onto my face. I didn't care for the way I was being scrutinized. She lifted her brows at me and then turned back to the scavenger. "Let's get ya home... Hey, Dune? What is that on the roof?"

"It's mum."

"Your- What?!!"

"Gonna put her to rest, love." Dune supplied honestly. She even seemed a little put off by such a strong reaction on Ardith's part.

Seemed that Dune had been alone so long that she no longer realized the morbidity of a dried up corpse sitting in an upright position on the roof of a car. She probably had no idea how problematic most of her behavior was if we're being honest. The more you think about it the more you realize that Dune is about as close to that feral line as a human could get before giving in to the sand crazy and going rabid.
"Um... Alright love. Alright. We'll git'er home faster than a jack rabbit on a date. Promise. I'll show you both the way."

--

Those poles the crow woman walked on were slid into the car, most of their length hung out of the front window. I was irritable about it. They were covered in mud from where she dropped them into the slop to greet Dune. It's not like the upholstery in this rig was ever great but mud on top of huge black blood stains wasn't a good look for my wheels. The blood couldn't be helped, Dune had to whack the previous occupants to get the car and the goods inside years back, but this redheaded wench could have wiped the muck off her stilts before throwing them on my fucking seat where asses go.

The two women seated themselves on the nose of the Impala, Ardith giving directions and the both of them talking like old compatriots. It was spooky, they almost talked like... V8, they spoke like Nux and I did when we were young, before the mutual resentment of each other started with his chronic weakness.

They talked about history, such a funny thing because Dune had never once breathed a straight word about history since I'd met the loon. In all of our time putting up with each other I'd learned more about her past from Wilson, now I was delving deeper just by listening to Ardith speak as if they had scarcely spent more than a few hours apart. I learned that they weren't actually sisters, no big surprise there since they looked nothing alike. I'm not sure what the hell it actually meant but they spoke about something called an Initiate Mother, theirs had been named Theta. I think it meant somebody that teaches you shit when you're young, kinda like the pup wranglers back home at the Citadel.

They spoke of something called an orchard, running through more of whatever trees were, eating the fruit, living in the sun, swimming. Sounded like a crock of shit, impossible. Nobody's done any swimmin' since the seas rose up and then disappeared, except the flipper boys that maintained the collection pools and Joe's pipeworks. I wasn't sure if this place could ever have been what they talked like. Just seemed like a ridiculous fantasy. Still, I wanted to hear more about it, I wanted to believe this Green Place used to exist.

"I thought you went North with the rest of the Croc Clan. Why stay, Ardith?"

"Well, my mum got sick. Like your pop got sick after the water went to hell..."

"Cholera..."

"Yeah, but also the radiation after what those bastard's dumped out in the reservoirs... It was all part of the plan. If they couldn't have the green, no one could."

"So it's true. They really dumped barrels of it out there?"

"Yeah. S'why everybody livin' near it started losing their hair. Why the saw faces and their lady fisherman kin are gone... I um... I stayed to see my mum through. By the time she was gone, everyone had already moved on without me."

"How did you survive? Without the water.. Eh.. How?"

"The Sky fishermen took me in. At first, I gathered firewood, washed their clothes. Then I started casting out lines with the others for bigger share of the catch. They know ways to collect safe water."
What about you? Did you and the others find new green? Where are they? Carol, Nita, Fanny? The elders? What about your brothers?"

My eyes drifted back to the scavenger, this was all new to me too. I had no idea that Dune and her parent had been with a group when they left here. Before her mentioning it the day before I didn't know she had brothers either. I'd been curious about that before but given that she immediately began to hallucinate after mentioning them, I figured it was better not to ask. Right now, she looked she'd just stepped on a rusty nail.

"Well... I... There was a storm. Mum and I got separated from the others. Got picked up by slavers and... and... then-"

I could see it, the memory of whatever happened chewing on her head from the inside. I tasted the words, they caught and snagged on all the rough edges inside me, making them come slow and jumbled up all stupid like at the back of my throat. Ardith beat me to it, hand grasping Dune's before she could lift her fingers to her ugly teeth to chew holes in the knuckles. That distance in her eyes faded and she was back here in the land of reality.

"Heyl, maybe we'll talk about this later. Yeah? Let's just get you home." Ardith soothed the coming hallucination away as easily as swatting off flies. How was it that easy?

I felt useless. I hated that, and an ugly feeling bit at me. I decided that I wasn't any friend of this Ardith. Sure, she hadn't done jack shit to me but- Nevermind.

Another ten minutes of the drive was carried out in silence. Ardith continued directing the way, I kept on grinding my teeth and grunting in acknowledgment as she slid an arm around my scavenger. Dune seemed comforted. I felt like I was out of a job, shown up, proven inept. Just rust.

I wasn't expecting much from the place Dune was supposedly from. I knew the whole area was nothing but toxic swamp land now, but what I saw when Ardith directed Shirley up a path toward the hills was somewhat fitting. There were crude huts atop many of the low mounds of land. Some were wood, others stone and mud. Made sense that they'd used catwalks and rope bridges to get around. The muck down in the gullies was probably thick and impassable long before the joint went to Hella. All things that weren't made of something substantial were falling to pieces. Looked like wood rot had destroyed most of the structures including some of the bridges linking the taller hills together. Rotting just like her head.

The narrow road was making the hair on the back of my neck stand up. It wound around the hills. Both of the women were leaning out over the grill to check that I wasn't veering too close to the edge. That made me nervous. _Don't fucking fall you lunatic._ It made me wanna reach over the dash to grab Dune's ankle and drag her back into the cab.

Now there was a new obstacle. Never mind driving along narrow ledges worn in the hills from lifetimes of foot traffic, there was a bridge built from old scaffolding, rope addled with dry rot, and wooden planks. Sure, it was wide enough for a rig and clearly reinforced for this purpose but even a slight breeze made the entire structure sway.

That made the dangly bits climb North in a hurry. I came to a stop, unwilling to risk it.

"There is no force in hell or Valhalla that can get me to drive this car across that wretched-shit." I declared. No fucking way.
"Woman up!" Ardith called out. "We drive across this with the truck all the time."

That made my teeth clench painfully. Woman up. Well, now I had to do it, it was a matter of pride.

Even Dune sort of cringed as she peered over the grill toward the muck far below. "Ah, you sure about that, mate?"

"Yeah, should be just fine." Ardith replied without a trace of concern.

I immediately looked back to Dune. "You. Back in. Now." I was not about to have the nutter be out there if the bridge collapsed under the car.

After motioning her toward me a few times with the flap of a hand she handed her rifle through the opening first. She then started back in through the nonexistent windshield and once seated I reached across her lap and pulled the seatbelt across her legs.

"Aw, you care about me, Ducky. Heh heh." Dune teased.

"Shut it."

I didn't bother with mine. Against my code. Against the code of any good follower of the V8. Don't ask why I wasn't crossing this thing until her belt clicked into place. Just made my guts twist to picture the imp tumbling around in the cab or flying out the front window if this thing came crashing down. I buried that feeling and took a moment for the acid churning in my gut to subside before carefully lifting off the break and letting Shirley crawl forward. The wood planks and crackling materials under the bald tires restarted that sour feeling in my middle, felt wrong as I gave the engine a little gas to keep her from idling at the middle of the bridge.

A scarred up hand grasping my wrist made me realize that somewhere along the way across, I'd grabbed ahold of Dune's right knee with white knuckles. The shine hand gave them a pat...

"...I was fine." I said.

"Yeah, you were shiny, Duck."

That felt weird. I wasn't afraid. I won't sink low enough to be afraid of anything so damn trivial. I used to throw thunder and fire and spit guzz. I'm not afraid of anything... I'm not.

"Just up ahead. You remember the rest of the way, don'cha Dune?" Ardith called, slapping the hot hood as she hopped down and began hauling her stilts out of the car.

Dune leaned forward to squint into the fog, eyes glazing over. "Yeah... Dune remembers alright."

"Good shit. I'll be headed back to the homestead to check on the young'uns. Then I'll come meet you both up at your old place?"

"Right-o. Meet you there." Dune called back after shaking her head to clear out what could be nothing else but visions of that wretched color green.

As the redhead disappeared into the oppressive mist, I looked to the Scav for further instruction but also just to gauge what was going on in her by her eyes. She looked like she was seeing something that made her recoil in disgust.
"You good?"

"Yeah. Good as Dune'll evah get. Down that path, then left. There's a place to park. Then we gotta hoof it the rest of the way. No worries, mud ain't too bad up in the hills like this."

I grunted in affirmative, glancing up and wondering what that meant as far as carrying the dried up old woman on the roof. I'd rather not carry the corpse but I also had my reservations about letting the loon walk around with her dead mother. If we managed to get separated and she was just walking around in the fog with the remains, V8 knows what could happen? This was the reason I wound up carrying the dead thing and Dune carried the shovel with her rifle slung over her shoulder by the strap.

Along we trudged, the ground was still damp and I could feel the dirt sticking in the treads of my boot and all over the foot of the metal leg.

The landscape was just freaky. Big things with dozens of arms reaching toward the obscured sky. The sound of crows squawking and moaning in the distance. The scavenging birds almost sounded like the pewling spawn begging for aqua cola at the foot of the Citadel.

The body was all shriveled up but it still had a really strong funk when it was so close to your face. It made my nose crinkle over the bridge and bile rise up my neck hole. I tried to find a distraction.

"What's that thing you said the place was next to?" I asked, not really that curious but looking for anything to talk about so I wouldn't chunder on her mother.

"...a tree?" She answered with a question of her own. She was several paces ahead of me.

"Yeah. What's that."

"It's that." She said, pointing a finger ahead of us.

There it was, a shipping container on a hill and another one of these towering things that probably had green shit on it at one point. She looked back to me, expression strained but still answering my question none the less.

"That thing standing next to the house. It's a tree... That's my house."

"Oh." It was all I had in me to say as I looked at what she called a house. It had a few windows cut through the corrugated steel, a few additions cobbled together from what I suppose might have once been steel supply sheds. Her parents had built the place to last.

On we went. Dune's steps slowed to a meander toward the general direction of her former home, eyes facing the dirt under her feet. I had to nudge her with an elbow to keep her moving. I felt her fingers prod at my side, then close around the worn leather of my vest. She simply hung on there as we walked. She was afraid, I realized. I'd never seen her afraid before, and of what I couldn't tell.

Nux used to do this way back when we were pups and he was only half as tall as I was at the time. He used to hold onto my belt and cower from one particular imperator. The worst of the scarring on the right of my face tingled at the memory of finding out why all of the youngest pups hid their faces from that man.
I had no idea what to do for Dune. Just as I'd had no idea what to do for Nux. I kept walking and she followed.

The steep hill made it slow going with the peg leg but soon enough we stood at the top, just next to the tree thing. Dune still clung to my vest for a moment, looking around with the middle bend of her knuckle between her ugly teeth as she took in the sight.

"Put ma down, Duck."

I did this, still she didn't let go of my vest. We both stood there, looking down at the body for a long while. The empty sockets seemed to peer up at us.

"You um... Know where you want the hole?"

I didn't really have much experience with this shit. I knew enough to understand that wretched bury their dead (when they don't resort to cannibalism) and since Dune brought a shovel then that must mean her kind did the same thing. Back home, you leave the dead where they lay if they died on the road. Ace performs the ritual and passes the belongings of the dead around to those closest to him. And that is it. That old fucker Notch would cut another mark in his skin for another man witnessed but beyond that there was no time to mourn dead. The general idea was that you'd join them soon enough. War boys that burn out in their beds get shredded up and turned into food for all the green shit.

Dune sighed, letting go of me to take a few steps toward the tree. She pointed toward a stake in the ground with a ratted old hat nailed to the top to keep it in place.

"There. Next to Pa." She said quietly.

I hoped this wasn't a permanent new symptom. It made me nervous, the idea of her staying quiet and half attached to my hip. I much preferred her independence.

I dug where she seemed to want the body put into the dirt. A few hours passed, the hole deepened. Ardith met us up there around the time the hole got to be about thigh deep. She brought two more shovels and jug of aqua that I might have been a little too eager to accept.

Three mouthfuls down the gullet before I thought to ask the all important question.

"This shit gonna give me lumps?"

Ardith just shrugged. "No more than eating the birds around here will."

That's about as comforting as the sound of a car backfire. "...Chrome. Real fuckin' chrome."

Dune had hopped down into the hole and taken a swig before I could pour it out. Fuck it. What doesn't have uranium in it anymore? There wasn't even any guarantee that the waters flowing from the roof of the cave wasn't the kind that slowly made you funny in the head and bumpy.

"I knew Kate. Her mum. I'll help you dig for a bit until I gotta head back. You're welcome to eat with us tonight if you two are hungry." Ardith offered.

Dune nodded, reaching with both hands to trade the water for the shovel I was using as a post in the dirt to lean on.
The redhead hopped into the hole to dig along side Dune. I took a short wander while I was on
break, having a look around. The tree thing had letters carved in it. I had to squint and try to work
my mouth around the sounds each letter made to understand that they were names.

Katie + Carter
Russel
Flick
Dune
And a dozen others.

"It's the family tree, Slit! Everyone Ma and Pa knew by blood and some they knew thickah than that
red stuff too."

Ah. I shrugged and sat. The entire concept of knowing who you came from was lost on me. Pups
come from milkmothers and wretcheds and the process of it was only something I was vaguely
familiar with. A man and a breeder fuck long and hard until a brat is made, the breeder gets all thick
in the middle for a while... After that I wasn't really sure how you got the pup out of the breeder.

I looked at Dune. She wasn't a breeder, something else for sure. Again, wasn't hard to picture her
painted in white clay with eye sockets colored black.

The two were talking again. Another chance to hear more about Dune without asking. I couldn't
resist eavesdropping but the little shrew was surprisingly great at avoiding herself in conversation.
She wanted to hear Ardith talk about herself, I did not.

"So you said about checkin' on young'uns. You got sprogs Arddie??"

"Yeah!" The woman replied with exuberance. "Three of um! Same with husbands too."

"Holy seeds! You're married??" Dune seemed surprised. "Um... Sorry bout your first two
husbands."

"Eh, what? Sorry for what?"

"Er.. Your first two men. They died, right? You said you got three of um."

Ardith's brows furrowed. "No no no! I have THREE. Featherknife, Bones, and Phil. Three. All.
One big happy family. They were there when we found you two. Phill's older boy too. But he's not
my brat, not technically. Love that kid to beans, though."

Dune's brows just about lifted off her head completely. For no particular reason I found it both
hilarious and horrific, that a woman had three blokes running around behind her.

"Holy wheels, she's got a boy harem. Must really be in hell then, everythin's feckin' bass ackwards."
It sort of fell out of my mouth, not that I would have thought much about what I was going to say
before I said it anyway.
Ardith cocked her head and looked to Dune with her face twisted up like she just got a whiff of shit. The scavenger shrugged before speaking. “Eh, Slit's from the Citadel. Says all kinds'a weird things. Don't mind him, he don't know any bettah.”

Her expression shifted and eyes were focused my way. Ardith looked more interested than she should be. “You used to be a warboy?”

I caught Dune cringing at Ardith's tactless, tactless question. Good, at least loony toons finally gets it, time to let the new maniac in on proper etiquette when speaking to the last devout follower of the V8.

“Go fuck yourself, eat a dick, die.” And I meant every word.

“Fucking excuse me?”

Oh yes, the battery acid in the redhead's tone was like hearing the Valkyries yodeling their way down from the gates to pick me up and give me a lift home. Yeah, I was taking way too much joy in pissing her off. Too bad Dune seemed so fucking eager to smooth over the conversation.

“Ooomph! Don't take that too seriously. He doesn't like the words 'used to be' very much. Or talked at like he's still is a warboy. He hates both. The whole thing remains very hush hush super sensitive.”

“...I'm not sensitive.”

“Oh ho! I strongly disagree. You're as sensitive as a clit, Slit.”

“What's a clit? I don't like how it rhymes with my name.”

“It's this cute little pink thing that sometimes looks like a tiny little cock... Feels good when you mess with it.”

“You know what?! I don't need to know about your sex life.” Ardith announced through a grunt as she pulled herself out of the hole. Her words left both Dune and I looking at each other like you'd look at a dead lizard stuck in the treads of your boot.

I expected the woman to simply leave but she turned and looked back at me. “Hey, no worries. Phil's got a brand on the back of his neck too. I get it and I won't ask. Please join us all for dinner, I wouldn't mind getting to know whatever madman thinks it's a good idea to hang around my initiate sister.”

That demand was just as acrid, maybe even intended as some kinda weird threat. Yeah, like she could stop Dune from being up my ass 24/7.

There was a long moment of eye contact, and I wasn't stupid enough to be the first to look away. The high pitch screeching of some pup echoing through the hills drew her attention away and with a sigh she left, but not before a final glare back in my direction.

My silent gloating over my apparent victory in her buzzing off was cut short when Dune's fingers slithered up my pant leg and yanked out some leg hair.

“Ow! What the hell?!”

“You din't have to be such a dick munch, Slit. Dune's known Ardith longer than you've been alive!”

“I'm older than you!”
“Sure, If you call that tripe before meeting Dune a life.”

“And you call me an egomaniac or whatever.”

“Slit,” She grit out between her ugly teeth as she stuck the blade of her shovel into the dirt by her feet like a spear head. Dune leaned on the edge of the hole on her elbows, hands scratching over her face in what could only be seen as frustration. The action smeared her face in dirt. It looked like an exotic configuration of warpaint. “Look. Dune just... Can't play the bickering game right now. She just wants this part to be over with. Just help her put mumsy to rest.”

Dune was tired. She sounded like she was completely fucking exhausted. To this day I still don't get why burying a dead parent is such a big deal, pretty sure they're supposed to cark it first anyway. I didn't ask. I did, however, get back into the hole to resume digging. We both worked in silence for another hour or so. I really did try to understand it, I guess the closest I could come to knowing what that felt like was watching older war boys start dropping like flies around the time got old enough to answer the call of the war drums. It wasn't the same, that was for damn sure. We didn't dig graves, we didn't make a big deal out of it, names were never carved into stones. I think most of us thought about our own mortality more than anything else, some even looked forward to the end and the promise of the eternal highway. Dune always seemed to make me question the whole thing, not that it might not be real but the parts that seem missing from the picture. I don't know what normal is anymore. I think having a mother might be normal, war boys might be the odd ones out in that.

“Hey, got a question.”

Dune looked up for a second as she flung another shovelful of dirt up over the growing mound at the edge of the hole. “Hm? Shoot.”

“What was she like, yir mum?”

That made her stop working look at me again, but her eyes were back on the dirt before long. She was just stirring it around with the blade of her shovel.

“She uh- She taught Dune to shoot n' take care of a weapon. It was um- self defense. We learned so we could protect our crops n' our own. She could peel the skin off an apple all in one like strip with her pocketknife. She sang all the time, loved music. She was an initiate mother. She taught younger people the things they'd need to know to survive. She new how to live in the bush n' said her pa taught her when she was little. She'dve kicked Dune's pants up around her ears for taking you in if she could, bein' from the Citadel n' all. I think she's warmed up to ya though... I've missed her.”

It was like she was admitting that her mother had been gone all along, like she really had just been talking to a inanimate corpse for years. I don't know why that made my chest hurt, it just did.

“Ah,” She exclaimed suddenly in a groan as she sloppily wiped the dribbles of aqua cola from under here eyes with her sleeve. “Dune thinks Ardith mightah misunderstood elements of the clit talk fir romantic subtext.”

Couldn't help but snort at that, it was pretty obvious that the topic had been changed to avoid getting misty about her parent. Honestly I was pretty grateful for it, watching Dune get all wet faced was unnatural and it made my insides twist up weird. Fuck it, two could play at that game, both conversations were about as comfortable as sitting in a driver seat and finding a loose spring jabbing you right in the sack. There was also something about the way she said that, like she wanted to correct the misunderstanding, somehow that felt kinda like an insult. I wanted out of this topic too.

“You think she got that from the clit thing? You sound crazy even when you sound smart... This
hole deep enough?"

“I mean, we don’t really need the whole six foot deep thing. Not like there're any animals left to
dig'er up and chew on'er.”

“What about the pole walker people? Watched a wretched cog fodder eat a human scalp once, hair
and all. It was gross.” Actually I dared him to do it and told him I'd give him my cola rations for two
days if he ate it. Nux chundered all over himself when the greasy old coot was half way through
horking it down.

“They don't really seem like the cannibal type, do they? Plus she's way too chewy to be edible now.”

“You'd know.” Hah, couldn't resist.

“Yeah, lets not mention that at dinner... I think Ardith thinks we're a thing.”

“So?” I replied. It was getting weird again and I really didn't want to talk about it.

“So...” She glared at the corpse. “We're not. We're separate things. Separate plural things that have
only ever seen each other naked for practical or medical reasons!”

“You're talking to your mother again, aren't you?”

“No! Yes. Shut up, Slit.”

I shook my head. Sometimes I swear that Dune heard voices in her head, mainly her mother. She
certainly talked to the body as if she there was another half of the conversation that I just wasn't
hearing. Was that why she kept fixating on the thing about being a thing? Were not a thing. Yeah, it
was pretty disgusting to imagine the thing thing with dune, but also not that gross? I really just didn't
want to imagine Dune as a wife, that fucked up picture was already seared into my skull meat from
Wilson's story about how she was supposed to get sold as a wife to Scabrous Scrotus. Her with
white garb on was like picturing Corpus Colossus wearing the people eaters suit. The shit just does
not fit together. Beyond white garb and vaults I just didn't fucking know what else a wife could be.
Well, they could be traitorous wenches who run away with a one armed bitch. Things would change
if we talked about this, I didn't want things to change anymore. I've had enough change for all of my
half-life.

I let it go. This conversation was over. We both climbed up out of the grave and each of us took a
look down into it. Neither of us were really sure how to handle the ritual from there, we awkwardly
realized that we couldn't just chuck the old breeder down the hole like a lot of rubbish. Even I knew
enough not to disrespect a corpse of any faction. The dead can and do meddle in the lives of the
living. One secret glance at the scar on Dune's head could remind me of what the dead could do. If
Nux could send her back, then her mother could kill my ass for just kicking her into the hole.

Dune got back down into the grave and I lowered the body over the edge to her with a grip on the
smelly blanket wrapped around it like a sling. It seemed like the time to finish this up and start
pushing dirt back into the hole came too soon, it was just another act carried out in silence. We could
hear what I assumed were Ardith's pups squealing and playing somewhere beyond the wall of still
fog.

The hole filled up and we both just milled around, packing down the sour dirt. More surreal silence.
Over the last seven hundred and sixty-five days, silence had suddenly become unbearable.

“Are we supposed to say something? or-”
“No. I think it’s all been said. Just… Uh… Dune needs a minute.”

No, I didn't want to leave her alone too long, but this wasn't something I had any experience with and I wasn't about to get any more involved with it than I had to. Could be bad mojo to hang around. I circled the steel structure she must have been raised up in once, checking to make sure she was still by the graves when I came back around on the other side. She hadn't gone anywhere, she was still standing by that tree, but looking up into the dead branches now. She wasn't chipper but she didn't look all that great either. At least she didn't look like she was having any of those damn green visions. She'd never been harder to read, then again there hadn't been much to read about Dune's normal level of unrelenting enthusiasm for pretty much everything shitty about living in scav country. She just was what she was but what I was looking at in that moment was not her.

She didn't look fragile like before when she was crying about this rusthole and she didn't look absent from herself. She looked just how I felt when I saw Nux on the hood of that rig. She looked like she felt alone. I was finding out that there were just too many things I didn't know how to do, maybe if I had known how to do these things... Nux wouldn't have left me behind. Dune was busy over there mourning kin and Nux spent years mourning himself and what do I do? I stand somewhere else and pretend I don't know what's going on.

Well, there was a ladder on this side of the shipping container. The fog was clearing a little too, so I could climb up there and try to see a little further out. Maybe then I could see what Dune missed so much about this damn place, used to be green right? Maybe if you look sideways and squint you can imagine it different. Ah, didn't work. Wound up picturing the Citadel instead. The Citadel did have green shit. I heard Dune making her way up the ladder around the time I stopped trying to imagine this joint looking like anything but a mud dump. She sat down next to me and swung her legs over the edge, heels thumping against the corrugated steel.

“I'm an orphan.” She said, chewing on her lower a lip a moment after speaking. I'd never heard that word before.

“What's that mean?”

“Means both my parents are dead.”

“Ah,” I couldn't come up with something to say to that.

Another moment of silence and another chew mark in my tongue from trying to think of what to say.

“Do you remember anything about your mum, Slit?”

I could only answer her honestly. “Nope. I just remember what happened. Not her.”

“What happened?”

“She gave me to the lift guardians, and I forgot her.”

Dune wrung her hands. There was this nagging urge to grab one of them and stop her from turning the shine one all red. I refrained.

“It really was beautiful here once. In the morning, there was dew on all the green and it looked like little beads of glass. When harvest came every year everyone danced and drank until they couldn't walk anymore... I wanted to be an initiate mother, like my mumsy.”

I shrugged because it wasn't like she totally failed at that. If I understood everything Dune and Ardith had said, then these Initiate mother people are supposed to teach other people shit. “Taught me how
to farm maggots... and stuff.”

There was more than that, but either I couldn't think of it or it was too weird to talk about.

“Slit,” I expected some kind of rebuttal but when I turned, the loon was grabbing my skull and yanking me in like she'd done a handful of times before and like I'd seen Ardith do to her once. Her breath still stunk as bad as the first time she did it to me, but mine couldn't be any better. I felt like a real flat tire for hating Ard so much. When she pulled away the throbbing in my nose from when she broke it more than a week ago was nasty, but in the moment it didn't matter. I didn't care what still hurt. She hadn't quite let go yet, I was pulled in again, this time crushed around the shoulders in her grip. Only a few days ago I would have thrown her off the shipping container for this. Maybe it was relief, I guess I wasn't being replaced.

“Thank you, Duck. For bringing me out here.”

“Yeah, no worries... Hey, what's with that? The face, head, nose thing?” I asked and she sighed.

“It's Hongi. Means you're one of the people, part of the clan. I trust you.”

I felt my face stretch into a half grin, remembering the first time she did that by the car when she told me I could have it. “Heh... First time you did it, I thought you were gonna beat the shit outta me.”

Dune let go, leaning back and slapping her scarred up right hand across my shoulder. She laughed as if I just told the best joke she'd ever heard. "Naaaah, Slit! C'mon, yir my Ducky!"

I used to hate the sound of her cackling, now it wasn't right if she wasn't laughing at something. It made talking easy. “Why, do you call me that?”

She leaned closer with her hideous grin and a smug look. "What is this, twenty questions? Pa used to call me that 'Cause it means... Hmm... Shiny treasure."

"Oh, now you're just trying to flatter me."

She mocked a look of confusion. "Nah, mate. If Dune wanted to make ya flatter she'd just push over a boulder on you!"

This time I laughed. It felt totally unnatural, but not bad. The sound of our voices died and I tried one last time to picture grasses covered in morning dew. It sounded like a story for pups, but I could almost see it this time, almost.

I could hear music. It sounded like it was coming from off to our right where that redhead had vanished off to. It was just like that box with a horn that Wilson played black disks on. We had dug all afternoon and filled the hole in until the evening, the sun was starting to set and darkness was fast overwhelming the fog. I could see a new point of light from maybe the next hill over, fire light creating halos of yellow and orange in the mist. I guessed that Ardith and her clan were celebrating something or other, maybe Dune coming back, who knows with wretched crow eating types.

"They're just goin' off over there aren't they?"

“Yeah.”

“Wanna go over there?”
“Nah, not ready.”

“Okay,”

Dune leaned into me, using my shoulder as a head rest as we both looked out over a dead world shrouded by a thick gray wall of air. This wasn't something I thought I'd be doing with the scavenger two years ago, but this time it was definitely me that put an arm around the little maniac, not just my flesh suit acting of its own accord.

“So... You trust me?”

“Yeah, crazy huh?”

Chapter End Notes

I also wound up changing the summary of the story because I thought the old one was kinda dumb and probably put off more potential readers than it drew in.
Green Is The Color Of...

Chapter Notes

So... Officially this is the first chapter that I've written entirely sober. Hm.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When I was little, a bridge connected my house to my best mate's. Things were beautiful. I would run across that bridge and I was never afraid of how it swung and swayed with every bound. Now, it felt like I was swimming through the ether of an alternate version of time and space. The boards creaked, I clung to the rope guide rail for fear that the dilapidation of the wood would cause us to fall right through. Eerie, there was the sound of music and people singing still, past and present smashed together. The voices were different now, not Arddie's mum and aunts, the sound was men and children and my old friend singing along to Bobby Darin.

All of life is what if, what if everything was just a strange dream and I'd wake up surrounded by green. Mum used to say life was the dream and when we sleep, those are the parts that are real. This felt half real, half dream. The hot breath of a War Boy at my back was very real, felt like the heat of Shirley's exhaust. That fog, that music, that laughter in the distance, it felt like the dream.

I must have slowed, a thick hand dropped around the back of my neck to urge me forward. We'd finally decided to go now that the world was going dark and all that could be seen was the dancing lights in the mist as my initiate sister's sky fishermen clan gathered to clean their catch and roast it. I could smell the cookin' birds. Didn't smell as nice as people roasting in busted up rigs under the scorching noon heat. Couldn't help a quick glance at my Ducky as he shifted his grip to my shoulders and pressed to get me to move. I'm glad I was never quite desperate enough to make a meal out of the human wreck he was, but that thought did pass through my skull more than once on the first few days. Shiny now, ain't he? Deadly Shiny.

“Dune, Slit. There you are.” Ard, sound of her voice still sparked and crackled in my ears with that thing Mama called nostalgia. Made me feel at home.

She appeared, as if materializing from dust at the other side of the short bridge, carrying two feathers in her left hand. Flight feathers of a crow. One was pushed into each of our hands, and then her right snaked around my skull to pull me in close. Like the first time, the eagerness of the reunion had our heads bonking together almost hard enough to inspire a throb of pain. Still, a true welcome home, it was.

As with any host welcoming others into their kip, she reached for Slit next, but he was quick to rear back his head and retreat a step to keep out of her reach. The movement was so swift that his metal leg clanked and rattled. Ardith's mouth pulled into a tight lipped smile, half reassuring, half wary. It was like back when I first met Duck, didn't like bein' touched. Maybe I'd been an exception to the rule for so long that I had forgotten. Distraction, we all needed a distraction.

“Ey! That music, sounds like a gramophone. Pilfered that outta Ma and Pa's placel, yeah? No?”

“Yeah, Sorry Dune. We didn't think anybody was ever coming back so we took what we could.”

“You find the vinyls too, Arddie?” I asked, true curiosity this time.
“Hah! You bet your sweet ass I did!”

There were so many songs that I hadn't heard in so long. I can't even remember the names of the men and women slinging old familiar lyrics like bullets right to the heart through the fucking ear. Oh, did I ever have hope that Mum's favorites had survived. I wanted Slit to hear them.

Ard's childhood home, now the home of her own children, was a circular house made from two dozen panels of corrugated steel, old chain link fence, patch jobs made of woven twigs and sticks. A mess of their stilts leaned against the west side of the home. Roof was nothing but a blue tarp now held up by what I may assume were the crow fishers old or broken stilts. A long time ago, that roof had been thatch and wood rafters. Inside were floors of cobbled stone, a fire pit in the center, half broken lawn chairs and tattered couch cushions littered around the fire in a circle. The tarp overhead had been cut with a hole in the middle to let smoke out.

Ard's arm was around mine and she may as well have skipped at my side as she led me to the old crate where Mama's records sat. I could sense Slit nearby, barely making out the sound of air fluttering around the feather in his hand as he spun it between his fingers. He was behind us as we sat on our knees flipping through the fat stack of covers.

“Yes! Bill Withers!... Aww, no. This one was Pa's favorite.” Inside the album cover were only black shards and dust. Guess we wouldn't be hearing that again.

Ducky reached between us to pluck one of the albums up from the crate, sliding the black disk from its sheath and turning it in his callused hands. I could always see when the little gears and cogs in his melon were turning because his head would tilt, his eyes would narrow to slivers and you could spot his jaw working as he chewed on the inside of his cheek.

“How's this work?” He nudged at my back pocket with his peg leg to get my attention as he asked.

It was much easier to show him. I turned the cover slightly in his other hand to read it. Nina Simone, I remember that music. Not a bad choice, not bad at all even if he probably never heard of her in his entire life

“Gimme the thing, Duck. We'll put it on the gram and listen to it.”

I felt Ard's eyes burning holes in my face as I turned to find the Gramophone, she'd no doubt caught the pet same for the saved war mongrel. Ard's older stepson was minding the music, the designated disk jockey, handing his stepmother the previous disk and reaching out to take Nina Simone from me before placing the needle and winding it up to play. Sitting cross legged by the crate of vinyls, I tilted my head back to watch Slit's expressions as the initial crackling of the needle tickling the record began. It was the sound of strings, a quartet crying rivers of lovely tunes, the tinkling of ivory keys, the velvet voice of Nina.

Ducky's brows pinned themselves low and his lips twisted. I could see his eyes searching in the nothing, making out the words and trying to stitch the meaning together with the tune.

“Never heard nothin' like that.” He muttered once and pushed at some loose stone in the floor with the foot of his false limb.

Well, it was a start. He was thinking, hearing something new. The new is painful for him. I wonder if it's painful for all of Joe's victims. Passed Slit, Phil and the other two men Ardith called her husbands were around the fire with other clan members, many of whom wore goggles and respiration masks. One carried around a tank of breathin' air, who knows where the hell he got it. Phil was simple to identify. He had his head wraps off and his goggles pushed up on his balding head, he had pistons
carved into his cheek bones and each sported a halo of flame, very indicative of where he came from. They were all rotating the skinny little bird carcasses over the low flames and chatting among themselves. Was it hard for Phil too? How did he get here? Must have been before the fall of the tyrant. Of the young children scurrying about near the adults and begging for a first taste of what was being tossed over the flames, the oldest had his rich skin tone and Ard's face shape. That one had been alive for at least a handful of years. Phil had a nagging cough and all could hear it. He'd been the one who first spoke when they surrounded Shirley, he had a rough, broken voice. Like fumes had choked him. Soon enough, his ragged voice called the rest of us to the fire. Food was being shared among all. Stunted little roots and tubers boiled soft in a bucket of water, the bird meat, something else I couldn't identify which had come out of old military rations. Everyone converged around the fire. As if by instinct, Ducky moved aside as a gaggle of children swarmed passed us toward the front of the disorganized line. Old plates were being used, interesting. Looks Like Ardith had broken out the good before-times china for the git-together. Still useful, albeit chipped and cracked. I remembered these. They had little sail boats carefully painted upon them in fading blue. Slit scrutinized his plate with squinted eyes before Ardith plopped down a halved bird over the design.

We arranged ourselves around the warmth of crackling flames. Bones held a toddler in his lap and sang with Nina as he used a threaded needle carved out of bone to patch a tear in the child's slacks. Others spoke and laughed in their own conversations. Slit watched them all, his eyes could be seen shifting to every face, taking in everything, sizing everyone up.

An old bottle was passed around and I recognized the taste of Theta's moonshine. Hadn't been expecting that. Couldn't help but cough on the sickly sweet taste of my initiate mother's terrible brew and the scorching burn biting at my gums. “How long you been holdin' onto that Ard? Good seeds and sprouts! Aw, forkin' hell! Slit, try this. It'll put lead in your pencil.”

“Found her stash a couple years ago. Kept a few bottles and jars of it for myself.”

Slit's reaction got us all a good laugh at his expense. He damn near choked on it. By force of will he swallowed a mouthful of the stuff and shoved the bottle back at me.

“Tastes like backwash from the bottom of a bunk still...” He grumbled as he shoved one of the scraggly root things into his mouth to cleanse away the taste, didn't look like it was much better than Theta's home made whiskey.

More for Ard and me then. Back and forth the bottle went before being handed around the circle again. Slit still tilted back the bottle when it passed him, guess he couldn't let the others laugh at him any more than they already had. Oh, his face had gotten all red and I almost felt sorry for getting my chuckles in. Been a long time since either of us had a sip of the creature I suspect, I was already feeling the burn of it spread out from my middle into all my limbs. Feeling loosey goosey. Talk of the lovely days came. We remembered old friends, likely all dead, but remembered none the less. Minutes fused into hours passing on by and time was lost. We talked and talked and talked. Ducky seemed unusually quiet. He said nothing, but every time I shifted he did the same. He closed every inch of distance and remained stuck close to my side if I turned or moved or scooted anywhere. Several times I thought to ask what was with him, but I was always pulled back into the memories with Ard.

“...Ugh, Skink-tail, she used to keep all those spiders in jars on a shelf like some sadist sicko.”

“Hah! I thought that girl's pets were gonna escape an' kill us all one day.”

“Remember that time Skink put a little green snake in Flick's boot?”
“She did that because she had some weird thing for Dune's brother.”

“Ha ha! And then he threw it back at her.”

“Almost got himself excommunicated for that, Arddie.”

“I think the elders were just trying to scare him when they talked about booting him, Dune.”

I shrugged. I was so little back then, all I could remember was how terrifying those old crones had been as they stood in a circle deciding what to do with my brother. They were half siblings to me, Russel and Flick. Weren't born here. They came in with Pa when Mumsy married him. They were already old enough to be 'bad seeds' as the older mothers put it. They'd seen life on the outside, and Pa had lived as a road warrior before landing here to stay. No one fully trusted Pa and his boys until years and years went by, and they were always walking a thin line. Bad seeds grow into weeds, weeds get pulled out of the garden. According to the elders, most bad seeds were boys. Bad boys get sold, good boys get to stay and plants seeds. Too many meanings in that rotten old saying, and it conflicted with the teachings that people shouldn't own people. I remember telling folks at Wilson's about the Green Place, they looked at me the same way I looked at folks who thought Joe Moore really was their redeemer. Mama told me not to let it get to me. Every place has its problems and every place has an evil. 'Ain't anybody out there made o' nothin' but sunshine,' She used to say.

No one's always right all the time and maybe we brought it on ourselves, the end of our Green Place. Maybe some of those bad seeds became War Boys. Maybe they grew up into the raiders who spoiled the water.

“Hello... Dune Buggy? Heheh, where are you in there? Come back to us, Baby.”

I looked up from the tiny hole in my slacks where my fingers had unconsciously plucked the threads loose. I guess I got to thinking about things too much. The group seated around the dying fire had thinned. Only the husbands and one of the children remained. Must have been wandering around in my head for some time. Remembering the good means remembering the bad too. I grinned for Ardith and she smiled back. That was when I felt that low grumbling and tooth grinding buzzing in my ears for the umpteenth time.

A glance to my right and there was Duck, looking like he hadn't shat in a week with his face pinched up like that. The fuck was his deal? Seemed like any time Ardith so much as breathed wrong, he was over there hissin' and growlin' like some old crocodile. Didn't make any sense to me, Ard had been nothing but a generous and entertaining host. Yeah, her brats were kinda irritating with their wild squeals and relentless bouts of play but that's what little sprouts are supposed to do, at least Slit didn't seem bothered by their noise. The oldest of Ard's blood babes, only four winters perhaps, he just sat and stared at my Ducky for the longest time while he was ignored. Then suddenly the tiny boy began to ask questions at rapid fire. Without looking up from his plate, Ol' Duck just answered in a word for every question, maybe two if the kid asked the right thing.

“Is that a knife on your arm?”

“Yes,”

“Can I see it?”

“Yes,”

“No! I mean can I hold it?”

“No,”
“Are you from far away?”

“Yep,”

“Why's your eye like that?”

“Got hit,”

“Why's your mouth like that?”

“Got cut,”

“By who?”

“An asshole who deserved what he got.”

Slit spoke in a rumble that left his chest like a distant storm drawing nearer. Out snapped his wrist and the blade flipped forward. He leaned down toward the small boy, everyone around the fire went stiff as boards, all but me. Pretty sure I saw out of the corner of my eye the barrel of a pistol glittering in the glow of the fire light, but my eyes were on Ducky and the wicked grin stretching his ugly face the way it's supposed to be. Haven't seen that proper smile and those stained teeth in too long. The tight flex in my jaw let me know that I had begun grinning too, hard not to show the sharp and yellows when you got a lovely eyeful like that. Oh-ho! Yes indeed, I was enamored.

The boy was never in any danger. I knew this. Slit always licked his lips before he did something violent like, and those lips couldn't be dryer. The youngling sat there with wide eyes and braced himself on the ground with his hands as he leaned back away from the gorgeously hideous grin. Then the boy's eyes shifted to the blade as Slit moved it between their faces. Took the kid a second to react once he realized that he was not in any peril, but naturally his eyes lit up like big blue saucers at the blade.

“COOL!”

“Okay! I think it's time for you to go to sleep and let the adults have adult words, yeah?” One of the men around the fire, Bones it looked like from all the hundreds of bird remains dangling from his jacket, had shot up from his seat and leaned over to gather the sprog under the arms and lift him up off the ground.

The boy was whisked away despite his dramatic moaning. The kid wanted to stay. Maybe he wanted to hear stories. It had been too long since I was a seedling to remember what it's like being a child.

I glanced around, Phil was settling back into his seat and I did indeed spy a revolver being tucked away once more within his tattered patchwork jacket. Ardith was busy glaring over me at Slit, who simply shrugged. All of the young ones were now put away and in their beds. Featherknife left with Bones for a few minutes to check on the other young'uns that had at some point been laid down to sleep as Ardith and I picked up our conversation. We were remembering other sisters and the mischief we all got up to. Green scarcely threatened my vision at all so long as Arddie was the focus of my eyes, she was a tiny surviving bit of that former glory color.

“HAH! Truth or dare, I remember. We made Rus kiss a goat.” It was a vivid resurgence of the forgotten, cherished things that had been swallowed up by the sand.

I felt the friendly slap of her palm across my shoulder. Ardith was laughing so hard she snortled. I'd forgotten that pure and joyous sound too. I could hear Slit grinding his teeth and I elected to ignore the groucher in favor of listening to my sister speak of the old days.
“And it bit his tongue! HA! Heheh, and he didn't talk right for a week. Ahaah! Feels like it was just yesterday! Gods, I miss those days.”

“Dune too. Yeah. Dune too.” A warm feeling was creeping up my legs and into my soul, it was heavy, holding down my body with the memory like a thick woolly blanket that stunk like musky body odor and motor oil- Wait a minute.

When I returned from my metaphorical journey back in time, Duck was shifting his weight over my walkin' limbs and using the bulk of himself to spread out my knees and lay between them. What a lounge lizard, settling himself right in, curling an arm around my right knee. The other hand still busy toying with the blade affixed to his bracer and knuckle dusters. He was wiping off the oils from where the steel touched his skin on my pant leg and inspecting the shine.

I looked to my left, Arddie's brow was furrowed, lips pulling into a tight, lopsided line. Well, this wasn't unusual. Ducky and I always have the touches in the night. I couldn't remember if I would have let anyone practically lay in my lap way back before the glory of the Vuvalini was tarnished and we left. Was it strange to see? Was it unpleasant from behind other eyes?

Phil didn't seem to care, he was leaning forward and stirring the embers around at the fringes of the fire before leaning back and grasping at more broken twigs and desiccated brush to toss in. Slit and Ardith though, I could taste the acrid scent of anxious perspiration and irritability, could smell it on both of them. Uh-oh, trouble. I wouldn't give a bloody damn, but I did, I gave every damn about these two. Past mates and present mates. Would they quarrel? Throw fists? Slit could break her neck in his enormous hands like crushing a crow egg, but she could slice him up into ribbons. The way I remembered it, Ardith always had a blade on her somewhere. Who would win?

Not Dune, she'd lose either way. Don't wanna lose either mate.

Duck folded back that blade of his again and clipped it secure against his forearm. I expected him to just drop his heavy noggin down onto my middle and start grinding his cranium into my guts until he received his precious 'shine hand' but no, his eyes were narrowed in their deep sockets and fixed to Ard's face. There was a twitching at the corner of his lips, as if poorly hiding some smug grin. Ouff, I think I know what this was about, and I think Ard knew too. He had been rather clingy, sitting too close, elbow or knee always touching, grumbling every time anyone so much as looked in our direction. This weirdness was unusual for the battle fodder outside of the way he piled himself across my lap just like any other evening, that was normal I guessed but I didn't expect him to do it in front of so many pairs of peepers. Bones and Featherboy -or whatever his name was- were back around the fire pit too. Slit was taunting Arddie by displaying a twisted, Joe fucked act of some kinda half-assed ownership.

Admittedly, there was some truth to the actions, I've never told him to bugger off when he wanted this treatment but it was a gift given willingly. Trust a war mongrel to take everything the wrong way, to feel entitled to something wherever and whenever he wished it. He owns my left hand, telling me to touch or not. I own his company, telling him to come and go. We've both partaken of the evil fruit, grown accustomed, not willing to share the spoils.

Ard's jaw was set, but she would not look at him. Instead, She ignored what was so clearly a warning and antagonized an already possessive Ducky. Being honest, I had no idea what to do as she slid her hand around my left elbow just as casually as I grip mama's rifle every morning. A very personal gesture, a reminder of how close we'd once been as children.

The new tension that I could feel in Slit's flesh and the way his lips peeled back away from his teeth told me plain, something needed to be done now to defuse the bomb about to go off in my lap, he could easily trigger Arddie's temper as well. She could be the human equivalent to a nuclear war
head when somethin' got her all steamed, and Slit was certainly pushing buttons. Just as I felt in my legs the rumble of a growl climbing up his throat, I had no choice but to curl my arm so that I could swipe my fingers over his face. It was merely a distracting caress, like a fly's wings against the brow until I found what I was looking for. Where the shell of his ears connected to his skull, there was a tiny flap of extra skin. I always enjoyed playing with it, smoothing it out under the whorl of my middle finger and feeling the crease fold back into place. It was a cheap move, I knew damned sure that it was one of his favorite spots. Shut him up right quick too.

My Ducky took the touch easily and turned his gorgeously forked up face into it, seemingly having forgotten the wordless spat with my initiate sister. I could breathe a sigh of relief, one disaster averted and all it took to close the ugly green eye was a touch there, fingernails dragging through coarse hair here, a tickling forefinger grazing the stubble beginning to grow in just under the tear in his face and circling the remaining staples. He couldn't feel complete sensation in the furrow created by the scar, but he could feel things on the periphery of it.

Well, damn it all if I'm not put at ease by it too, touchin' him and watching the ill matched eyes close lazily while he rolled his head and tried to guide my digits to his lips. They parted for me and I felt the slick from inside as my thumb passed across the bottom. Good war boy.

"Where did you meet Slit?" Ard asked quietly.

I wondered if I should say. He was still so sore in the skull about that day. We don't talk much about history seriously. He must have heard his name. Saw his good eye crack open and roll up to glare, so I dragged my hand down his ugly mug and over his chin so that I could stroke from collar bone to hair line. Keep him placated. A slow hiss of air and a tilt of the head so that I could run my hand down his neck more easily told me that I had succeeded.

"Big mash-up a seven hundred and some days ago. Many, many wrecks. Dune found him in a metal tangle... Boss up at the Citadel fell."

"Immortan is dead?!" My attention was yanked away from my Duck and Arddie. That had been Phil, looking at me with dark eyes full of conflict. I could only nod. When my attention returned to Slit, his eyes were open.

"Slit told Dune he was dead a while back. Didn't tell her much else though."

There was a moment of quiet around the fire. Everyone else looked to Phil with some kind of knowing concern. Ardith leaned his way and reached out to grasp Phil's right knee, giving it a squeeze. Comfort, same as I do for Duck but different. For a moment Phil looked at us if we'd told him the world was ending all over again, but it seemed that he accepted the news quickly, leaning back in his seat again and settling with a pipe stem clenched between his teeth as he dug into his pockets for a piece of tinder to light the herbal smoke. It was a soothing smell, something from deep in my happy childhood. The old women would inhale the fragrant smoke to ease pain, so did my Pa for he was addled with scars inside and out. Wouldn't be surprised if Phil was just as chewed up by the world outside this place as Ducky and I were.

We watched the fire and the scent of the burning herb began to lull me. Slit turned his face into my palm and nipped fingers when they would stop their trailing along twisted flesh. I had seen the way he looked when the topic of his discovery and the fact of Joe Moore's death came up. Pain and confusion. These War Boys, they were orphans too, forged in the crucible of a scorched world. They were taken as children, gnawed up, heads emptied and refilled, then spat back out to spread across the lands and bring the fires of hell with them. Why'd they do it? For a cruel father who branded them and then told them that they were loved. I was reclined, half dreaming about bodies marching across the sands and swarming through the settlements painted in white.
“Dune, Honey. How long you been talkin' the way you do?”

Everything stopped for a moment, Ard's voice had pulled me out of the calm. Slit grunted and peered up at me now that my fingers had come to quite the disappointing pause. I was confused, what did she mean by a question like that?

“Huh? Watcha' mean Arddie? Talk like what?”

“Ya know,” She said, nudging at me around the ribs. “Sayin' your own name instead of like, me or my or whatever.”

“Uh. Er... I dunno.” Honest, I seldom notice it, it just happens. Not sure when it started, I thought that it always just was.

“Ain't your fangin' concern.” Slit scoffed, sitting forward and twisting around to glare and huff-puff at her, nose to nose. That left me practically lying flat out and almost entirely caged under his arms as he braced himself over me like some ruddy dingo guarding a bone.

“Hey, asshat! What the-” I grunted out between my clenched sharps but to no effect, if they were gonna take bites outta each other it was going to happen right on top of me

Ardith bared her teeth and stood her ground, not flinching at all as Slit damn near pushed her back with his face. She simply shoved him in return. Bones and Featherknife stood, but Phil's hand shot up from his lap and he stopped them from intervening. Maybe he could read something 'bout war boys that the rest of us couldn't, or perhaps he had enough confidence in his wife to know she could handle herself.

“Known her since- Hm, aw lemme think... Oh! Since we were fucking born. I think it damn well is my concern considerin' that she didn't talk in the third person the last time I saw her.”

“You weren't there when she got lit up an' cooked. Weren't there when she got blown up by Joe-damned lightnin' either. Dune'll talk however the fuck she wants to, count yourself blessed by mighty V8 that she talks at all! So why don'tcha just shut your rust hole an' stop askin' so many shitty questions.”

The crack of flesh against flesh echoed all through the hills. Slit tongued at the split in his lip were Ardith had slapped him hard enough to summon forth a fat red welt in the shape of her palm. They both looked at each other with brows pinned high on their heads, totally gobsmacked at what the other had said and done. Hell, my wide open face hole was liable to catch flies as my hands clung into his vest to hold him fast and keep him from doing something stupid. Slit looked like he was about to go kamikrazy on her and I could spy her hand sliding back toward the knife she kept on her belt.

I couldn't stand it, all that had gone on tonight had built up the pressure in me and I was fit to burst open like a can of beans left on a fire too long. Ugh, it felt like my skin was crawling with ants! Too much! Too much everything! I felt fire. It was scorching throughout all the pores and boiling the wet stuff in my veins. Felt like at any second, I might vanish in a puff of steam. It was all in my head, all in this rotten awful head.

Why did Ducky have to bring up that tripe? Why did I always have to be reminded of all the broken bits and just when things were almost sweet as peaches? Anger rose up in my throat like bile, or maybe it could have actually been vomit. I'm not sure. I could still feel the flames licking, blistering, eating up the flesh.
“Nnn-Gah!”

Out the pressure came. Slit was tossed away and unto his arse with two muddy boot prints smeared across his pullover and vest. He sputtered and hacked at being kicked away, but I didn't care.

“Dune! Wait!” He'd sprung up to catch my arm at the elbow just as I had scrambled away and gotten to my feet.

My backside and feet where numb from his laying all over me. Back around came that anger. It chucked a u-ey and threatened to run him down with all its burning fury. Not sure what takes over in those moments before I taste his blood, something so white hot and terrible that there's no Dune left to hold unto, just the thing born of the caverns I guess. The part that started to splinter off and do it's own thing long before the fateful day I found that wreck and the roasted battle fodder inside.

Before I knew it he was stumbling back and tripping over that metal leg as he gripped his bleeding wrist. It was thick on my tongue, the blood. The taste was like licking old coins from the before times. I ran for the bridge, I needed to get back to where I was before. Needed to speak with Mama, Maybe Pa too.

“Dune! Honey, come back!” That was Ardith this time. No, I couldn't look back. Just couldn't. I wanted to bolt for cover, far away from everything... Everyone. I'll beat the flames dead on my own. I will.

Chapter End Notes

I really want to get back into writing more concise chapters. My rule with this fan fiction has always been to write until the chapter feels complete, not until I have a hefty word count which has definitely served me well. I was, at the time I began the story, publishing one and sometimes two chapters a week. I'd like to return to that. Longer chapters can take up to a month and I'm not down for that. I have a lot planned for this story and I'd like to get it out of my head.

I also wanted to explore a potential dark side to the green place. From what we see in the movie, the Vuvalini have absolutely no trust in men, despite the fact that a few of them seem old enough to have been young adults in the years before the world went to hell in a hand basket, honestly that's probably why they don't trust men, but it seems like it's more than that. They did not question the women at all of whom Furiosa clearly stole (C'mon it's obvious, the sisters don't even wear any form of practical clothing), but a skinny boy with no shirt on and a Max who looks like he's about to collapse from exhaustion/depression at any moment throughout the film spooked the hell out of these older women. And they asked WHO they are, not what faction they're with. Furiosa doesn't answer their question with names, as if their names are totally irrelevant because they wouldn't know them (also she doesn't even know Max as anything other than Fool). I dunno, it struck me as very odd and my brain filled in blanks with wild speculation. What if male children who didn't show enough respect or didn't fall in line or didn't keep themselves out of trouble had to face unequal consequences to those actions because of a community gender bias. Maybe the Vuvalini were holding unto a lot of resentment toward the men who trashed the world and sorta took it out on their
whole gender.

I've definitely seen a bias hinted in other fan fictions, just wanted to expand on the idea a little.
History Is A Shit Show

Chapter Summary

We explore a little tiny bit of Slit's traumatic early life. Ugh, sorry. I slipped and fell in some feelings.

Chapter Notes

JAN 30 2018 personal update: Still working on the next Chapter, so don't worry, I haven't forgotten. I'm hoping to get it done by Thursday and edited by Friday evening. It COULD potentially show up earlier but I'm uncertain. I don't think it will be a super long chapter but it won't be short either. It just needs to feel right and it needs to touch on the topics that I had summarized for the chapter without feeling forced. Thank you for your patience.

- Major overuse of italics on this one. And holy shit this chapter took way too long

Also, to avoid any confusion, Phil's War Boy name was Crank, and that is how Slit will refer to him often in this chapter. Also to avoid further confusion, in the official comic published after the Fury Road film the War Boys called Joe Daddy, so that will happen a few times.

Slight changes were made. I said at some point that I wanted Phil's older kid to be eleven, but I'm more keen on making him about fifteen so that the timeline works. Phil is also between thirty-eight and forty-five years old; which I imagine is kinda old for a former War Boy. Thank you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shit! Fuck! Fuck rust fuck! That hurt, wasn't the worst she'd ever mauled me but the wrist is always a bleeder. Had to yank off my scarf and tie it around the flow to staunch it while I watched her jet out the door.

“How old are you? Thirty going on Twelve?”

No time to dignify the red headed wretch with a response. Couldn't let Dune get too far. If she wandered off she'd inevitably start freaking out and get lost, then eventually fall asleep somewhere, get up to sleepwalk, get more fucking lost. Little rust head was liable to get swallowed up by the fog and shat out dead. Fuck all, I had at least two good reasons not to let that happen. Maybe three. No, still just two reasons. She still didn't regret barring me from the afterlife and I still needed her around for... reasons.

Three steps would see me out the door after the imp first. It was that easy, at least it would have been if I hadn't heard the click of a loaded revolver's hammer being slid down into the cocked position just
behind my head.

“Don’t move, Pup.” The old deserter shit stain rasped as his wench ducked out the door and called after the scav.

Yes, I’d recognized him the moment I saw him without the goggles, respirator, and bandages around his head. For Dune's benefit, I hadn't made a scene when I saw his face. We were outnumbered and like Ardith or not, I doubt Dune would ever so much as look at me again if I wound up knocking off one of the bitch’s men. Back when I was a few hands shorter, this asshole had been a rule breaker. Slept around with wretcheds, got caught twice sneaking food down to them, it was even suspected that he helped a potential clean breeder get loose and run off before the catch could be brought in and presented to the Immortal. Finally he tossed his driver from a moving vehicle and tried to leave in one of Immortan's war chariots. His crew leader went out to hunt him down and destroy him for it, apparently Tank had been too damn soft to see it through to the end. And this coward had the balls to call me pup. Fuck Phil, fuck Tank, and fuck Tank's driver by association. All of them filth. Fuck um all! With this trip fast going tits up, I’d had a mind to shred him myself and finish the piss poor job Tank did. I'd have done it in a second if I wasn't in a position to get my head blown off.

Traitors die ugly, deserters die forgotten and nameless. Much as it went against code, I called the filth by his true name when I turned, stepping forward into the barrel of the colt to feel the cold muzzle flush between my eyes. This softened up flat tire wasn't going to shoot me, I didn't think so anyway. It's all a matter of balls, had to see whose were bigger.

“Not a pup anymore, Crank.”

He pulled in a breath through his teeth, the ones up front stained yellow and brown from smoking that pipe. “Yeah. Cn’ see you're a much bigger pain in the arse than you used to be. I can't let you out there alone with our wife, mate. Nasty as you've been, one of ya is gonna wind up dead. No doubt, after that little spectacle, she wants to snap you.”

The other two fell in at Crank's flanks to back him up, pulling up their masks and revealing their faces. One had freckles littering his face so thick they seemed to take over every feature, the other had skin darker than Dune's and darker still than the man holding the gun. Behind the three was the teenager said to be the deserter's oldest brat, unrelated to the mouthy redhead. What I saw stoked up new flames in my guts. Should have fucking known. He pulled his goggles and a leather mouth guard down around his neck as well and it became very clear that this wasn't Crank's kid, it was a pup that had gone missing around the same time Crank went AWOL. It was easy to tell, the kid had one of those faces which was easy to recognize. Big birthmark around his right eye that made him always look like he'd taken a nice wallop from one of the other pups. Sure, the mark had faded a little and the kid was at least twice as tall now, but I remember this brat. Not only had “Phil” stolen food, ran off, sabotaged, but he'd kidnapped a pup. Pups are precious, future war boys, and he'd fucking stolen one.

Couldn't make punishing him a priority though, not with the maniac out there doing V8 knows what, possibly tumbling down the hills and getting sucked down by the sludge. I didn't care if that woman friend of hers wanted me to cark it chokin' on her blade. I brought Dune out here, I was going to be the one to bring her back to her kip in one piece, period. You start something you fuckin' finish it.

“Let 'er try.”

“Nah, I'd rather not have to bury your corpse tonight. Doesn't matter who kills who first. You walk out that door, you're getting put in the ground so why don't you just have a seat, No-name.”

Gears stopped dead and all the cogs ground to a raging halt. No-name, an unremarkable kid with an
unremarkable face that got passed over three times when names were dealt out because he hadn't made himself noticeable. No-name died, something else rising to life when a knife tore through his face and I became. No-name has been dead since long before this puke left the Citadel, he knew that, but he was trying to poke open a wound that was nothing but hard, grainy scar tissue.

“It's Slit,”

“Alright, then I think we can all agree to call one another by the names we choose, not the names we had, unless you're craving lead for dessert. Chrome?” As he spoke, there was a smugness in his smirk that made my skin itch like sand embedded in every pore.

Had to submit, nodding slowly. No choice. How can I make this rust fucker understand that it wasn't his fucking place and it wasn't the redhead's either to deal with the nutter? I'm the one that was there, I'm the one that lived with the madness, I'm the one covered in bites that overlap and scar up together, I'm the one she forced to fangin' live and it was my turn to return the shitty favor. I'm the one Dune needed, not them, not Ardith. That's how I saw things.

“Yeah, chrome.”

“Good, good... Hmm, you took a hard dive off a high lifted rig and landed right on your head, didn't ya? I said sit the fuck down about a full minute ago, Slit. I suggest you do as your elders say before you wind up pissin' lead.”

It was deliciously easy to picture chaining this dick-head to the rear bumper of the Impala and dragging his sorry ass all the way back to the badlands behind us, just listening to his old hide get shredded and the sound of screams. Oh, I sat. I shut my pup mouth. I also imagined breaking his lumpy neck and enjoyed every second of that fantasy while he held me at gun point by the dying fire. Dune calls thinking like that 'a happy place' and makes claims that it pacifies your bloody urges just enough so you don't go and catch a case of terminal stupid. Actually I'm pretty sure it just made it harder to resist taking a bullet in exchange for pulling off my leg and wanging him over the head with it.

“So, what happened to dear old dad?”

“He died. That's what.”

“You know what I meant. How did he go.”

I was wrecked several miles before that cunt allegedly ripped Immortan Joe's face off. I didn't see it happen. It was when I had gone to see if I even had a home to return to long ago that I had heard this and that in several variations from the filthy mongrels camping in the shadows of the buttes. The end of the story, no matter who told it, was always punctuated with a visceral telling of half his face reduced to a mess of raw meat. I wondered if Crank's interest in the death of the Immortal connotes a sense of loss. His face didn't read like somebody who'd just been told that the guiding force of his world had died. He fucking died somehow, in spite of the deep rooted belief that such a force was not something any mere mortal could extinguish. He looked impatient, maybe a bit hopeful. What an odd, odd way to look. Well, fuck me, I was getting curious about where this talk was going to go. I'd made him wait long enough for an answer, figured I'd bait him a little and see how he responded.

“One of his Imperators traitored him.” I said it plain and simple. It wasn't a lie although I omitted a key piece of information from the statement. Knowledge of which Imperator was responsible would quickly change the tone of the confession.

“Really? Who took over after him? The Prime? Rictus was always too damn dull.”
Yeah, Rictus might have been built like a brick shit house but he was a bloody moron. Still, the fact that Crank—or Phil or whatever—had the balls to say aloud what he thought of Immortan's youngest made my teeth clench painfully. Prime Imperator was dead too, according to the wretcheds, not that I cared to tell him that. “Does it matter?”

“Matters to me, matters to know if I can go back.”

“What the hell does that fucking mean?”

“I guess it means if he got traitored for the right reason then maybe I could get my people out of this stink hole. I think I'm plenty justified in wanting to know if I'd be welcomed home.”

“Nah. Know what? I think I've just about said all I know.” I lied, knowing that he would be able to detect the flagrant deception in my tone.

“Ah, ya know that kind of answers my question.”

I didn't respond, didn't care to, so he just droned on.

“I can see you're still devoted to him. Slit, do you ever just wonder if it was all bull? Don't you ever feel like there was heaps of exaggeration about him, our place in it all too? What does his death really mean then?”

Jesus-fucking-Chrysler, I didn't waste that good guzz to drive all the way the hell out here and listen to some old fart try to enlighten me. Fuck that, I knew my place in the world and I didn't need him to tell me where it was. Devout, but excommunicated and cursed. I just wanted to make my pathetic existence a little more tolerable and get the nutter back to one hundred percent.

“I got a whacko seeing green crap that ain't there an' I brought her up here to see if we can't get that shit to stop. I'm not in the mood for semantics, or any talk about naming names or who did what to Daddy. I'm not sayin' shit else to you about it...”

Crank's face hardened and so did his voice. “Hmm, had quite a big mouth on you when you were a little oil squirt. Did the change have something to do with how symmetrical your face got after I left?”

“Eat my whole ass. Evened it up myself an' nobody ever managed to shut me up.” I shrugged, giving him a big false smile. “Just don't talk to rust suckers who screw themselves out of Valhalla. No point, just like talkin' to a walkin' corpse. Nothing there to talk to.”

Feathers and Bones were squirming where they were seated. Both were younger men by at least three thousand days. They looked to Crank, rather the man they knew by the shit name of “Phil” for guidance on how to react. He just sat in his seat, expression an unreadable stone facade.

“Uh huh,” Crank seemed to be thinking of what to say next, nodding slowly with beady eyes narrowed like two crescent moons. Not exactly the reaction I'd been hoping for, picking at the usual soft parts of anyone who is or had ever been a warrior of the Immortal. “...how long you been running around with Dune?”

“What's it matter to you, shit-head?”

“Just curious.”

“Fair enough, seven-hundred days plus. Leaning a hair closer to eight hundred, now.” I justified sharing that to make it clear that I knew the maniac well enough, probably better than the red headed
harpy. I shouldn't be in here listening to an old war boy prattle on, I should be dragging her screwy arse back to the car and making her lay down and sleep.

“Apparently not long enough to get all the garbage that Joe shit into our heads outta your system.”

Welp, he missed my point in telling him and his attitude was just about as much as I could take. I was fast forgetting all about the pistol gripped in his meaty blackthumb fist and just dying to leap over the fire and sink my teeth right in, a page torn out of Dune's word burger. Thankfully I had enough sense and restraint not to.

“Hah, wretched-shit! A saw your face when Dune blew it out her cola hole that Joe's dead! You looked like her words cut you up! Don't you sit there and tell me you don't believe, not even half believe in him still!” I shouted the words, loud enough to wake the damn birds roosting in the dead trees through the hills.

I could hear the feathered rats squawking and retreating from the sound of my fury. Pity only the dumb birds seem to heed it. Crank appeared to be wary at least, he gripped that pistol just a little tighter as he leaned back in his seat and burned me with his eyes. The others tried to look every bit as deadly, but they just didn't hold a candle. They could not touch me. I was not afraid of those two and only half wary of the lead spitter held in the hand of their elder. Finally he replied.

“...No. No you're right. I still thought he might be immortal. Maybe not a god, but so damn rotten that hell would just belch him back out if anybody ever tried sendin' him there.”

“Blasphemy.” How dare he, if he was struck by holy fire from the skies right where he sat for this slander I wouldn't be at all shocked.

“Don't you sit there and blasphemy me. You weren't there when all of this got started, you weren't even a little seed in your momma's belly-”

“Look, I drove all last night to get here and my head's a little hazy, you wanna go ahead and make your damn point?”

“Maybe if you shut up. Tch, now you're starting to sound like the mouthy skid mark I remember. Yeah, I'll get to my point. Ace was there when Joe took the Citadel. Notch was there when we started paintin' up white. Tank was there when the rules that no one was to fuck wretched was passed down. I was there for a little of the early days, too. Some of us were real easy to lead but others... We rode and hurled thunder because were afraid of that son of a bitch. We saw him do shit to our own that no God or Pappy that loved you would do and we sure as hell didn't call him Daddy.”

“Tch! Oh veeight, like fucking what? What did he do that was so out of fucking character that it justifies running away, fuckin' coward. O' course you're afraid, he's a fucking war god.”

“What good did war do for the world?! The pup blurted and everyone's attention snapped to him like bands of stretched rubber. He shrank a little, head ducked and trying to hide himself behind Crank's mass. He didn't like being the center of attention, he never did, I could remember how he never spoke when he was just an ankle biter back at the Citadel. Crank looked back at the boy, then turned his head from left to right to make eye contact with the others.

“Guys, take the boy outta here, and go find the girlies and make sure they're alright, will you?”

There was a little arguing but after some reassurances and the true yet no less annoying reminder to the others that I wasn't doing anything unless I wanted to eat a bullet, they each picked themselves up
off the floor and left. For a while, Crank only glared at me from his seat, but the blessed silence from
him just wouldn't last forever.

“Slit, I'm going to talk to you and you better have your ears open boy, because it's damn important
that you actually listen to what somebody has to say to you for once.”

I only narrowed my eyes but that was what he wanted, for me to sit there and shut up. What could be
so important coming from this thing that had turned his eyes away from the mighty V8, this nothing
who abandoned his own. I waited, not expecting much. I was wrong to underestimate him. To my
surprise, and advantage, he pulled open his jacket and slipped the pistol back into the holster strapped
on around his chest.

“Do you remember your first kill, Slit?”

This question caught me off guard, made the blood cool in a real bad, rusty way. The first kill, I
never counted it and honestly I try not to think about it because I just can't. Can't stomach it. No one
had ever spoken to me about what happened and if it weren't for the scar, I might doubt that it had
been anything more than a rust dream. What the hell did that have to do with anything?

“Why?” I asked dumbly, my good ear was ringing for some reason and the edges of the hovel were
going fuzzy. It got hard to focus, I didn't want to look back on that shitty, shitty moment.

“I just think it might be illuminating to talk about it.”

I said nothing, but felt the staples in my face pinch and my teeth cool in the open air as I cringed. I
couldn't move, the deserter's eyes had changed from stern certainty to a cold deadness that I swore I'd
seen once before. He kept talking, V8 why wouldn't he just shut up and let me go do my job? I'd
have given anything to trade his voice for Dunes jabbering.

“Imperator Wrecker. What he did to the real little ones back then. How he did it to them over and
over and over. I never realized until that night. None of us knew, that is, until he plucked your blue
eyed little friend out of the den where you all slept. You followed them, you got in his way...”

I think he kept on beating his teeth together, but to this day I can't be sure. I was sliding back into that
place, that night. It felt like I had cold fingers curling around my neck. I could still remember parts of
that night Crank spoke of so damn clear, but other pieces were just black pits of nothing. I didn't
guess what Imperator Wrecker had been doing, either. They called him Wrecker because he'd wreck
anybody who so much as looked at him wrong. I always thought that was why the younger pups
were afraid. I don't know how old I was, just old enough to be proud of a couple armpit hairs. Nux
was maybe half my height at the time? Young, weak, easy to hurt.

Nux used to sleep next to me. The other pups shunned him because of his irritating optimism, I think.
He was always a little soft in the head. I wasn't well liked either because I was three times passed
over for a name and a crew to be trained under. I just didn't stand out, probably too scrawny.

I didn't want to remember, I didn't. It was just a mess of fragments anyway, a bunch of broken
thoughts that are hard to tell apart from the deceitful nightmares that I had almost forgotten.

I could recall waking up to the Imperator leaving with Nux. I remember following them quietly, he
didn't even notice, and I remember the way he jammed his filthy finger into the pup's mouth to pry
his jaw open.

I couldn't hear anything Phil said anymore. Couldn't see anything, either. There was just that garbled
memory sucking away my senses, making me want to lean over and chunder. I could almost feel was
the horrendous kiss of steel warmed from Wrecker's body heat. It slid passed my lips. And the agony of it! I'll never forget that.

I think I'd tried to stop him. I'd picked up the nearest thing that wasn't bolted down and swung it at his head when I saw what he was doing to the pup. Then I was the one on the ground, pinned under a knee with a hand wrapped around my neck and feeling the shaft of a blade tear through me as I thrashed. Fighting only made it worse, made it hurt more. Nux was screaming, maybe I was too. I don't know... Then there was blood. Hot, thick, smothering, choking. It ran down my throat, I inhaled it and then hacked it back out into his ugly face.

That was where it all went dark, just a whirling vortex of nothing in my head. It was like a sink hole sucking in everything around it, all the skull pictures and the memory evaporated into nothingness. The next thing I could recall my hands were soaked in blood. It was both mine and his. It always looks black in low light, like well used motor oil.

Two older boys were pulling me out from under Wrecker's limp corpse and trying to pry the shiv out of my fist. When I was a pup, I used to think grown War Boys looked chrome, menacing, like walking skeletons. Faces painted like skulls had never been so comforting before or since. Crank was there, standing somewhere in the background and holding Nux by the hand while the others started scrubbing at me with oily rags to get the red stuff off. Ace was there, stitching my face closed and commanding me not to make a peep. It was even worse than the kiss of the blade, to feel the needle tear through and pull back out with catgut streaming behind it.

Others appeared. Wrecker was gone, where I hadn't known but I could hear something somewhere beyond sight. It was like a shovel being slamed through sloppy mud again and again.

I understand now that they were cutting the body up. The eldest of the War Boys were getting rid of the evidence. I was always told never to breathe a word about what happened. I know now that if the other Imperators had found out what I had done, it would have been over. They'd have shredded me. They never would have believed. They wouldn't have taken my word over the glory of what they believed Wrecker was. He was rust, but who would have believed me?

“...Imperators have a lot of power, they're like us but full-life. They think that makes them better than us but they're wrong. They were just property, too. Specifically Joe’s property. How do you figure the owner of all that property doesn't sometimes take advantage of his wealth? A wealth of breeders, a wealth of engines, a wealth of fanatical young boys who would do anything, I mean anything to get into Valhalla?”

“W-what are you saying?”

He leaned forward in his fold out chair, eyes probing, fingers lacing together almost as if he was about to fly the V8 salute. Instead his fingers curled over his knuckles like a double fist between his knees.

“I'm saying, your driver wasn't the only one who's been hurt by someone he should have been able to trust. And Imperator Wrecker wasn't the only one doing the hurting. Think about that.”

The concept of what he was saying just wasn't something I could accept. Skull wouldn't digest it. Well, there's still the chance he could be lying. My skin was starting to cool with sweat, felt sticky but not the way you get when the sun is trying to fry you. Felt sticky and cold like that night all three war parties got stuck just a quarter mile south of here in the worst of the mud.

The Immortan doing what Wrecker did, but to who? I wanted to ask, but the words were stuck somewhere in my chest and wouldn't come up.
"Hey, I know. A pretty inconvenient truth, huh? How about a change of direction. Aye? Remember how to play dice?" Phil asked, and I was all a bit too eager to abandon the topic.

After I got my face rearranged, Cra- Phil's crew leader let Nux and I stay in the spot where their hunting crew slept. They had me there just to keep me out of the way for a while so that no one suspected that Wrecker's disappearance and my face had something to do with each other. Within a few days I was so out of it from infection and fever that I couldn't do anything but lay there and pretend I didn't exist, anyway. Some of their greenhorns taught me the game while I laid around, trying not to die.

"Uh. Yeah."

"High or low?"

A few games were played. Nothing special was pulled out of pockets for gambling fodder. Nuts, bolts, Phil had some blue glass with edges all worn smooth. It was all physical distraction. My head felt weighted like a bag full of sand.

Time passed, how much I couldn't possibly guess, but no one interrupted the game until long after my arse went completely numb from the stony floor. The one to step into the shelter and start running their mouth a little too loudly was the red headed wench. She took a moment to glare at me again, but I failed to care enough to so much as hiss.

"So, Dune's off her face. Talked all this nonsense and nodded right off inside her old place. Managed to pull an old mattress out and get her to fall into that and stay there..."

"She's asleep?" Ardith ignored me. Phil raised his brows and half pouted up at her, which seemed to convince her to answer.

"Seems to be."

No good.

"She sleepwalks." Was all I said as I dropped the dice from my hand and got up off the floor with a groan.

Ardith didn't seem keen on letting me leave to go to the scav. She let her hand drift around her hip toward her back, no doubt reaching for an unseen weapon. Phil stopped her with a simple gesture, taking her hand in his and shrugging when she looked down to where he sat with questioning eyes. She quickly yanked her hand out of his and took a step forward to have her last word.

"Dune didn't sleepwalk when I knew her."

I my guts felt hot, twisting, furious. I wanted to shriek something back at the know-it-all. I was too tired to roar. Maybe she was trying to ferret out some unseen truth, trying to find a way to make it my fault. Ah, I had a revelation, she thought I had something to do with how rusted up her old compatriot's head got. Too bad, that wasn't me.

"Yeah, bet she didn't."

-0-
The shipping container had a door which leaned against the frame, hinges broken. Inside was a mess of shit all pushed toward the back wall. All rubbish and bags of who knows what pulled up to the ceiling. It reeked of mildew, too. The camping lamp I’d grabbed on my way out the door to get away from Ardith's big mouth cast a flickering light on all the trash. It could be a trick of the eye, but I swore that I saw little vermin with scaly tails scurrying for cover as I moved toward the conspicuous scavenger shaped lump by the wall on a thin square of I’d at least consider luxury bedding.

As promised, Dune was curled up on a bare mattress -if you could call a flattened slab of steel springs and batting a mattress- with a bucket next to her head, just in case. A look inside told me that the pail was empty, at least I wouldn't have to sleep next to the stench of vomit. I blew out the flame in the lamp and stumbled my way over. Off came the leg and the bracer on my left arm. They were dropped by Dune's feet.

The cot was just wide enough that I could cram myself between her and the wall. Usually preferred it the other way around, but I'd rather not have had her climbing over me to hork up her guts later. I wanted to ball myself up into that spot and die. That fucking image carved into my skull meat, Crank had to be lying. Had to be. Please let him be a liar.

Well, the nutter hadn't gotten up and wandered off so there was that. I didn't think I could handle any more trouble tonight, the last two days were catching up with a vengeance yet I couldn't quite get myself to sleep even after I tied our wrists together and there was nothing left to do.

I kind of wished she was still awake, being hysterical and bitey. At least her rambling could chase off the damn imaginings of the Immortan cornering some kid or a particularly scrawny war boy...

Scrawny just like the ones that would in rumor attend him every morning before he made his daily public address. Ugh!

Couldn't be possible. Just couldn't.

When the loon gurgled an involuntary noise, I realized that I was holding on a little too tightly. Her chest cage expanded the second I uncurled my arm, air whistling around her teeth.

She started trying to turn over the same way she always did before she tried to rise out of sleep to walk, but she couldn't quite get up. She rolled, pulling our tied hands between us and grinding her head into my throat. Her breath reeked of the home brew she and Ardith had been chugging down. She really was off her face.

The cord which kept us bound didn't seem all that necessary at the moment. I wasn't getting sleep any time soon, anyway. I slipped myself out of my half of the cord and pushed at her to give my head enough room that I wouldn't have a sore neck later from laying with it bent weird. Her arm lifted, hand curling in the air a few times before dropping and finding warm skin to press frigid fingers into. Felt like a handful of cold salamanders climbing up my shirt. I shivered and my teeth clenched.

She was just looking for body heat as she slept. Nux used to do the same thing. I fought the urge to shove her away. If I did manage to fall asleep like this, on a mattress crammed in a corner with an idiot leeching warmth off me, I'd probably wake up thinking I was back at the Citadel. I didn't need that kind of disappointment.

Would be nice if it was all just some rusty fever dream, then again, it would mean that Dune never actually existed. Would I be worse or better off? Well, I'd feel pretty cheated by my own imagination for dreaming up a person like that and for waking up before I could get some kind of resolution. I still owed Dune revenge for saving me, I still had to make her regret it. I guess I'd miss somebody actually giving a shit about me, too. Sometimes I couldn't figure if Nux ever did. I saved his hide
from that monster, a dozen more times when he got himself in trouble, he sat there and waited in the bloodshed for me to get patched up that time I almost got myself gutted, but then he fucking left me there the moment he got a chance to ride with Immortan.

Maybe one day Dune would do it too, maybe she'd just leave. Or maybe I'm tired, maybe this whole stupid day had my skull filled up with toxic sludge.

The sand was white. Felt cold, too. It pulled every iota of strength from my meat, and it had teeth. Fucking teeth. The world had opened up its maw and taken a hold of me around my throwing arm. I should have felt fear, I needed that arm. A lancer could probably lose a foot and be okay without it, but his throwing arm? No, I couldn't do without that bit.

Still, I wasn't afraid. I was mad, mad as a feral in a bloody rage. I tried pulling my arm from the sand, the teeth just held on, clenching tighter. Blood stained the white grains a crimson. It was impossible, my arm just wouldn't budge and the teeth swallowed down more of that arm, more of who I was.

The dead world under me began to shift. It was alive! No, something in the earth was moving. The face which those teeth were rooted into emerged, the sands around it churning.

It was the skull of a dog, something everyone has seen in the wastes. A symbol of death.

It was saturated in black oil, it pulsed from the empty sockets in dark flows. More rose. A body half rotten, tawny fur sloughing off in matted clumps. Now I felt the fear, it pumped the adrenaline through my veins.

The monstrosity released me, that was the moment I saw the chain, felt the steel muzzle tight around my face.

Woven through the chain links was a tube and my red stuff flowing away into the oily creature.

"That's right! High octane crazy blood, fillin' me up!"

I swore that I saw the disembodied eyes of Nux peering out from the back of the thing's throat as it barked those familiar words at me.

“Ducky! Good goddesses! Damn, you almost knocked my block off!”

Thank V8, Angels of Combustion, Lords of Torque. Just a dream. It was probably the most senseless nightmare I'd had in years, but something about it just rubbed me wrong. Really wrong. I woke up to Dune trying to hold down my throwing arm; must have been slinging punches in my sleep. Shit, I fell asleep. Didn't mean to do that. No harm done, Dune was right there and fussing away.

“Ducky? Duck?! Hey! Slit!”

"I'm fine!"

I couldn't keep laying there, felt like my bones were trying to jump out of my skin. V8, fucking dreams. I definitely didn't want to fall asleep again. Whenever there was one weird dream, more were usually more queued up right behind the first. I snatched up the metal leg and started pulling it back on while Dune clutched at her head and groaned. Served her right if all that rotgut was making her head throb.

"Aw... Duck. Where you goin'? Sun hasn't even woke yet. Hey, you a'right?"
I felt her hand pressed flat between my shoulder blades. Shouldn't like that, shouldn't want it. Talking to Crank was like being slapped across the head with everything from home, the good, the bad, the worse than bad. I was supposed to be a war boy, the last devout boy! I was supposed to hate her, I was supposed to take Crank as a test of faith, I was supposed to be better than him! Then why do I feel like such shit?

"You're stiff as stone," She said. Dune was right, because I was fighting the desire to lean back, turn, and bury my face in her hands.

Oh V8, I just wanted her to help me forget. I wanted to lose it all, let her pull all the bad out of my head one piece at a time with her shine hand, but not now. I needed to be able to think my way through what Phil said, decide if he's full of shit or not. Couldn't give in and let her touch me right now. Frustrating, you can't want two things. I needed to get up, or else my want for Dune to fix me her way would win out. It always won out against any personal code or moral qualm. I let it sour into anger as I tried to stand.

"I said I'm fine, Dune! Sodder off!"

Her hand slid down my spine as I rose but instead of falling away she took a grip around the waistband of my trousers to keep me from leaving. She couldn't let anything be easy, she just had to make impossible to say no to her.

"Slit. Dune's known ya for two years, she knows when something ain't right with you."

“What does you knowing me have anything to do with anything?!” I shouted, snatching her hand away and turning to pin the other sinful limb down. Something wet was running hot down my face. Eyes stung too, but I was furious, or at least I was supposed to be. She knew better, she always did. Fuck.

“Bless it, is it raining or are ya leakin' wet stuff?"

Something in me quit working like it should, stalled up. I could have just gotten up and left but the strength to move failed. She had her damned claws hooked into me and I couldn't leave the comfort of their sting. Senseless killing, pig king, just a man, all her words. Was she right? Was Phil telling the truth? Had I honored an unworthy man with evil deeds? Was I headed to a fiery pit when I carked it? Was I just a blunt instrument and nothing more? Did I trade my fucking leg for eternal damnation?? I wanted to die, there just wasn't any reason to live anymore. My head fell into my hands before I even realized that I had let go of Dune's wrists, I broke. I'm broken. All for nothing.

“Aw Duck,” She groped blindly in the darkness at me, the touch barely registered now. Her fingers found the cloth tied around my right wrist. “Did I bite you?... Did I-”

Shit, I knew where this was going, if she'd been pissed on that swill then there was a good chance she couldn't remember much of the night before. I growled, better to sound angry rather than pitiful. “No, just one of the usual fender benders. Can't hurt me.”

I was still sitting on her legs although I'd forgotten to care enough to fight off her concern. She fixed that with some innate sensibility to understand that I was about to slump over anyway. If was gonna fold up then why not right here on top of her? I knew damn well that escape was impossible now, I wasn't getting away from the nut to think about rusty things. Who wants to do that anyway? Why does it even matter? It's over. It was just a long time coming to finally get it through my head that my entire existence has been a whole lot of pointless. She took two fistfuls of the shirt I wore and steered me to the narrow space of empty mattress next to her so that I wouldn't use her as a weight bearing surface. When you stop giving a shit, you stop giving a shit wherever you're at.
“Seeds Duck, what happened to you last night?? You're a right mess.”

She turned and fought with a twisted strip of trash and her flint to light an oil lamp. Please let it be too soggy to light up. I didn't want to be looked at like this, a less than mediocre little maggot.

The flame of the lamp was small but blinding in the pitch black of the abandoned dwelling. She turned and looked at me with her bloodshot eyes and I rolled mine.

“Dune-”

“No, you look at Dune and tell her what's wrong with you.”

“Why do you have to fucking care so damn much? Huh??”

“Because, for better or worse I pulled you out of that wreck. That makes me responsible for you and like it or not, I got awful fond of you too. Bloody hurts seein' you like this and wonderin' who I gotta put a hole in about it! Yeah? Makes sense?”

I didn't know what to say. Did she just offer to shoot some poor sod over my misery? That was kind of half an insult, didn't need Dune doing my defending but, it also made the blood pump squeeze in a strangely pleasing way. Didn't matter, it wasn't a topic up for discussion.

"Ya wouldn't get it anyway, jus' drop it and go back to sleep."

She grabbed my lower lip between her thumb and forefinger to turn my face and force me to look at her. That didn't feel shine, and I prepared myself to shackle her wrist with my hand and threaten to break it for her.

That face of hers in the lamp light stopped me. She didn't look ready for an ass kicking match, she looked damn near afraid. Spooked by whatever was going on with me? Why? One other thing got my attention, that wasted aqua cola I'd leaked all over her. It had streaked her with clean spots across her always dust coated face.

Now there was proof that the other thing she said was true, she had this look like something with too many legs had stung her. Can anybody actually hurt for somebody else? Maybe. Lately her miserable face made all kinds of parts on me inexplicably ache. Guess the feeling is mutual.

"Dune wants to hear what's going on in that melon meat, c'mon. Can't be that hard to figure, Slit."

Almost. I could almost hear myself say it- No, I wanted to scream it. Wrecker tried tofuck a pup and put a bloody knife in my mouth when I tried to make it stop! So I cut him! I cut him deep across his fucking throat and he died on top of me! Phil was the one who pulled me out from under him! Phil's crew leader was the one who got rid of the body! Them and Ace just swept the whole thing under a rock because if anybody blabbed to the other Imperators I'd be dead! Fucking dead! The only reason I even got scooped up and trained up by that crew to begin with was because they couldn't just let me run around with this ruined face while everybody tried to figure out where that missing imperator was! They'd have gotten shredded too for the cover-up, but they were barely merciful enough to keep me and Nux for a while. We stayed with them until we outgrew their bunch and wound up a floating pair that went wherever we were needed. Too fast and too chrome to belong to any single crew. And by then we both knew better than to ever breathe a word about the imperator who just vanished one night.

And Joe. How was I supposed to admit she could be right about him? That Phil would support her position on the subject? How the shitting hell do I say 'yeah, maybe he was taking too much and asking way more of us than he should've been'?
And maybe, just maybe, those wives in white weren't so much in the wrong for leaving as I thought. Fucking no! I can't believe that. I just can't! It won't work, it doesn't fit with the place I was raised up. But maybe that was what made the horror of it half believable, the fact that I can't make myself believe in the picture Phil was trying to paint for me. Dune had, once or twice, called me a child soldier. She made it sound like a terminal illness, like a disease I picked up somewhere and couldn't shake off.

What was I supposed to tell her? As I gathered my grit to look her in the eye, only one word came to mind.

"Home."

"Huh?"

"Me an' Phil... Talked about home."

"Oh, Ducky. I see then..." She said it so quietly that I barely heard it, had to make it out mostly by how her lips moved.

There was that dumb, inescapable concern of hers and yet I welcomed it. V8 Dune, hurry up. I could feel her shifting to bring her hands up and in a moment of defeat, I pushed my face into those fingers with fervent desperation. I felt her scarred up hand curl clumsily against my eyebrow but even that felt something like liquid chrome.

The thumb of the shine hand was busy scrubbing away what was still damp under my eyes and mingling with a dried layer of sweat. I probably had clean spots, too.

Finally, fingers traced the scars, the one I put on the left side myself to even up the mess Wrecker put on my right side. What usually felt so shiny started to feel like the scratches of a blade's point, a silent threat. Tickling fingernails turned into teasing razor blades. Phil had gone and ruined everything by bringing up that first kill. Even the glorious touch of Dune's shine hand felt like dragging a hangnail over a bad sunburn.

With eyes mashed shut and teeth grinding, I had no choice but to capture her hands in mine and pull them away. They were warm, my fingers squeezed around them and spread out to feel the texture of skin, both soft and rippled with rough places that had healed tight and ugly. Both were fine, and I still wanted them on me, helping it all go away. I wasn't sure what to do, I'd never felt anything but that numbing balm inside somewhere when she touched my face but now? Would that goodness come back later?

"Please, V8... Just... Not there."

I kept my eyes closed, but I knew she was looking at me. She was so still, motionless. What else could she be doing but gawking in awe of my weakness?

My throwing hand let go of her left, before I knew what I was doing I had covered my worthless face. Ha! Trying to hide from a sand dweller who's seen me at the very most rusty. What could be worse than that level of infirmity? Being able bodied and still rust as fuck, that's a world of worse.

Perhaps she finally regretted dragging my carcass home.

"Oh, seeds." She offered no more warning than those words and this cooing noise as she felt her way around my arm and then under it to pull us together.

I wanted to fight it, question it, tell her to go sit on a prickly pear, but that arm around me made it
hard to move and easy to let the ugly rust in my soul spread like a cancer. I held it in, the stinging drops of cola in my eyes, the mewls and sobs that should follow them. I had to imagine myself strangling the feeling down and pushing it into a sand drift to suffocate, just like any wretch who was stupid enough to make an enemy of me.

Like any good long shot, Dune didn't miss a thing. I was only drawn in closer, head tucked under her chin and listening to her shudder as if her cola-works were gonna start up too. I could hear it in her voice, it was confusingly comforting to hear her whimpering too.

"If you were born here, you'd have been raised up by your mum and you'd've been so loved. We'd've played together. You'd've been older than Dune but a little younger than her brothers. Heh, they'd have liked you. You're actually a lot like them when you're not trying to be biggah and bettah and more deadly than everyone else. Got the same stupid arse sense of humor we all had. Dune's mum mightah been your initiate mother... You'd probably also be dead right now just like almost everybody else."

*How dare you. How dare you lie to me about how I could have been loved by some breeder I don't remember.*

But the picture she scratched into my mind was clear, like looking into rearview glass to see an alternate version of yourself and longing for it. How tore up was my head? Longing for anything besides white clay and a thunderstick gripped in my fist, that's crazy. I've gone crazy.

She was right, though. That fantasy could never have been possible. I'd have been brought up soft and carked it a long time ago. Being raised a war pup was probably the only reason that the scrawny No-name puke I had been ever amounted to anything.

"I'm just lucky to be born wretched, I guess."

She just hummed at that and I couldn't decipher the meaning of the sound, but she still had my left hand between us, held in her scar hand and I felt it squeeze around my fingers. I knew what that meant, though I can't name it.

I felt her other hand follow my spine North until it crashed into the hair which grows ceaselessly. Her fingers tangled in it at the back of my skull and drew circles in my scalp. Skin pricked up at that like I was cold, but I wasn't. At long last, something that could pull me out of my busted up head. It's a guilty pleasure to go somewhere else and let that weird, going undone feeling happen. You forget which thoughts are trash and which ones shimmer like naked steel. The thought passed me by, if Dune was aqua-cola I'd probably drown in her like an idiot and enjoy it. No one has drowned in forever. I don't know if there's enough wet stuff left outside of the Citadel to do more than sip very carefully so you don't spill.

I started drifting toward sleep again, thoughts getting more obscure and difficult to focus on. There was only the drumming of her blood pump under my face, the softest war song I've ever heard.

"Ya know, kinda missed this."

"Mm. Huh?" Her voice vibrating so close to my head woke me. Probably for the best, shouldn't fall asleep without the all important cord to bind our hands. Skull processed what she said a second later. "Missed wh- huh?"

"Dune lookin' after you instead of how it's been the other way around ever since that damn storm. Missed it."
"...dunno how I'm supposed to feel about that, Nutter."

"Humph, yir s'posed to shut up and let me hold you."

"Ah, eat it."

"Mmm. Maybe Dune'll just eat you, finally."

"Cannibal creeper."

"Jerkoff."

"Big-mouth."

"Greasy-pig."

"Sand whore."

"Hoppy."

"Limp."

"Slit."

I'd almost forgotten to feel like a pile of scrap as the familiar routines and sneering began. Felt like the careless fun ended too soon.

"What?"

"Okay, so. Dune is really, really hungover and maybe even still a little drunk,"

"That's for damn sure,"

"Pffpht! Lemme finish! Anyway, she wants to say... That your breath forkin' stinks and you're a huge pain in the arse,"

"Ugh, thanks a lot, little cockbite."

"but she wouldn't trade you for anybody else. And you can talk to Dune about anything, she'll listen even if she doesn't understand."

I pushed myself back to look at her, taking in what she just said as well as this terrifying honesty in her eyes. I don't think she could possibly grasp all of the meanings and ironies of the crap in my head, but... I already let her touch my skin and if that helped, what would happen if she touched deeper things? Could she reach far enough into me to grab the tangle of sludge and waste from the black pit in my soul and then yank it out? No, I don't think so, but for somebody who says they wouldn't trade you for anything, and if you believe them when they say that...

"I- Okay... Alright."

Chapter End Notes
Screwed up a few times with which side of his face has which scar on it. Fixed that just now. Oops. It was late (or rather super early) when I finished. I swear, once I'm done with this fic I'm going to go through and fix every typo and grammatical error. Hell, i might even purchase a month of Grammarly to get it JUST so. Thanks for hanging out and reading!
Chapter Summary

As she promised, Dune listens even when she cannot understand.

Chapter Notes

SHIT SHIT SHIT I FORGOT TO LINK YOU GUYS TO THIS!!!
MONSTERBRUSH CREATED THIS AWESOME FANART! AHIIIIIIIIHHHHH!

http://monsterbrush.tumblr.com/post/169902698376/some-fanart-from-one-of-my-
absolute-favorite-slit

I almost wish I still used tumblr, I'd have reblogged this literally everytime I looked at it
to squeal like a twelve year old at a one direction concert.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I lay with the battle fodder half curled in the fetal position under my arm. Dear thing, poor sweet
wounded killer. He'd wept for just a moment, reigning this outburst back with tremors that shook him
in my arms. He fought to hold it all it in, I wished that I could have him know that he didn't have to
push the flood of tears back, but that wasn't his way. He fancies himself invulnerable to feeling
hopeless things like this.

Just what about their terrible home had my Ducky and Phil spoken of? Must have been awful, but I
cannot imagine much of what went on where they came from was pleasant, yet it was their normal.
Perhaps the roaring engines and the thrill of the chase might have been a rare delight. I'm not dull
enough to deny that it must have been incredible fun to go fast and be fearsome, but in between those
moments- Hmm.

When I told him that I was there to listen, and he looked at me with the trusting eyes of a small boy. I
still hadn't expected him to truly give me his tales of the road behind him. Hidden tales of forgotten
children and wasted lives.

He agreed, he wanted to speak only for me. Strange strange strange. Something had changed.

Slit wasn't quite ready, he rested his head again for a little while and the only sound I could hear was
his unsteady breath. Oof, he needed a shave. His chin was like cactus prickles to my collar bone.

"I- I don't remember anything before the war tower... I know It was my mum who handed me off
and just popped me up on the lift to go up. Dunno if I know that 'cause I was told or what. It's shitty
to think about but I don't remember anythin' so why should I care? I remember them bloodshed boys
buzzing my hair off, though. An' jabbing me in the neck with the branding iron. Before that, nothin'.
Might as well've been born right then. It only hurts real bad for a second, after that it just throbs
kinda nasty for a bit..."
Holy seeds and blessed sprouts, this was history. His history from the very beginning. I hadn’t thought for a second that he would take the offer of an open ear that literally, to tell me about the whole thing. It wasn’t like a Slit to share things from the secret places in his head, but who was I to stop him?

He spoke of blessed childhood in a way I’ve never heard before. He barely cringed or gave the things he admitted a second thought, but to hear it was painful. He had to fight other children for a proper share of grub, and then said it wasn’t far off from an average upbringing!

He looked at me once more as if he wasn’t sure what I was doing when this confession had me pushing my fingers through his hair again. His eyes fell closed and he took another pause, and that’s okay. He could take whatever time he needed. All we had was time and that’s the beauty of being scavengers, no one to rush you around and tell you what to do.

I think we slept for a short time like this, and I held him safe and protected like he should’ve been when he was small. Felt like somebody owed him that, and I was there. I’m the one who pulled him up out of the wreck, so, felt like I was the one who should.

There were many moments when I became half awake, seeing the green things, but feeling Slit holding on tight enough to dispel the blessed illusion. If I stroked him like a tamed house critter, he only burrowed into me deeper, face pressed to my neck.

He’s always demanded attention when he wanted it, but never like this. He never needed it as if he might be swept away if he didn’t have something, or better, someone to hold onto. I must admit, it frightened me a little.

When the sun rose, I left the place of my birth to fetch water for thirsty mouths and dirty skin. Duck was already awake when I returned, just looking into the palms of his hands as if for answers until I got his attention. We sat and washed our faces in the quiet of the morning, and he spoke for me again.

“...He was small, pathetic. No one liked listening to him talk, I didn’t either, but it was better than being alone. Anything is better than that...” He said softly, quieter and more gently than any words spoken before or since. He talked of a brother, a boy whose name I’ve heard him spit like a terrible curse. Nux, who had been like the other side of the old world coin for Slit.

It was like walking through the path he took in growing from boy to... Well, not quite a man. It felt like Joe kept them all young in the head, too young to question him. Slit tried to tell me the things he felt as he grew to know that all he was and all he’d ever be was a warrior, and to expect the same from those around him. He wasn’t good at putting a name to the things he felt. He could describe pain, his guts grinding and churning up bile, pangs of fear and the stabbing feeling in your chest when you’ve been through it all too much. He told a tale of worry and disappointment in knowing that the one he was obligated to spend this warrior life with wasn’t made for war.

I wondered if he’d ever be able to leave the past behind him. It’s not like I could expect him to do so without being a hypocrite. With green leaves and gripping vines threatening my sanity every day, how could I claim that I’ve left my own history behind? Maybe, the act of saving him had been a feeble attempt to rescue myself. In order to save my sanity, I had inspired it in him. I made him question his world for the benefit of my own. He always said he’d make me regret pulling him from that wreck, I didn't, but I was questioning my reasons for it. Doing the right thing for wrong reasons, is that as bad as making a hurtful mistake with good intentions? Is it even enough to have good intentions?

His hand felt huge between both of my own, so big and rough and abused though years of violence,
but I knew that I may as well have been holding a lost kid's fingers while he told me his name. People aren't made of rubber, they're not like tires that you could just replace. Joe Moore just hadn't been capable of understanding this.

Slit kept talking, I kept holding his hand. He spoke of disease and the way others died young around himself and his partner, the way it felt to watch Nux slowly begin to fade into the space between life and the place beyond. People would die in their beds at night, some survived more on blood transfusions than they did on food or drink.

Helplessness. He spoke of helplessness but couldn't identify or rationalize the feeling, he just didn't know how. I tried to do it for him, tell him that he wasn't bad for not knowing what to do because no one taught him how to cope.

He told me that as Nux got worse he used to carve the feeling away, and I didn't understand at first. The word kept coming up, something would happen, and he'd "carve it out of his head" he'd say. Carving, carving, carving it all away. He must have seen the confusion in my eyes, so he pulled our hands apart and turned his arm for me between us, his callused fingers tracing the keloids and scarification which formed images in his skin. Oh, I'd known that he'd done these himself, but the reasons never quite added up. I was tempted to ask, there had been many times that things weren't so good between us, or our situation wasn't all good in a general sense. I wondered if he had carved away the feelings then too, in those moments when he had the privacy. This nasty suspicion had my gut twisted up into knots.

"Are they all so old, from before I dug you up from the sand?" I asked carefully, my palm swiping over the tightly grouped doodles in the flesh before pushing my fingers between his own to link our hands again. His face reddened, I wasn't sure if it was from the question or the way I had touched his skin.

He shrugged, the tight line of his lips which accompanied the gesture told me that he had done this ritual at some point since I'd met him. I hadn't seen anything new, and while I've spied him in the nude plenty it's not like I spent any time scrutinizing him while he shed clothes with his back facing me. He must have done it somewhere I don't see, during the moments when I'm not paying attention. His fingers curled and fidgeted between my own. The conversation had made him uncomfortable. Though it could be the hangover, I was queasy too, made my throat tight picturin' him with a blade to his skin for any reason besides bein' creative. I wanted to believe some of the doodles were artist's scratchings on the only long lasting surface available to him and nothing more. I'd always thought he wanted to carry his scribbles with him wherever he went.

I couldn't understand how pain could alleviate pain. How does that work?

I wanted to see what hadn't yet known the light. What had he etched into his flesh during our shared time? The old cuttings depicted life as a war boy from Slit's perspective. Cars, tools, parts, bang sticks, blades, bones, gods, and men dying for them. What does life as a Scav look like to him?

"Can I see?"

He looked at me, mouth popped open and snapped shut a few times until his free hand scrubbed through his hair. Duck was hesitating, turning his eyes away now. He looked embarrassed, of what? Slit never seemed ashamed of me looking at, or caressing, his other scarred bits. Maybe something was different about the new things, maybe it was too personal, maybe I'd be able to tell which healing marks related to specific moments of hell that we'd endured.

Yeah, that sounded about right. Not sure I'd want to share that either.
"Hey, um, Duck? I'm... Dune is real beat from last night an' you're tired. C'n see that long boring drive wearin' on ya. Sun ain't even shinin' bright yet, so let's sleep this off. Yeah? No? Gonna go quick to grab us a proper blanket out of the car."

"I can do it."

He began to rise, and without warning I wanted to move, escape, think about what he'd told me outside of this musty container.

"Nah nah! I'll get it. Need the air anyways."

The former war boy sat again, the cringe of his lips and the way he clutched at his head said it all. I'd just made it worse, saying I needed to be out of the room.

"Forkin' hell." I muttered on my way out, too quiet for him to hear I think.

Ah, neither of us are good at this.

I was still having a hard time making sense of it, bleeding and slicing yourself to chase away ugly feelings, although, it's not like my coping mechanisms are lovely moments of sipping tea in the sunshine.

I could remember the years before Slit. Itching for something, anything to feel alive.

Bang bang bang. Nothing quite like being the nastiest longshot in scav country. Travelers beware, trigger finger itchy and eyes sharp, don't show off your shiny scrap near me too much. Eyes are green. Bang bang bang.

Not that much has changed. I'm still a right nasty beasty to people who wander too close to my homestead. Usually, now days, they never live long enough to know that they've become target practice. Slit and I blow through resources too fast to dilly dally with an opportunity. Before him, when it was just me I was feedin', I used to make a game of it. I'd watch down my scope as trespassers ran for cover, I'd keep them pinned down for days, watch them get the thirst crazies. I even went so far as to insist that the killin' I do is a survival necessity, and it is, just didn't think the manner of it mattered much.

You're a hypocrite, Dune. Maybe, but it was fun.

Ah, fuck! I just hadn't expected this trip to pan put the way it did. I didn't know! How was I supposed to know Ardith was still kicking!? Holy shit, and married to somebody Slit grew up with. What are the fuckin-forkin' odds of that?!

This wasn't supposed to be spiritual madness and an emotional vomitorium, this was supposed to be a point proven. The green place is real but dead, and being brought here was supposed to prove that to Slit somehow. After that, I'm not sure what the next step was supposed to be. Begging for a mercy killing? The juxtaposing intent, it was enough to inspire a new headache. I had wanted to die in that moment when speech returned, but I had saved Slit, prevented him from traveling to the next realm on a few occasions.

I don't know that he's ever been suicidal, but ready for death, I'm certain he's longed for the end now and then, desired for his Valhalla.

I thought about this the whole way back to where we parked Shirley. Seeds and Sprouts, I sucked at this. I could almost see it in my mind as I rummaged around the car, that at the same point in past time when I was laying there covered in blisters and dying from the core out, Slit was carving away
the desolate horror of his upbringing. I couldn't understand! I couldn't force the jigsaw of fragments to fit together. How does pain cure pain?! What does pain do besides hurt?! What good does hurt do???

Everything outside the womb hurts, but we shouldn't ask for more pain.

I was crushing the blanket in my hands, as if it was the thought, as if I was trying to compress the idea of it down into something small and simple enough to fit into my head.

But for Slit, my Ducky, my friend... I could try. I could try to understand him.

He's asked so many questions in our time, but he's never asked why, why I had to save him. I thank the goddesses for that, because I know I'd never be able to begin explaining how his scarred face stopped me in my tracks when I meant to cut open his throat and send him off to his Valhalla. How do you tell someone that you were just too curious of them to let them die proper? I can't give him such an unsatisfying catharsis to this, to us.

I just... I had only wanted to know how such a creature could come to exist, I didn't count on caring for him, that it would become this. Slit's pain became my pain. How could I know that would happen?

It was then I decided I could not die here, not after this. Suicide to reach a reborn green wasn't an option when I had so much left to do, things to teach, wounds to help stitch closed. Slit needed me alive, he said so himself, though his reasoning for it was probably more than the words he'd spoken in the car on the journey here.

My sweetest friend, I've been a shit to you. Good goddesses, I'm so sorry. How could I believe that I was justified in abandoning you for emerald heavens when you, who had tried so hard to understand me from the very start, still needed me there with you?

How could I?! So we fought and screamed and cursed, but we understood that we get what we give, and that sometimes the bad has to come forth in terrible, violent ways, but trust that the other could take it. We could take it and forgive it. That's our shared gift.

I cried in the Impala, weeping hard. Harder than the times since my old beautiful body had been marred by vindictive flames. I wasn't lying to him, I really had needed the time and the air to think, to absorb it, his awful, terrifying youth. It was like a punch to the gut, I knew it was bad but to hear it is like being there too.

I needed to grieve for his childhood and the methods he had to use to cope, but I knew the way he paled wherever he saw tears. I've seen the look on his face. When I cried he never knew what to say, what to feel, so his head would just stall out. I couldn't burden him with that again, not now.

Were doomed, destined to be reduced to desication and decay unless we can face the harsh realities of our lives, the things which create the true self. We are violent and homely. Ducky and I, we're made of nitrous oxide and dynamite, dangerous, beautiful, ugly, evil, benevolent. We're both all of the above and the pieces of us fit in unexpected ways, time to admit that and just be there for him.

I left Shirley with shaking legs, the blanket hugged tight to my chest. The path toward my childhood home seemed shorter than it ever had before. What do I say? Before I knew it, the sun was bright enough to shine through the open doorway and illuminate Slit as he looked at me, and I looked at him. I'd never seen anyone look so lost.

"Let us get nice an' comfy an' have a nap, Duck." I said with a smile. At the very least, it seemed to
distract him from my red, wet face.

I dropped the blanket into his lap and began pulling his shirt up over his head, vest and all coming with it. There was nowhere to wash it, but I tossed it aside as if there was. Next came my own outer layers, Mama's vest, my pullover, my belt and knife. All that was left was my trousers and the tank top I wore under everything. I could just throw the covers over Slit, which I did, and he nodded. He wanted the rest, or perhaps the comfort of the ritual.

I considered simply giving him my hand to link us together, but when he looked at me like he couldn't believe that I'd give it to him without struggle, it became easy to give in to habit.

I laughed, sang, and raved. Slit growled and bitched.

At some point he managed to trick me, prodding at my side to make me flail in most ridiculous laughter so that he could grab my wrist and slip the leather cord over my hand like a noose.

Eventually there was no option but to settle, Slit certainly gave me no choice. He was sure to remind me that the nap had been my idea to start with.

"I dunno how I put up with your bull!" He sneered. I only bothered to shove at him to let me get more comfortable on my side without him leaning into me to calm fidgety limbs.

"Because I remind you to eat, and bathe, and drink, and do yir basic self care. Really, I'm just a glorified clock, ain't I?"

"The fuck's a clock?"

"Ah, nevermind, Ducky. Sleep."

"Yeah Yeah."

He lay there so still and quiet, the only indication that he still lived was the hot breath against the back of my head. The time passed, my headache kept me awake, and from the sound of his breathing I could tell that sleep evaded him as well.

It came like an itch that needed a good scratch. That's curiosity, it niggles and nags until you can't stand to hold your hand back. I needed to know what was going on in his head.

"What are ya thinkin' about?" I asked.

He shifted oddly, like he was caught doing something I might snap at him about. I knew how to get him talking, but the act felt deeply manipulative. I took the hand I was bound to and pulled it to both draw his arm tighter around me and to bring his fingers to my lips.

The way the air came and left his chest changed, he drew in a gulp of it quick, then let it go in a slow sigh.

Gods I'm evil, poor man-boy, so easy to sway with nothing more than a kind touch.

"Just... Why do you like my cut-ups so much anyway? Why do you touch um?"

Well, this I had to turn around for. His eyes weren't glassy with new tears, thankfully, but that lost look was there on his face again. It was a cold reminder of the days just after he was strong enough to sit up and see that his leg was missing. A lost soul.

"Because, it's you? I touch you. They're a part of you, aren't they? Slit?"
They're his scars, his doodles, they were his. Why was he looking away, chewing the loose skin of his chapped lips. Oh, Ducky.

"I guess... But."

"But what?"

"Why me?"

"That's... That's a complicated question with an uncertain answer."

It's a variation on the very question I had dreaded on my way to the car to fetch our things. Shit, my heart was going nuts, and this close I knew he could feel it. What do I tell him? The truth as I saw it? If I tried to think my way back, all of the reasoning at the time got fuzzy, mixed up, but one thing stood out in the memory. It was his ugly ass grin and how much it had pleased me.

"I- Slit... It's because, I don't know, you're different, ya looked different, aside from tasty you smelled different even. And then you smiled up at me, I had my knife snug against your jugular, but you were grinnin' like mad. Couldn't jus' leave ya to rot after that... Yir like me."

I think that was an honest answer, it felt right.

"Oh." Was all he said for a minute. Couldn't be sure my words were well received, but I could still feel his forehead and nose against my temple and cheek respectively. "How so?"

"How so what?" Dumb of me, forgetting what I just said.

"How the hell am I like you?"

Another pause, another thought. How was he like me? I twisted in his grip, slipping my hand from the leather cord to smile back at him with the sharp and yellows. He had to lean back a bit to see. Its funny, he's far sighted, so he can't see things close. Made sense, I depend on my scope. Warriors like him raised up in the shameful pit probably don't know such luxuries.

"Busted up and smilin' ugly. Dune thinks maybe she made up a lot of excuses, but mostly just... Lookin' at you is like lookin' into some weird mirror."

I lay my head back down to watch him. He seemed to be thinking again, maybe absorbing it, that some nutter took him home for silly ass reasons.

"So, I could'a just been maggot food."

"Yeah, but yir not. Dune's real glad she didn't turn ya into grub, Slit. Real glad."

He seemed frozen there, looking at his newly freed hand. Again, he gazed into his palm as if there should be an answer held in it, like his fingers should be curled around something.

I know why it hurt, why I wanted to cry. Because its bloody humiliating, opening that door to let somebody know the reasons for things. And if my small admission made me want to hide under a rock, talking about all his history must have practically killed Slit.

I'd still rather eat sand than let the reality of this world reach me. There's so many reasons to be sad, grace of green I just wanted to focus on the good, however hard it was to find.

"Hey." He turned his eyes back up as I spoke. I dared, not because of the scars but because his face itself pleased me, to lift my hand and trace the outline of his cheekbone and jaw. He shivered, as if
cold. "We're alive, ain't quite rusted out yet. Ain't alone either... You're right, it's better not to be
alone. It's so much better."

He seemed to cringe at that and I nearly drew my hand away, ready to roll over because I was sure
that I had stepped over a line that I hadn't known was there. Slit was faster, reaching for his face and
flattening my hand between it and his palm.

"Dune, how long were you on your own?"

That came from nowhere, an abrupt road away from his history. It made my insides feel hot and dry,
grinding together. It's not something I remember fondly, the days in the silence of the caverns.

"I dunno duck. Dune would need to look at the wall where she counts days."

"You marked finding me with red. The other red spot way before that, that's your mum, ain't it?"

I didn't want to answer, I felt far off in some other realm away from here. "Yes." I said anyway,
mechanical like, the same way Shirley lurches forward in a hurry when Slit lead-foots the guzz
pedal.

"I counted once, that's six of your years."

"Yeah."

"Holy shit, Dune. That uh... That explains some things."

"I guess."

I knew that was why we were here, didn't mean I wanted to talk about it. That was probably the
point of the trip, because I don't talk about things, I just bury them because it's easier. Much simpler a
matter to try fixing somebody else rather than yourself. When I looked back at him, I expected him to
be in a state of recoil, pulling away because that's what any sensible person would do. He wasn't
doing that, he was in mid yawn when turned my head and a moment later propped up on his elbow,
just lookin' at me with this weird, serious face. It was odd because there wasn't a trace of anger or
annoyance in the glare. He still had a hold on my hand too, pad of his thumb playing with the
tendons behind my knuckles. Not sure what to make of that.

"Don't really feel up to sleeping."

I've heard that before, usually nights when he woke up swinging and rolling around, dragging me by
the wrist with him as he flopped about. He's always had those tricky dreams. Usually he'd get up and
do something under Shirley's hood to get his mind off it. Couldn't do much of that delicate nature out
here. Another problem was, I don't think he's gotten more than ten hours sleep in the last three days.

"Ah, well, laying down for a bit may still put the pep back in yir step, Ducky."

"Mm. Maybe."

"Slit? Has Dune ever told you that she hasn't chundered since she was a wee sprout?"

"No, that's fucking weird, though."

I was having that sudden hot feeling all over and the burning sensation of stomach sludge crawling
up my chest. Yeah, that long, proud record for my steel constitution was over. I foolishly swore that
I'd ever drink another drop of home brew.
Ever bright Ducky, he was shoving the bucket under my face. So helpful

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was... Hard. I don't want to get into why it was hard, but writing this out helped me find some peace and understanding for a problem (actually, several problems) I've been on both sides of.

Not 100% happy with this chapter, I could really only do so much with it. These characters are not heart to heart talk types and I really don't think they would unload every bit of their shit on each other all at once. It's going to take a few more chapters and a few more interactions with the crow fishermen before I can close this arc for good and start the next one, which will be more gritty action adventure than the emotional soap opera this has lately been.

Also, my building is undergoing renovations so everything is loud and stupid right now which makes writing whilst sober a huge pain.
I'm So Tired

Chapter Summary

These are men who choose their own names.

Oh V8, it's in her hair. It's not even long enough to get near her mouth. How'd it get in there? Splashback?

It was the sad, violent, loud, ugly kind of retching that you do with an angry, but mostly empty gut. And like anything done by Dune, she was trying to talk throughout the entire ordeal.

"Ugh! It tastes like-" Then came more belching and gagging.

"Yeah, tastes like stomach juices, 'cause it is." I said.

"I- hhrk! Hate this!"

"You've been eating the same damn shit every day for ten years, you think eating greasy sky rat and pouring rotgut over it isn't gonna tear up your insides?"

"Ugh... Nng.."

She was just spitting up trickles of acid and the water we had earlier in between mutters and moans. It's been too long for a belly full of food to come back up. Last night's meal was probably well on its way through the tubes, leaving the stomach sour. Personally, I didn't eat much of it. The bird was actually fine. It went down the okay-ish, same as any other wild meat we managed to catch, but the rest... If I couldn't identify it, it got shoved onto a passing pup's plate and they certainly didn't complain.

I couldn't not gag at the sound and smell. It had been a while since I had to listen to somebody spew next to me. Nux seemed to always toss up at night, if I had to hork it was usually on a pursuit. Just pound on the roof, thumb at the gut to let the driver know, then let loose as soon as they veer off so there's no one behind the car to catch it on their windshield.

I caught the futile gags, can't sit there listening to it without joining in. Didn't need the bucket though. I wasn't really sick, so I could swallow it back. Felt bad, couldn't tell'er that she'd feel fine once it was up when they're was nothing really in there to come out. Her guts were just fighting uselessly out of spite at this point.

Once she appeared to be more tired than sickened, I pulled the bucket away and pushed it toward the wall with my foot. The smell would just make us both gag some more.

Dune did little more than slump forward and complain more in mutters, head in the space where the bucket had just been.

Much earlier she'd fetched the canteens, I took mine to wet down the soiled pleats on her head while she lay there. She slapped at my hands as I tried to scrub them clean with wads of the trash around us.
"What'er ya doing?? Stop pulling!"

"You got chunks in your hair, Nut-job."

Yeah, I wasn't about to hang around the scav if she stunk like this. I tossed the rags toward the bucket and sat back, watching her to make sure she didn't belch up more nasty shit onto the cot. She did nothing but groan and curl up with her forehead digging into my right hip.

"Twas the headache that started it. S'gone now for some reason..."

"Yir too tired to feel anythin'. Been there, doin' it right now." She appeared to be trying to crawl across my lap toward the canteen now. "Swish and spit it or else if you swallow it's just gonna come right back up."

She gave a wave and groaned dismissively, but still followed the advice, pushing away the bucket once again when she was finished to flop back over my leg and a half, staying there. Fuck, I just let it happen, not like I had it left in me to push her off. Liked it too much, and there was too little war boy left in me to fight that liking.

I felt hollowed out, like a war chariot with no engine and no go left under the hood. It's not that I had any hope left of doing something worthy of Valhalla with the rest of my half-life, just felt as though all before that wreck was some fevered up dream. It's like waking up and finding out none of the grandness of it was real. Is Valhalla a lie too? What about the mighty V8? I worship engines, which you can see and touch, but is the spirit of it real?

Talking to Dune about it was, different. Don't feel worse, don't feel better either. She said things I don't really get, but she would probably say the same thing about what I said if asked. Dunno how somebody was s'posed to teach me how to not be pissed off at everything because I got the best driver, who happened to be perpetually trapped in puphood and fecking dying only two thirds through this half-life. And the rest of the shit. I guess somebody should've known what to do, a lot of pursuit teams start fighting when one of um has his foot in the grave. Somebody should've had the experience damn it, so why didn't they fucking say something? Why didn't anyone tell me what I was supposed to do?

War boys don't talk about this shit. Dying is a fact of the half-life. Everybody dies. Just remember it's better on the other side, but what if it isn't? Maybe I always knew deep down that we're all completely fucked.

I trained harder, prayed harder, fought harder. I was the fucking best. Chromiest of the chrome, war paint so thick that it became white armor, aim so true that the shine of our war chariot made Immorta's enemies tremble in their rust buckets. And Nux, the best driver, worthy of me.

*Delusions.*

I did it all, became all to conquer fear, the most wicked of all maladies. It's possible that it was all to convince myself that if I just believed enough, deserved enough, the Eternal Highway would await me beyond the gate. No more pain, no more broken thoughts.

"Thanks Ducky. Such a nice boy..."

_Fuck, why do you want me?_

Why would anybody in their right fucking mind like having me around? I've got the face of a dump truck and the rest of me is pretty much as useful as the stereo system you always gotta rip out of any reclaimed car.
That's the thing though, she's not right in the head, but she's swift enough not to waste too much time on useless things. I used to think a lot of the garbage she collects was totally worthless. Turns out you can build better junk from the piles of her "treasures" scattered around the caverns, like my leg.

She said she was glad that she didn't turn me into maggot food. All the touching was different now too, it was worse, a thousand times as sinful.

War Boy law dictates that you keep clean and pure. No messing around with anybody outside the faith and if you had to trade paint, better to do that with another willing War Boy. Those are things carried out without care in the dark of night in unoccupied tunnels within the deep warrens. You don't bring those sinful grabby hands into the light and in the day, the only touch you might be likely to enjoy was a fist in the mouth.

Boys back home sleeping huddled together to keep warm was just practical, but half the soft headed shits probably enjoyed it.

 Couldn't tell now if Dune ruined me or blessed me. Pissed me off that I couldn't tell. I still don't fucking know what's what. Liked that Dune listened though, didn't call me soft or... Whatever. Getting to really like that shine hand's fingers caught up between mine. I think that started with the sleeping deal we have to do to stop her wandering off. I liked it even better awake. I dunno why, just made it kinda as if we're connected.

I've made up a dozen excuses for why it was no big deal when she had her fingers all over my cut-ups. Just letting her admire the good work and the grit it takes to cut flames and wheels and idols into chrome flesh, that's all it was, and she should admire the chromeness of it with a hand that shined. That's right!

It was complete bull and I knew it. I went after her for it because it felt good, helped me forget everything, made me go limp and feel... Things.

This touching lately, can't make up a reasonable excuse for that. It's worse than the aqua cola addiction. I fucking needed it. Sometimes I resented her for it, getting me hooked on this stupid, soft, rusty crap. Other times, like now, it was real easy to let her stay where she was, even rest a hand over the back of her head and toy with the damp fuzz on the sides. Didn't even care that I was still wearing the metal leg. Too fucking tired to give a damn how much that ached, and I think she was singing something we heard last night at the pole walker hovel. It was doing a hell of a job lulling me to sleep while I sat leaning back against the wall.

"...Blackbird singin' in the dead of night. Mmm mmm..."

I think I closed my eyes for just two seconds.

"Well, you two look like fresh hell. Nice sweater."

Nnnrrg! The redheaded she-dingo.

While Dune rolled off me and managed a ridiculous grin at the wench, I was grabbing my shirt to pull back on. So I wasn't bothering to shave that off anymore, it's not like I ever leave Dune's dirt hole without something to hide my skin from the sun anyway so there's just no point to running a blade over my chest to sheer it off. Dune bitched any time she found piles of hair anyway. Ardith didn't have to poke fun for it.

Dune chuckled low, devilish as she tried to scratch her nails up my ribs to drive the embarrassment home. Her shine hand got slapped for that, a rare consequence of pushing that line a little too far.
Didn't like them teaming up on me.

"Ouch!"

"Serves you right."

The harpy took a step through the open doorway, clapping a hand over her nose and mouth only to back right out of the shelter again. Now she was fighting the retching. Yeah, probably stunk like a sick ward in here to a fresh nose, served her right too.

"Oh, you definitely need Bones' hangover cure, sister. And you... Phil says he wants to see you about something or other."

Fucking great, why would he want to see me? Hasn't he seen enough? I was pretty sure that the nutter and I would be rolling out of here sometime today, not lingering around like this was some dumb social thing. This place sucked. It was still cold, at like noon-ish? Certainly didn't want to hang around long. Yeah, this trip was my idea, but by how last night went it was doing a fuck-ton more harm than good.

It was a damn good thing this witch was Dune's friend, or else I'd probably grab her and chuck her out the door by the scruff. How come she ain't hungover?

I growled and gave her a glare as I stood, but I couldn't be granted the time to chew her up for walking in uninvited. Dune kept stumbling all over the place and had to be caught and hauled back up to her feet. Fine, fuck it, let the redhead deal with it and hand her back when she could walk right. If Ardith and her big mouth had any merit, it was that I didn't think she'd do the scav any harm.

With that realization, it wasn't too hard to steer her to Ardith and let mouthy creature take over leading her along.

"Dune can walk damn it!" The scav griped, and I let her go.

The redhead pointed her across the bridge, telling her a moment later that she'd meet her at the house.

"Where's Phil." I asked bluntly. I didn't have any intention to stand here to talk to her for any length of time.

"...look, I don't have to like you-"

"Feeling's mutual."

Ardith ground her teeth at that, I grinned. It was too much fun pissing her off.

"But, if you let me finish, I don't want you dead. You're Dune's man, if she sees something in you..."

"I ain't nobodies man."

Her eyes spoke questions without answers, because they were asking the wrong ones. I wasn't a husband and Dune wasn't a wife. The line was blurring, but I still knew what we were. I'm sure of it.

Her face twisted up, once again, like she'd gotten a whiff of shit. "Fucking whatever, man. Point is, I talked to Phil. He says, you wouldn't be here if you didn't give a shit about her. So... There. You don't bother me, I won't bother you."

She talked to Phil, so that meant he must have opened his big mouth too. Great, how much did she know? I couldn't tell, she was just as hard to read as the scav.
"Whatever." I said, shouldering passed her to watch Dune across that bridge. Didn't want her to fall. "...Don't leave her alone anywhere too long. Don't need her wandering off and hallucinating."

Ard grabbed my arm. I hoped that she had the sense to tell that I was tense because I didn't want her touching me.

"How long has she been like this? Since you knew her?"

"Been a nut since she dragged my worthless hide home. Got worse after the lightning." Might as well speak the truth, then maybe the bitch would stop trying to blame me for Dune's crap. "Don't. Leave. Her. Alone."

There was a moment, it was brief, but we exchanged a glance and in that fraction of a bloodpump squeeze we could understand each other.

"Got it... Phil is around back at my place, under the pavilion with the truck."

She was off running after the Scav to pull the hair up out of her face while she leaned over the rope railing of the bridge to lose her guts again. My shoulders hunched, I felt like I should be the one running after Dune and keeping her from falling over the rail or getting chunks in her hair again, but I had to let this happen.

My leg felt sticky and disgusting. I should probably take the fucking thing off and clean that whole deal before I get heat rash or some shit. The old fart could wait, I was going to do that self care Dune was bragging about first. What is a clock?

Either way, much earlier she had reminded me that I hadn't cleaned the stupid leg in a while. I popped that off, peeled off the sock and wiped the thing down. Yeah, I had friction blisters up around where the rim of the socket rubbed on me. As always, I felt a foot that wasn't there aching like it had been in an ill fitting boot all day.

I didn't have to lose a foot. If it weren't for Joe, the cult, everything, I'd still have a foot, but I also might not have lived long enough to miss it. Who the Fuck is to blame? Can't figure out who to hate, Nux, Joe, Dune, Crank, me? Who's to blame?

All that could be done for the half-leg now was bandage it up where the blisters were chafed open, put on the cleaner sock stuffed into my pocket, and just ride it out. The drive back was going to bite the big one. Well, Dune was getting better about listening to the car and shifting the gears. Maybe she could be convinced to give driving another crack and let me keep this thing off. Once we get back to her kip, I'll have to try and keep off it for a few days and hobble around on the crutches Dune made for me so this could heal up.

Why does she try to help me?

Didn't understand it. Never had. But, she did try to explain. It wasn't an excuse for all the BS I've had to deal with, but according to her, she brought me home because allegedly I'd smiled at her when I thought she was going to drain me out and send me off. I don't remember this, but it sounds like something I'd do. And she said she touches me, not the cut-ups. I didn't know what to say to that, I was kinda chuffed to hear it, but that never translates into words all that great.

She wanted to see the new ones, and I wasn't so sure about them myself. It happens when it feels like I'm made of knots, I get that freakish sense of relief and sometimes pride when it looks good, then it's done. Don't like thinking about it. Damn long-shot never misses anything, she sees right through me like windshield glass. How much of me does she really wanna touch? I pulled at the waistband of
my slacks, looking down into the mess of it crawling toward my right hip. I was running out of room, and lately the kit I kept in my pocket felt heavy. She'd see sooner or later as the new and old crashed together. Would she shout and rant like Nux did?

He was easy enough to placate. I used to be able to tell him it's practice for when I traded this skill to others for better grub and cleaner Aqua Cola, which wasn't always a lie. Dune wasn't so easy to reassure. I wasn't sure what she'd do if she saw. Also there was the matter of where the new shit was.

Mm, didn't feel like thinking about it, eyes on me like that.

I sat, waiting on the stump and the leather socket of the metal leg to dry off, and nobody bothered me. It gave me time to think, time I'd needed last night but couldn't get. Now that I had it, I felt wrong without Dune close by, and then there was this vague feeling that Nux should be there, too.

I hate being alone to think.

Once I was all together enough to pull that leg back on, tighten the corset threads and fasten the belts, I made my way across the bridge, trusting that wherever Dune was, that woman was with her. That half a leg was angry, it felt like I was being jabbed with a hot screw driver. Everywhere else I felt stiff like the organic cogs and sprockets needed a good oiling.

When I found Phil, he was sitting on a wooden crate in what could only be a makeshift garage among a few heaps of scraps framed in by two automotive corpses. He was using a broken chunk of rearview glass to see as he shaved his head and face with a razor. He used cooking grease to lubricate his skin against the cruelty of the blade.

"Same as always. Would you turn to ash if the sun touched you before noon?"

"Eat me, old man."

Crank put the glass and the blade down with a grunt to look at me, and I felt small under that gaze although he was still seated while I stood. It was because he was still alive, ancient for a war boy.

"You and my wife made up?"

I cringed at that. Still didn't really care for her, or anybody around here, but I didn't want to chuck her off a cliff.

"Well, standing here ain't I? She didn't try to kill me."

"Good. Figure she's just being clucky about her friend showing up acting off." He said, and I had to wonder what Dune was like before.

"Yeah... What did you want me here for?"

"Ah, yes." He stood, pulling a rag from his back pocket and swiping the grease from his face with it as he moved toward the pickup with the hood propped open.

"I've got an engine about to cark it and no replacement to drop into this polished turd. Feather Knife and Bones are all but useless with things of the mechanical type. Figured you could give me a hand and we could overhaul this in a day if we work hard like back home... Help me with this, I'll tune up your ride and let you dig in my goodie piles. Deal?"

It'd be stupid of me not to take a deal like that, I could already spot things sticking up from the heaps that I wouldn't mind getting my hands on. I could find better parts for my leg. "Yeah, I'll give it a fair
go. She chattering when you start her up?"

"Yeah. I wanna replace bearings and get her squeaky shine inside. Got the tools, parts, and equipment for it, just never the time what with pups and crow fishin' an all of that. Four hands would get me ahead of the game."

"Can't relate."

"Mm. Yeah, It's different when the wee ones are your responsibility, not everyone's. Kinda miss that sometimes, belonging to something big."

Now, there's something we could agree on. A lot of times I felt like I was just floating around loose. Back home I had a spot where I fit like the right size screw, and I looked damn shine on a lancer's perch and back basket. I used to fit there just right but that spot, and its sense of purpose, is gone.

Dune was the most annoying, obnoxious, vulgar creature to ever crawl through the sand, but she spent considerable effort hacking a hole in her world for me to fit into.

Is it a place of mediocrity? I still look at my hands from time to time, knowing that a thunderstick belonged in the right.

"Hey, yo," Phil was snapping his fingers in front of my eyes to get my attention. V8, I was out of it.

"You gonna just stand there or are you gonna help me take this shit apart?"

Shit. Right. Maybe I'd been alone with the scavenger too long, starting to act like her too.

I might not be much of a black thumb next to Nux or Crank, but there's something comforting in lifting an engine out and knowing that once you stripped it down to the sum of its parts, all engines look pretty much the same. If you could put your skull meat into the right place and commit the assembly to memory, duel overhead camshaft or pushrod. Inside every good vehicle worth touching with greasy hands has the same stuff inside, if you're willing to learn how they work.

Nux was better at this, he had some kind of bizarre gift, but I wasn't useless. Ah, soon enough though, I felt like some fresh pup what with how he was talking to me, though he wasn't quite as vulgar as I remember, which says something about how he used to talk back home. He was handing over bearings after scratching his blunt fingernails over them to see how worn they had become.

"You know what that means. Feel that, we're gonna have to resurface this crankshaft... I ought skin that dodgy junk peddling skid mark who sold me this rusty old bitch. Look at this! Only had it two months, oil hasn't touched her in the right places for an age, dry as a nun's nasty."

It sent me back a thousand miles, back to laying in their crew kip with infection eating the inside of my face. Nux had more or less lived under my arm, too terrified to move. After a week of that, Crank was the one who pulled him up and told him it was time to learn engines. I was too fevered up to remember much but that moment stuck. I took a swing on him for trying to take the pup and he told me in the war boy way, that Nux would be fine, lay down, don't move. Stating that as a war boy sounded like this: Don't throw a wobbly! I need skinny little hands to dig around under a hood and this pup can't be let to latch onto you like a Joey on a tit! He'll come back in one piece an' after that you're gonna sleep on separate mats! Got it? Get to restin' before you turn to worm food. I was too rusted up to do much more than crawl after them, howling, for a few yards and then give up. Wasn't too long after that, I was well enough to get up and do something. Started on engines, but was too old to keep with trainee blackthumb work, got stuck on the back of a boarding wagon and taught to throw a lance. That, throwing fire and fury, was my own godly given gift. Only ever saw Nux at night for a long time, when he'd crawl out of his separate sleep spot and wedge himself between me
and the wall.

"Aw hell, this might be more than a one day job, mate."

"Ain't your mate, geezer."

"Kiss my wrinkly ass."

Besides a driver's tan and the accompanying aging on the right side of his face, Phil didn't really look that old. It was the aging inside that was the problem. He hacked and retched every half hour or so in a fit. That was years working war chariots from wreck to beauty in the warrens and inhaling dust on the roads when he went out as a repair boy to-go. As we worked, I wondered if that's what started killing Nux, if that's where Larry and Barry came from.

How am I still alive? Lately I ask myself this question more and more. I'm at least three quarters through my life. Crank is an anomaly, so were Notch and Ace. Everything was so different now. I'm not sure what a half-life is. Do we live fast and die young because of the place we came up, or is it all luck of who your parents happened to have been and how much of their sickness they passed on?

Phil had lumps, or rather, a single large mass somewhere in his throat pushing the left side out noticeably. A lot of us get like that eventually, and blindness for a number of reasons. Always the neck and eyes. It didn't look so nasty with paint. If I thought about Phil, when he'd been Crank, he was always painted up proper. I knew he had darker skin where sweat had made the white clay run, but it still took looking at the holy scars on his face to remind myself who he was. Now it was easy to see where the sun bit him too hard on too many occasions and the lack of paint made his neck look more like the cancer or busted thyroid he must have had. More than anything it was just disconcerting to look at a war boy without the paint job, sporting nothing but the primer.

"You look fecking weird without war paint."

"Hah! So do you. Liked you better bald." He replied without missing a beat.

"Dune would have my guts for garters. Says I need the hair or else my brain'll get cooked."

"Ah, women are like that, carin' about things like us for some reason."

Only grunted in agreement. The topic had been weighing like lead on my head lately. I didn't get it, doubt Phil got it either.

"Tell me, were Tank and Notch still alive, before you wound up wrecked?"

*Welcome distraction.*

"Tank caught a bullet with his head about a thousand days before I, er... met Dune."

"The job hazard." Phil hissed through his teeth as he dropped what was in his hands down into the tool chest. It was an old saying among our kind. A mediocre death through no real fault of the deceased. Stray bullets happen, and sometimes we caught them with our faces or the important components inside. "Notch? Was he still doin' alright?"

"Last I saw him, Yeah. Him an' his hunting crew were doing something up north when the immort-Joe, had us chasing his breeders. They were probably on a Bartertown run."

"Ah, makes sense. He'd know when to get his crew out of the way when a shit storm is coming."
I shrugged. Notch would have only known if the one armed traitor let him in on her plot. I always thought Notch was a know-it-all. Only had any respect for him because I knew, given a good enough reason, he could probably beat my arse into pulp. At least up until the lumps on his back got nasty. He might be dead now, too.

"He had rust growing on his spine." I said, and Phil nodded.

"He was never long for this world, being an asthmatic. Didn't suspect he'd get bumpy though."

"Why's that?"

"He was full life when I first set eyes on him, but I guess we all absorbed a lot of that radiation, scouting ruins for Joe. Shit, I think I've lost more mates than you've ever met. We had a hard go of it back then, Slit. A hard go. Citadel wasn't always a smooth running organic machine."

Damn. That's not a picture I could conjure into my head easily. War boys don't talk too much about history, Valhalla, sure, feats of valor, definitely, devotion to V8 and he who grabbed the sun, always. We never imagined things had ever been different than what they were. Things have to start somewhere. Nothing starts off nice like and pretty, not in this age. You have to make it nice, same as polishing chrome till it sparkles. V8 is everything about war boys just dumbass adage fuel?

It had been several hours since we lifted the truck's soul out with the hoist Phil had built from the skeleton of other wrecks scattered about here. One look around, it was clear he'd made himself at home here, creating a proper garage around himself, much like I was beginning to do back at Dune's kip. My stupid fucking mediocre leg was killing me, but I couldn't believe what he had here. If you went just inside into the addition that was clearly newer than the rest of this beat to hell house, he had nearly all of the tools and machining equipment of a fully functioning garage. There was even a pit to work under and hydraulics to lift the car, all you had to do was pull into this back room.

I asked how he got his hands on all of this. Turns out, crow fisherman hold meetings and elections. If you're the best out of the bunch at something, they vote you the master of it and bring anything useful for that trade to you. Phil was a mechanic, so it was natural that anything that was deemed useful to the craft be brought to him. The impala would no doubt benefit from this deal, in the meantime, I was scrubbing and oiling parts while Phil tinkered and nitpicked at the poor care that the truck had endured for time longer than can be counted.

I heard pups, gibbering and squealing. They came around a corner shouting and carrying on like pups do. Weird, you could tell which one was sired by who. A toddling one with freckles, another one with a pug nose, and the third, looking an awful lot like Phil. There was the pup he stole too, almost my height now, but skinny as a lance what with being that age when you grow up rather than out. He wandered around the corner more slowly only to back up to and peer around it at us. He was afraid of me.

Phil's brat, he clambered up unto the bull bar on the truck to peer inside at the empty space where the engine had been.

"Issit gonna go fast when yir done?"

"Eh, not as fast as some I've seen, but swift enough." Phil answered as he picked up the smallest one, settling him on a hip while the other, a girl I think, grabbed at my pinky finger to pull down my hand and look at my arm.

Phil was grinning like some idiot, and the kid smeared her drool coated mouth all over my forearm with a "Mwah" to punctuate the action. Gross.
"She'll be a stitcher when she grows up. Likes fixing bleeders, though, doesn't seem to see the difference between the old and the new yet." He said, a little muffled because the one in his arms was trying to stick its fingers in his mouth.

"And Sump is Fixin' to be a mechanic too. And, then the trouble maker, like Bones." Ardith turned the corner next, taking the one Phil held from him. Behind her was the scav. Good, she looked less like shit.

"Look'it this! A Slit and a Phil doing car stuff! Makes odd sense, yeah? No?... Ey, I know a good joke. How do ya figure if a mechanic's been naughty? Cause' hell have two clean fingers! Hah!"

Ardith's eyes just about fell out of her head, I'd have laughed, but I didn't really get the joke. Clean fingers, what? I don't know, there was some latent instinct to look at Phil like he had the answer, he was open mouthed grinning, hands pressed over his brat, Sump's ears. Slowly he began to chuckle.

"Heheh, nice one. Heard it before but, Nice." With that he let go of the pup's head, just as he started whining about wanting to know what was said. Fuck, I wanted to know too.

"What... What?!!" I looked at Phil again, he was stifling fully blown cackles and descending into yet another fit of coughs.

The redhead began pushing Dune into that back room I had just been marveling over. "HOW ABOUT WE SEE THOSE PEACHES. HMM?"

And then they disappeared into the shadows of that room full of shiny tools, pups trailing along after them..

"Your girlfriend's got jokes, give her that."

The gears stopped dead when he said that. Dune was a lot of things. But a girlfriend? She was a girl and I GUESS she was a friend but a girlfriend? No. Something nasty rose up in my head. Uh uh, he had it wrong. Dead wrong. I could hear something clatter loudly on the other side of the doors separating us from the harpy and the scav, almost as if Dune heard what he said too and dropped whatever she'd been holding. There were mutters and murmuring from in there too.

"She's not my girlfriend!"

"Hmm. Does she yell at you stop tinkerin' and come eat?"

"Uh, yeah?"

"Does she yell at you when your clothes stink?"

"I guess..."

"Does she elbow you real hard in the gut when you're almost asleep and say 'Ow! Get off my hair!'?"

"Sure but-"

"Girlfriend,"

"Shut it!"

Asshole. Anybody you have to live with would do all of that shit. Hell, if Nux had hair he'd probably have kicked the shit out of my shins for laying on it.
Fuck. Shit. Fuck. Rust. Fuck! Dunno why I thought of it, maybe I needed to get away from the topic. "What the shit is a peach anyway!?"

Phil glanced at me, brows pulled up on his head. "Dunno. Probably has something to do with those crates stacked up in there. Take a peek."

I dropped what I was doing, parts being scrubbed in dirty water at the bottom of a pan, to look through the crack between the mismatched steel doors.

They were pulling thin, flimsy stacks of glossy paper from wooden boxes with a strange picture and a single word on each crate. The symbol looked like someone's backside when they're bent over, and the word, it took a moment to sound out.

P. E. A. C. H. E. S. Peaches.

They were reading under a shop light, not word burgers, something with pictures.

"Spiderman. My favorite." Dune said, showing Sump with a pointing finger and pulling him into her lap to read to him.

This was like a fever dream, just as curious, but less terrifying. "They call those paper things peaches."

"Yup." Phil said, leaning against the flank of the car and wiping his greasy hands on his slacks. "Harvest moon is about a fortnight off. You should stay until then... According to Ardith, it was a really big deal around here when they were kiddies. We always throw a rager over it. Might do your girlie good to be here for that."

"I didn't think we were staying that long, couple days at the very most." I said truthfully, still watching them in there. Even before we got here and found out we weren't going to be alone when she went about the deal with this place, I didn't think we'd need long.

I went still and stiff. Phil had dropped his hand on my shoulder, then he was talking to me with the same tone he was using with those pups in there.

"Someday, I'm gonna have to face the hell inside me. So will you... Knowing things could have been worse isn't an excuse, Slit. Don't just step aside and tell yourself that you couldn't have done more. Wasn't fair to you when I said it, it isn't fair to Dune if you say it. Stay, just two weeks. Hold her. Let her get over this place. Maybe it'll help you move on too. Never know till you try."

I was still watching them, Ard nudging Dune, showing her a page of what she was reading, and the Scavenger laughed, resting her chin on the head of the small boy in her lap as she read out loud. Maybe this, finding these people, was doing less harm than I thought. Dune looked happy. Not crazy, not mad happy like when we found wrecks with bodies in them. Her smile now was different. With zero warning, I didn't want to stand anymore. I was so, so out of guzz. I meant to say something else, something that meant something but instead...

"I'm... I'm so fucking tired."

"Heh yeah, me too, kid. Sleep, I can handle this. I'm a better black thumb than you an' your driver combined. Honestly Jus' wanted you here to talk. You can sleep in the cab of the truck, Slit. It's okay."

As if I had regressed many thousands of days, I did what I was told like a pup, took off the leg and propped it up between the seat and wheel as I lay inside the cab while Phil worked. The noise of a
mechanic doing what he does never bothered me, I slept right through, lulled even by the noise.

I didn't dream. I was too spent, too far gone.

When I woke, I found that someone had covered me. It was a sheet of cloth I didn't recognize. It wasn't Dune's. She was there too, leaning in through the passenger window, smiling, touching my face. It came back, the goodness of her shine hand on my scars there.

*Thank V8.*

"Hey, Duck. They're wanting us to come eat with them again. You hungry?"

Yeah, I don't think she'd argue if I said we should stay a while.

-0-

Peaches are Comic books. Slit is tired. Here's the best thing ever, fanart. Look, look upon it and praise be! Thank you so much monsterbrush!
I still wasn't fully awake, but the feel of her finest fingers dragging along my scars, me, was grotesquely indulgent. Too chrome, but I wasn't capable of saying no.

So they wanted another shot at food and chitchat? Fine, couldn't promise I'd have much to say, though. I didn't really care to get up at this very second either.

"Not yet. Get in here, Psycho."

Dragging her into the car was easy, even without the leg I still had the weight advantage on her so it was all a matter of leverage and enduring her bitching.

"Ah! Why you gotta be so fuckin-forkin' pushy, you big damn jerk!"

"You asked for it! Reaching in here and touchin' me while I'm asleep, like some bat fuck." I rebutted as she wound up crawling the rest of the way through of her own accord, sure to elbow me in the ribs and damn near put her knee in my crotch as she seated herself.

Now she couldn't escape easily or refuse me as I tucked in my remaining leg to turn around in the seat, putting my head in her lap once settled. She rolled her eyes, of course, but the shine hand came. Though, it did not come without hesitation.

"Didn't think you'd wake up, bein' honest. Eh, hoped you wouldn't so I could, uh... Yeah."

"Freak." I knew what she wanted, what I wanted too, so I took her hand and brought it where it needed to go. Naturally, her middle finger swept over the old wounds and around my lower lip.

She always did talk like the torn mouth I had was something of a twisted beauty. Didn't surprise me
at all that she'd try to sneak a touch, though I now think maybe I could have snapped at her for doing that when It felt like knives in the wee hours. Didn't matter, wanted it now.

"You know, this is likely to just put you right back out."

"Don't care." The wench had the Scavenger's attention all afternoon into evening, it was my turn now. "Just wake me up again."

Dune seemed to relax into the drivers seat, heel of her boot propped up on the dash, hand wandering around my skull. Sometimes it was only a finger, other times her entire palm smoothed its way over my neck and jaw. When she pulled up at the bottom of my shirt, it was reflex to twitch and go rigid, then I had no option but to melt like wax left in the sun. Soft, rusty touches around a scar still stapled as if to hold closed the gash that had almost bled me out once. Didn't need those chunks of metal for a long while now, but I still kept them in anyway, all but the one Dune tore out with kicking heels the last time we had a good knock down and drag out.

The bruising was finally faded to a sallow color spread out wider than the initial black and purple blotches had been. Usually the filth and dust that floats in the open air sticks to sweating skin in the parched land we came from, which hid bruising well. So did war paint. Damn, that had been a hell of a brawl, more ferocious than the usual for sure. At least most of the bruising and all but the worst of the aches over it were done with. Usually, I enjoyed the ass kicking matches and so did she, that last one was different. I didn't like it but hell, at least she was talking, still talking. I suppose even if it took almost offing each other, it was worth the cost.

That's the thing though, I was that damn close to killing her. Right now, with that hand on me, I wouldn't dream it, but each of us had cheated the other out of blessed death. If she pissed me off enough, would I go through with it? I don't know, I don't think so, I'm not even sure I was ever really going to choke the life out of the scav. I think I just wanted to scare her but it turns out she, a full-life, wasn't afraid to die. That's what scares the fuck out of me.

Her fingers returning north to trace the outline of my mouth ejected me from that tangle of thoughts, praise V8. Like always, my meat and bones did things on their own, I just wasn't fighting it anymore. I had my face turned into the soft underbelly of the loon, felt myself vibrating with a groan that was not pain.

As if to win the discussion and prove that what she said was true, I detected pulling at the longer rope of braided hair she refused to let me hack off the back. She was undoing the ties and pulling the beads she'd put there off the length of it. Oh, you merciless shit. I was dead-ass beat, and my corpse felt like a pool of warm tar. With her fingers playing in that longer hair, I'd be off in my dreams sooner than a war pup with a belly full of mothers milk.

“Ducky, it occurs to a scav that you've only been asleep for a couple hours. We could skip dining out and eat in. There still be the scaly jerky in the car. Aftah that, we pass the fuck out in the back seat.”

I liked the sound of that. Yeah. Last night was a bad sleep, if any that was substantial managed to happen. Everything smelled wrong in that old junk heap she came up in, that's not why I slept like crap, but it probably hadn't been helping either. Dune wriggled her way out from under me and clambered out through the open driver side window. Once she was out and waiting by the door, I put my leg on, only bothering to tighten one buckle and the leather strap that snapped on around my belt. I'd be taking it off in ten minutes anyway. Fuck, it ached.

Soon enough, we were trudging along, across the bridge, down the path, down the hill and to the spot where we'd parked. “Where's your spark torch?”
“Side pocket. Vest.” She said, and I could hear her loading the rifle as I dug into her pocket for the thing. No chances taken, ever.

The black cylinder didn't want to turn on and shine the first couple times I depressed on the button, had to whack it into my palm once for the ancient batteries to touch their contact points right, then I could see as we neared the car. One quick glance inside, with the help of a weak stream of light, and we could be sure no vagrant had begun to squat inside for the night. Nothing was missing, not that there was much inside the cab for thieves. I wound up popping the trunk to check that the guzz and wet stuff was still there. This, too, remained untouched. Good, now we could just do what we do and tell the day behind us to bugger off. I took one of the jugs of aqua and the folded tarp stowed back there before slamming the trunk closed. With no windshield, it would be cold. Tossing this stained grey cloth over the front end would certainly help that. It was worn thin with age and the eyelets were missing, so we could simply pull the corners in as we entered the vehicle and shut the doors on the tarp to keep an odd breeze from pushing the material down onto the hood. It would stay just a touch warmer in here this way.

Once within the relative safety of the car, there was no light. It was a new moon. The only sound to be heard was the Scav digging around in the glove box for the lizard jerky, after that, the gnashing of teeth as we ate. The interior was still chilled, we could feel each other shiver through vibrations in the seat under us.

The aqua jug was passed back and forth between us once, then, the metal leg came off and I began making my way into the back seat. Took little encouragement to coax the mad scavenger to join me, no more than groping into the darkness and finding her head. I enjoyed this far more than I should, just like the last time I had the nutter sprawled atop me like this, limbs all mixed together awkward but comfortable.

As tired as I was, sleep avoided me as if I was prickled and covered in deadly prongs like a buzzard buggy. The thoughts came from nowhere, well, perhaps not nowhere. Spend all day talking to another failure, you start thinking your way back to before your world turned into a huge, bizarre joke. Nux pulled away because he knew he was dying, I don't get the logic of it, but that's how it went down. What did I do? I either ignored him, or I fucking lost it every chance I got. I punished him for his weakness, snarled at him if he got too close out of spite for just checking out on me without even being a fucking corpse yet. Once or twice I left him behind and hopped on the back of some other driver's rig, happy to lend them my excellence and watch how it stung Nux that I'd leave him in the bloodshed the same way he left me alone even when we were right next to each other. Sometimes, the bickering and bitching got so bad, he'd slug me right in the mouth and shove me out of the shared bunk. Then I'd have to go search out some other spot to drop. Usually, I would wind up in Notch's kip, the more recent leader of the crew Phil was from. I could still remember the old fuck, though not so old as Ace, clear as if it was last night. He'd sit up in his spot, scowl, then point to an open space among the dozen or so others. Some nights, I'd wake up to Nux having followed me there through the dark of the warrens and tunnels to curl himself under my arm, just like way back.

Fuck. If I fall asleep with all of this shit in my head, I'm guaranteed a screwed up dream about it. Or worse, the ones when I'd dream everything was alright, that One Arm hadn't stolen Joe's breeders, Nux had gotten over whatever sickened him, Larry and Barry would be gone and a scar in their place. Everything would be fine. Then I'd wake up, feeling like a big steaming pile of fresh shit.

I could tell Dune wasn't asleep. She was doing some of her fidgeting and running a finger up and down the flames of the spark plug etched into my shoulder, at least the parts of it that hadn't gotten toasted. I had a question, and not enough pride left to bite my tongue.
"Are you ever afraid to sleep?"

She hummed and turned her head so that her nose was under my chin. "No, but sometimes Dune's scared to be awake."

"Green shit?"

"Yeah. It's Nux isn't it? In yir dreams?"

I felt myself scowl at that, it's shameful to still be so damn torn up over that slag who threw in his chips with a bunch of busy body breeders.. "Yeah."

"C'n you tell Dune more about him? Been curious for ages... Tell her what you an' him we're like when you were little."

*Can't do that, it would only make the business of sleeping worse off.*

"Eh, tomorrow maybe." Weird, I left the possibility of actually continuing that conversation with her wide open. Gotta get my head off the filth so I don't wake up swingin' again. "Tell me somethin', anything. Just yap, I don't care. Gotta get that shit out of my skull."

She shifted atop me, turning her head to look at me I think, although there wouldn't be enough light to see. "Er, what's a Slit wanna hear about?"

"Anything. Doesn't matter."

"Hmm... Dunno what Dune wants to talk about." She moved a bit and I had to adjust too because the woman was all elbows and kneecaps. "I s'pose, could tell ya some things about some... stuff."

It started pretty usual, a little muttering of some less than funny jokes. She talked about how we needed to find something to fill up the maggot farm on the way back, also that the bones and gunk needed to be cleaned out. I took that opportunity to curtly remind her that it was her turn to do that, then she mentioned, randomly, that I'd probably have wound up a crow fisher if I had come up here. That demanded explanation.

"...Ah, huh. Right. So, us Vuvalini were basically militant feminists to the point of un-feminism. At least that's what mum always said."

"Ah, what's a feminist?"

"Not sure. Mum made it sound like there were two different kinds but Dune could never tell anybody apart like she could. Granted, Dune was twelve when we left here. She said a lot of things this scav couldn't fathom but she left those words here, never brought it up again... Mum was a bit of a trouble maker, see. According to her, it was a real shit show when she dragged home Pa an' his broodlings. Everyone just about lost their minds an' she had to remind um that she grew up with a ma an' a pa, not just a ma. Men were rare among us. Bad boys get sold, good boys get to stay and plant seeds. Boys who just weren't quite good enough, didn't respect and fear enough, they were given to the crow fishers. Dunno, if you were born here you mighta been too mouthy. Heh, Mum always used to tell Dune 'If my child had a pecker, even the crow fishers wouldn't want her' but it was with a laugh, loved me anyways. Dune was always too much. Too loud. The older brothers could never get away with that, maybe at home they could jus' be but... Not around the others. Boys walked a thin line, like a tight rope, an' it's too easy to fall."

Something about that, it got me thinking this shit could be part of why Ardith was such a rotten pain
in the arse. It also smacked of home somehow, but in screaming reverse. Might be harder now to
sleep than it would have been before she started talking. I was curious the day before about her
history, now it was reminding me of random fragments of my own.

It wasn't that wild to consider that these people who used to live around here might have been just as
segregated by sex as we War Boys were back home. Only those who were next to the gods could so
much as look at a breeder, which we weren't allowed to even discuss to begin with, but it made my
skin crawl a bit.

*Just go ahead and sell off half the next generation, that's fine right?*

I could taste the sarcasm in my mouth at the thought, but the truth that followed it in my head was
just as uncomfortable. It was perhaps only an itchy, nasty feeling thought because I'd spent the last
seven hundred plus days living with a woman. One that could, in my opinion, hold her own among
the Immortal's Half-Life children.

*When the milk mothers had sprogs, where did the girl ones go?*

I had never asked myself that question. The boy ones were brought to the scrawny little twerp named
Nanny and a few others to be raised up on daily deliveries of mothers milk until they were old
enough to be integrated into litters and initiated as war pups with a brand and white clay. But what of
the girls? Joe and his Imperators must have done *something* with them.

"...c- can we talk about something else?"

"Oh," She shifted once again and I felt her scar fingers find my chin. "Sure thing, Duck... Hmm,
what else is there. Ah, huh."

I had an idea of what I wanted to hear, wasn't sure how she'd feel about it, though. "Like to know
more about your brothers. Don't have to, jus' sayin'."

I didn't want to hear about what happened to them, well, that's a lie. I wanted to know that, but I
knew for sure that the nutter didn't want to talk about it.

"Ohh, *them,*" I could hear the apprehension there in her voice, to delve into the way back of her head
and locate the memory. She was fidgeting again, too.

Shouldn't have asked, I'd seen the way she went all rust headed the last time they were mentioned by
the Crow Fisher woman, and how she started seeing shit on the way here when she offhandedly said
something about being raised with siblings. When did I start caring how the maniac felt about
anything? Maybe it was a slow rise, something coming to a head here, in this filthy swamp.

The urge was strong and humoring it was a sin, but my hands wanted to move over her spine and try
to make whatever demons I'd woken in her head fall back into their slumber. I did what the flesh and
bone asked and she was still for a moment. I didn't expect her to talk any more.

"They were strong. They used to carry Dune around on their shoulders." As if to drive the words
home, she squeezed at my shoulder with the act of recalling, or maybe to make sure I was listening.
"They only spoke at home, almost never around others unless spoken to first and a thousand times
over never did they open their gobs around the elders. They knew the consequences... This scav
used to speak for them, 'cause them old bags wouldn't throw the book at a *girl.* Rus was older, but
Flick was taller. Us girls liked them around because Flick could reach the best juicy delicacies out in
the orchard. *I* liked them around 'cause they were *my* brothers, an' *I* loved 'em. Heh, Rus used to make this silly voice whenever Dune was sad..."

She kept going. Dune talked about her brothers and them alone for so long that she talked herself to sleep. A lot of it I didn't understand, the vernacular from here is different, but I knew an awful lot about her brothers now, down to the clothes they wore. They seemed wild when it was just the three siblings together in the stories, wary when they were with others. The older siblings liked to build dirt bikes and would try to motorize just about anything for kicks. They once glued a spoiler to the shell of a tortoise. I've only ever seen their empty shells, never one with the animal still in it. Dune had to describe it to me, and I had a laugh when she said their heads and necks looked almost phallic. I said 'they sound like a bunch of dickheads.' and she laughed too.

When her jawing quieted to mummers, barely audible, I let her trail off and eventually her dead weight and snoring clued me in that she was out for the night.

Still, sleep was hard for me to catch, and *fuck* I was exhausted, but it wasn't impossible to achieve. There was a trick I'd learned a long time ago from an Imperator leading a small war party on a two day journey to raid a northern encampment. Nux and I were with the party. For some of the boys, that had been their first call to war, and they couldn't rest. For some reason that particular Imperator felt compelled to make an announcement, daring more than advising the boys to try a technique that sounds like a heap of B.S.

Apparently, if you lay still, close your eyes, and put all of your will into not moving a single muscle, you *will* eventually fall asleep. Typically within fifteen minutes of committing to the decision. I was surprised to find that it worked, it didn't always encourage a good experience in your dreams but if you need sleep in a pinch, that can do it. And it did, this time.

*I dreamed, and it was a strange one. I was looking down at the Razor Cola, a sad, burnt shell. She was still warm although the smoke had cleared and the embers cooled.*

*There was blood in the sand around me. More came in rushing flows, it was coming from me. My chest hurt. V8 it hurt. You're not supposed to feel pain in dreams, people say that but they're wrong.*

*It was a hole, punched right through the center of my chest. Where's my blood pump? It should be right there, but there's only that ragged hole and hanging threads of gore holding charred skin together like a flimsy barrier between my insides and outsides. The red kept coming, pouring through my fingers, from between the splits in my ruined face, filling up the leather socket of the metal leg.*

*This is too much blood, but for some reason it didn't spook me. The hole was just there. I could stick my fingers in around the edges and feel how wide and how deep the yawning cavern in my flesh was. It didn't hurt any more or any less as I explored it. Once more, it was just there, and no matter how much I bled, I didn't die.*

*I wandered away from the wreck, not too sure where I was going. Not the Citadel, nothing back there for me. Maybe I should head that way anyway. There was a pileup in the canyon after they killed Joe, right? Maybe I'd find others... No, didn't want them seeing me like this.*

*I just kept walking, unsure of where I was headed. I didn't know where I was, but you can't be lost when you have nowhere to go.*
"Oh, look at your sorry face. That must have hurt."

Dune?

I looked up from the sand under my feet, finding her there, not looking at all like herself. Her skin was coated in layers of ash. Clothes weren't right either. Everything was off. She wore a linen frock which matched the chalky grey of her flesh, not white like a wife, and it was aflame. My scavenger wore a cloak of fire and gazed with dead eyes. If I looked at those eyes, the reflection in them showed me things growing from the sand, her visions of green shit.

This is so wrong.

Dune had a hole in her chest too. I could peer inside it and see that there was an ignition cylinder stuck in it. The key hole was spewin' hot embers that stung my face.

She thrust her hand at me, palm open and turned up, as if she expected me to place something into it.

The dream was interrupted by the sound of someone walking around us—no, Around the car. I jerked awake under Dune, who barely stirred. There was no time to consider whatever the fuck that dream might have meant.

There was something just outside, the sound of boot treads on the damp dirt, and I could see light setting the tarp aglow from the other side. It could have been a thieving wretch, a buzzard, another Crow Fisher who was less open to the idea of outsiders. Could be anything. I allowed my arm to fall off the nutter, down off the seat, then under to search out the hidden pistol with questing fingers. The moment I saw a face peering in through the window opposite of our heads, I had lifted the weapon and flicked off the safety. It was just Phil, the lamp he held illuminated his face just enough that I could recognize him. He peered in for a moment more as I lowered the business end of the lead spitter, and he seemed to nod before moving off, toward the short bridge linking the hills.

Just then, the thought came that neither of us remembered to let the Redhead and her male harem know that we wouldn't be turning up for food. Phil must've gotten curious, but I can't claim to know what goes on in deserter heads.

Sleep came for me again more easily, though it wasn't as deep as before. Now every noise made me twitch. The car had been a bad idea, this was too open a space to park it then try to sleep in it. The familiar stink of us lingering in the seats only offered a false sense of security.

-Dune-

I woke to Ducky jolting under me and the sound of his revolver firing off some lead. That had me whackin' my head hard off the roof as I shot up.

“GAH!” Two people had uttered the same guttural voicing of shock, the echo I’d heard had been Phil.

“Damn boy! It's a rare clear sky, I just came to wake your sorry skin before you idiots roast in this
fucking hot box!”

I turned to look, didn't see blood, just brown eyes encircled in whites opened wide as the big blue sky behind him. Duck must have either missed for fired a warning shot. If the former he'd claim the latter. Either way, I was woken with a bang.

“I've been living in fucking scavenger central for the last seven hundred days! Don't be fuckin' creeping around the car like some thievin' buzzard if you don't wanna piss lead!”

“Quit your bitchin' pup! I came to collect this rattlebox. The deal, remember the deal?!”

“Yeah yeah, whatever. Should still know better.”

“Eat my ass, Scav Boy.”

“Hey, think twice, asshole.”

They were both bickering and growling now. Maybe it's a Citadel thing.

“This something ya learned in Scav Country too? Tradin' paint in back seats? There's better locations for that, mate.”

Slit was snarling and wriggling out from under how I'd been sitting astride him, climbing over the seat into the front. I could hear him jerking his leg toward himself and fiddling with the buckles. I was confused at the way they spoke. Trade paint? Rattlebox?

“There ain't no paint to be tradin'.” Slit muttered.

“Sure. Move over, I wanna put my hands on the wheel and feel her out, get an idea of what she needs.” Phil said, pulling open the driver side and practically shoving Slit deeper into the car as he made his way inside.

It was odd, for all his protesting Slit submitted to the older man. Odd, odd, odd. Maybe it was Phil's experience with mechanics that had Slit scooting aside. Arddie had told me that her man was a master of this science. One thing about Slit, part of why he was alright to have around, if I was better than him at something, he usually shut up and let me have that task. For me, it was really only shooting and salvage. Anything else he shut up about was because he was too lazy to do it. Maybe that logic applied to everyone he'd known.

“Ah, she's bog standard for sure, but the arse on these old Chevys! Mm, that back on her would make a nice lancer's basket. Bet you cracked a fat one when you found this old girl.” The eldest in the car enthused as he turned the key in the ignition.

Slit seemed to squirm a little, taking a glance over his shoulder, passed me and out the back window. “I've had the thought.”

He caught my gaze before facing forward once more, cringing a bit when our eyes met. Now it was Phil who looked back at me. “Oh, uh. Ard wants your help with a few things, says you need to get caught up.”

“Oh,” Was all I said. I was still groggy and getting over the suddenness of waking.

I had a wicked case of déjà vu as Phil pulled out of the parking spot and took the winding hills the long way around to bring our lovely rig to his garage. Navigating was never a simple feat here. Him and Slit kept on poking each other in the nose with their hot-head banter. A few times as I watched
them, I thought they might begin to bloody each other up and that made me reach for Mama's gun. Arddie appeared at my side from the nothing at just the right moment to stop me from taking aim at Phil when the man shook a wrench at Slit in a way that made me a little leery.

“They'll be fine, probably.” She offered as I was tugged by the sleeve around the house and down off the well beaten path. “Left the kids with Bones. He'll look after them. Time we revisited things, the important stuff.”

Days passed, and each was the same. We'd walk, talk, remember. The orchards were gone, the only evidence of their existence being dull stumps where the trees had been hacked down for firewood. The crow fishers had moved into the places that the many mothers had dwelt. Some were of the Vuvalini, too stubborn to cut away their attachment to this place, so they began to eat the birds, they joined the stilt mongrels who roamed the bogs at the fringe of what was once good. They turned their eyes away from me, as if they sensed my judgment. I had mixed feelings. Mum always pited the fishers while the old ones always scorned their birth designation. If only they had been daughters they'd said so often. I realize now that I had grown up confused about it all. What's the difference? We're all just meat and bones and hunger, for that is what it was truly like outside this place. In Scav Country, if you're alive, you're hungry. Hungry for guzz, hungry for water, hungry for food, hungry for companions, hungry for shiny things, starving to death. There's nothing else. Maybe we were out of touch when we lived here. Reality hurts so damn good, and the past is so sweet that it leaves a bitter aftertaste. Still, it was nice to walk and talk with Ardith.

I got to know her children, and something about this carried the whisper of hope. Like the others, Ard was once devout, born of woman and made with seeds placed in a cup at her mother's request. Now here she is, rearing two boys and a girl and an adopted teenage son. I swore, once, that I saw Bones and Featherknife mackin’ on each other. So, Ard's life wasn't standard by any measurement, not by Vuvalini ideals, not by before times norms, it certainly wasn't how I'd live my life, but it was still perfection. I could see them all together and happy. That was enough to know, Ard was happy, she wasn't going to trade away her boys when they reached the proper age as our predecessors once had with their young. Together and happy for all their days. By thinking about this, I missed Ma, Pa, my brothers. I missed the idea of family.

Arddie came with me to visit the graves again, and it was there that she did something that I hadn't in years, and still wouldn't. It was like she had stolen something out of the air and pulled it to her breast bone, just over her heart. Saving a memory of the dead. Sometimes I felt it was best to forget. I'd clung to Mumsy for too long, and I had plenty of memories. There's no time for remembrance in Scavenger Country save if you live among the dead. I no longer did. No more excuses.

“What happened to her. How did your mother die?”

-Slit-

Phil was being a little too generous about this deal, now talking about the fact that Shirley needed a brawler bar on the front end and offering to hook me up because he had “extra materials”. I knew what he was doing, what his ulterior motive was. He wanted to know more about the current condition of the Citadel and occasionally broached the subject with small correlations between the then and the now. A large part of me was still evasive about the topic out of sheer spite, but some much smaller portion of me was just being shrewd. Over the time spent sifting through the dust and helping Dune grow her shit collection, I learned to know better than to give up anything too quick when the recipient is willing to pay for every hint of reward. Maybe I'm a bitter shithead, but neither
was Phil wrong about how bare and unpolished the car was. Shirley had an engine that worked, and that was the only thing about her worth any real praise. Any improvement to that would be more than welcome.

It had been a few days. Work on his crow wagon and the Impala was somewhat simultaneous. Parts would scatter and mingle, but we both knew which pieces belonged to which chariot.

Procrastination about the work the interior desperately needed couldn't be entertained any longer, not with Phil's constant prodding at my only source of pride. Out came the back seat and I told the old bastard he could have it for whatever. He took it, muttering something about family seating as he dragged it into the back room full of machining equipment.

When he emerged, I was busy scribbling out plans on the floor boards for the interior. I wanted to install an auxiliary gas tank, which I planned to do once the nutter and I were back home in scavenger land. There were a few things she had laying around that could serve the purpose. One of the kegs she stored cola overflow in could be sacrificed. The only concern was trading to Wilson so I could use that welding torch of his. Sure, it could be done here, but eventually Phil would run out of patience and realize that we were both knowingly playing each other for all we were worth. Felt just like home. I considered that we might have to come to blows to sort that out, too. I wondered how much War Boy we had left between the two of us.

He returned to the outdoor grease-pit, and I felt a finger jabbing at my arm which I lifted to swat at him, but he was pointing passed me through the driver side window at something in the fog.

“Somethin's up.” He grumbled a little too close to my good ear.

Not that fucking deaf.

I strained to see through the mist, I heard before I saw. It made sense that he'd hear it first, what with my right ear being useless. The nutter and her gal pal were having some kind of disagreement. One of the kegs she stored cola overflow in could be sacrificed. The only concern was trading to Wilson so I could use that welding torch of his. Sure, it could be done here, but eventually Phil would run out of patience and realize that we were both knowingly playing each other for all we were worth. Felt just like home. I considered that we might have to come to blows to sort that out, too. I wondered how much War Boy we had left between the two of us.

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“...Because she doesn't want to fucking talk about it?!” That was Dune's shrill, throaty bitching.

“Oh c'mon, Dune! I'm sorry!” And that was the harpy doing her usual dog like yipping.

“Just... Dune needs air. Air is all she needs.” She shouted back, making her way across the bridge while Ard stopped midway with slumping shoulders.

Didn't take much wit to know that the woman had pushed Dune a little too far for history. Dune was always so tight lipped about it unless, it seemed lately, if she started yammering about it on her own, at which point you could maybe ask a question or two and get an answer. Couldn't scorn her for needing to be in the mood for gut spilling, when is there ever a right mood for it, though?

She was headed our way, eyes fixed on me through the dusty side window, so I removed myself from the vehicle and waited for her to meet me. Didn't give a shit what Phil thought of a move like that, waiting for her to come tell me what she wanted. Hell, he answered to the redhead, at least my excuse was that Dune was a inveterate biter.

She stopped by the edges of the tallest pile of scrap parts, nudging a muffler back toward the heap.

“I'm goin' rummaging.” She said with a cringe that she quickly turned into a grin. She was doing a shite job of trying to cover up whatever that hissing and spitting with Ard was about. “Be back shortly, jus' need the lead slinger before I go.”

She was moving to get around me and into the car to fetch her rifle from where it sat on the
remaining bench seat. I was closer and had something to say about this idea of hers. I leaned into the drivers side though the window, lifting the Enfield and holding it tight enough that she couldn't quite pull it from my grip without putting some real effort into it. It stayed in my hands and she looked to me with brows dropping low over her eyes and making them appear dark.

“You think you're going on your own then?”

“Yeah? What of it?” She shot back.

I could tell she wasn't in the mood to be told she couldn't go, and I felt for her in that way when you know you'd be decking somebody if you were told the same shit coming out of your own mouth, but it was just too damn risky. A couple months ago I'd think nothing of letting her do a wander, hell it always gave me a few hours of peace, but now days she was liable not to come back.

A glance at Phil, and his jerk of the head to tell me to get lost was all the more indication I needed to know that he understood I was leaving to keep an eye on the lunatic for a while. Though, he probably read a lot more into this than I'd like. He also tossed something my way, which I had no choice but to catch on reflex. Dune told me it was a geiger counter. Looked a bit like the thing that the spark boys back home carried around, but no cords and needles to check how deadly the charge of lighty power was.

So, we were off. She led me down paths worn deep by a thousand feet before ours, explaining on the way that everything was once framed in by green that no longer existed. When I asked where we were going, she said we were going to wander toward the town that had been adjacent to this place in the times much longer than just The Before. She told me her mother was born there, but I wanted to know how long the walk was going to be. She only held up her hands in a way that told me she wasn't sure.

“Long enough for the sun to move a few knuckles widths.” She said a paces later. She followed that statement with a warning. “We need to stay on the higher paths. The stilt walkers avoid the muck in some places with their long legs 'cause in some spots it makes the counter chirp. That's the stuff that gives you lumps. Or bad seeds.”

“You think radiation is why wretched pups at the Citadel come out all bumpy?” I asked, and she looked back and sighed.

“Perhaps. They say in Scav Country that the people there came from all over for the water. Maybe they came from the places that went kaboom at the end of times. Who knows. Been almost fifty years now since then. They mightah brought the sickness with them.”

Her mother must have told her about the end times. I was inclined to believe it. Dune had never lied to me, forgot to tell me things, sure, but she'd never told me anything but what she thought she knew.

We walked and walked. Dune showed me how to use the thing in my hands and sometimes it made noise and read out a number, so she'd have us turn another way. We never made it to that town she talked about. It seemed that this place was unpassable according to the geiger counter. This place she said we could not cross, I swore that the war parties had driven across the very stretch of it when Immortan Joe was leading us in the pursuit for the wives. It was endless flat mud beyond the hill we stood on. Toxic Lands she called it. Joe led us across Toxic Land. I Wondered if he knew, if he cared.

We just meandered along the hill of damp dirt after finding that we could go no further. She told me that it wasn't like this before. The days we had taken to wandering back in the scavenger lands, Dune would have filled the silences with her singing, but not now. She only looked around, dragging her
fingers through the beaded pleats of her hair and letting the corners of her mouth be weighed down. She was just standing there, arms lifted, hands resting behind her head and fingers intermingled as she watched the sun roll toward the horizon. I didn't know what to say, so I played with the loose dirt under the foot of the metal leg.

I was busy watching her and just feeling the resistance between the dirt and by extension, my stump. I was somewhat amazed as I looked down to find something that glittered like chrome in the darkness of the wet soil. Naturally, I pulled the knob of the leg so I could kneel and pick up the object.

“What is it?” I heard from over me.

Dune must have seen me bend down to find out what the thing was, coming over to see herself. I scrubbed at it with my thumb and turned it over in my hands.

“It’s a set of keys.” I said once enough filth fell away to reveal it.

“What’cha think it goes to?”

Well, one of them definitely belonged to a car. The rest of the metal hanging from the ring was debatable. Just rubbish no one had used to lock anything in an age and a half. One item hanging from the ring needed a little more cleaning to make sense of. I wiped it off with my shirt, still unable to understand it, and held it up to the scav. She could read, I could only be bothered to read a couple words at a time.

“I love my pontiac. Theres a bunch of numbers and a gibberish after that. Car dealership? What’cha think that means?”

Dealership? Ace talked about that once within earshot of me when I was shorter. According to him, people used to buy their wheels from big parking lots full of shiny newborn cars with nothing special about them besides their brand new smell. And then he’d go on and on about the smell of new.

“Somebody told me once that people used to get their cars from a lot way back. Might have something to do with that?”

“Huh, how curious. I wonder where the car is.” She said.

Well, if the keys were here, the car must be somewhere nearby. The driver’s carcass might be nearby too, but I didn’t mention that. We walked again, along the hill of silt and dirt and listening to the geiger counter tell us how safe it was where we were going. I swung the keys round and round on my finger, liking the way the weight of it felt on the digit.

She was the one to spot what could possibly be the car which went with the keys, calling to me and showing me what she saw at the bottom of the hill, sunken into the muck. Only the back end of the car stuck up, I couldn’t tell what the model was from that end, I was better at telling from the shape of the grill and the configuration of the headlights.

“Think that’s it?”

“Maybe.”

“How sad, Duck. I wonder if there’s bones in the driver seat. Shame for the car too.”

“Yeah. Engine weight must have sucked it down. It’s useless now.”
She shifted from side to side, face twisted up. “My guts are grindin’.”

Ah, but I was bright enough to grab the last few crumbs of lizard jerky from the glove box of the impala before we left. We sat and shared that, sitting on the remains of a wooden shed that had blown over at some point. There was nothing under the boards to scavenge, but it kept our asses dry at least.

Like we might have done around her home territory, we laid back and stared at the sky to wait and digest. Her shine hand found its way to my face as she lifted her arms over her head and felt her way around my own.

“Yir gonna be sportin' a beard soon.”

She was right, I'd been putting it off. It stayed cold here in the morning and only warmed a little by noon, so I was reluctant to get rid of the insulating bristles. Those hands would feel much more chrome on a clean face, though.

“Later.” I answered. I'd find a blade sharp enough to do the job and the grease to keep from shredding skin once we went back. I'd left the razor and fixings at her kip.

Hmm, I wondered how long she wanted to be out here rummaging for nothing. She must've been real sore with Ardith if she was willingly detached from her hip before the setting of the sun.

“What were you an' the redhead buttin' heads about?”

She grunted out a short reply. “Shit that can't be helped.”

“Ah.” Not hard to translate that into truth. “You should probably talk to her about it.”

“Don't care to.”

Stubborn wench. Did she really think she wouldn't have to deal with her crap once she was here? Well, her reluctance to come made sense if she just didn't want to face whatever it was in her head that made her, her.

“I might be just some fuck-up from the Citadel, but at least I've got the sense to admit unloading my shitty cargo was probably healthy.”

“Oh kiss my arse, Slit. I never said you HAD to do that if you didn't want to.”

“Oh, I see how it is. Suck my fat cock then.”

“You wanna watch your tone, are you asking to be de-balled?”

“Why can't you talk about anything but shooting people and throwing long pig in the maggot farm?! Huh??”

“Because I have NOTHING else! I AM nothing else!”

That isn't right. She was contradicting things she used to say all the time, way back at the beginning. When did that change? When did her high flying sense of self worth plummet so fucking deep into the pits? I swear, she once told me that we're not nothing. Her hand was still on my face, maybe she didn't realize what she was doing but her nails were digging in, stinging half moons into my cheekbone. Had no choice but to jerk my head away and sit forward to turn and look at her. She'd sounded pissed off as we argued, her snarling teeth said plainly that she was still pissed, but her eyes
were all wet and dripping down the corners. The wasted salt and cola seeped passed her hair line at
the temples.

_Oh V8, please don't fucking cry. Bite me, slap me in the face, call me a stinking hog. Anything but this._

She wasn't like this before the sandstorm, she never walked in her sleep, she never bawled her eyes
out, she never said she was _nothing_. Dune had once said she went back to this place when she was
nailed by the lightning, like a second bolt of crackling electricity, something occurred to me.
Whenever she got up out of her sleep spot and walked, she went East, as if she had some internal
compass which oriented itself to point here. She was always trying to come _here_, in a fugue state, to
realize a bizarre return migration home.

“It's because you were alone so long, because of losing this place and your place in it, isn't it?”

I was projecting, I wouldn't realize that until years later.

“I can't talk about this! I can't!” She wailed deafeningly and without warning, teeth grit and hands
clapped over her ears.

I knew what I had done, my guts twisted and I had this sensation like my bloodpump was about to
drop out of my arsehole, but I just could not fucking _shut up._

Anger tries to conceal fear yet again.

_-Dune-_  

He looked at me like he was seeing something crawling out of his nightmares. That and pity. I didn't
need _pity_. No no no. I needed to escape this talk of mum and the time between her and Slit. It's too
big a gap. _I can't._

"No- I mean. Fuck! I don't think I've ever been alone for more than twenty damn minutes to take a
dump before winding up with you. I can't believe you're still alive! You think living alone for six
fucking years isn't worth talking about? You think it didn't do some kinda damage?"

He sat up as he ranted, pulling away from me. _Recoiling_. He was recoiling from me, because I'm
crazy, because there's proof of it everywhere, because it's what any sensible person should do.

"I DON'T KNOW! I don't wanna talk about it!"

Things were getting itchy, ugly, and the green was springing up all over. I could see it crawling
through the bog, across the junk pits, roots diving into the earth under us. It even crawled right over
Slit, reaching out to me with flailing vines looking for something to grasp. I needed to go, the tension
in my legs and hands told me to get up, to run. Mum was calling, I could hear her but she wasn't
beckoning me to come to her, she was urging me to stay put. Soon I was standing, frozen like the
morning frost on the surface of the collection pools back at the caverns during the cold months.

_I'm fine_ Mum said over and over, just like at the end, when she was laying on the ground with both
hands in fists over her breast bone. _I'm fine. I'm fine. Dune?_
"Dune? Hey! Stop saying that! Yir freaking me the fuck out!" That was the failed war boy, trying to shout over the screeching inside my skull.

"I'm fine! I'm fine! Stop touching me!! Fuck off!"

When the green vanished, he replaced it, grasping at flying hands and forcing me to turn around and face him. I didn't WANT to, I didn't even want to come here!

"No, you're NOT. Look at me!" He was roaring now, so I roared back.

"No!"

"Dune! Stop! Quit scratching!"

He wouldn't let go, no matter how I clawed and slapped and twisted myself against him to break free of his grip. Goddess, just let go! I knew what I was doing, I can't excuse the way I brought my knee to his inner thigh so terribly hard to knock him off his already precarious balance. Insanity isn't an excuse for violence, this much I know. We're all born with a river of rage flowing though us, that's the curse of being human.

He went down, hard, but not without dragging me with him as he scrabbled at anything to keep himself from falling. We went rolling down the hill, cries of pain interrupted only with involuntary gasps. Tumbling over stones, garbage, the ruined past until landing in the detritus of it. We'd broken apart at the bottom of the hill, he flopped flat, face down into the muck. I was flung aside over the trunk of the half sunken vehicular corpse we'd just been musing upon the tragedy of. Oh, the rusted steel bit at skin and bruised the bone what lay just under.

The shock of it! I couldn't breathe, I went sliding down into the muck of the world heaving empty retches and sputtering coughs. Slit was regaining his feet- foot and swinging his arms all a rage that he was soaked face to toes in the black stuff of the rotten earth. It suited him now as he flung it away from himself in splatters and tried to swipe it from his eyes.

He growled, sounded like Shirley drinking up guzz and spitting exhaust fumes. “I didn't come here to scavenge shit and pal around with an old cock-up at the end of his half life!”

“Well, then why the hell did you wanna come out here so bad, Slit? The fuck was the point then? Was this just what you said it was?! To prove your dumb Valhalla is more real? Well I guess you got your stupid wish!”

“To hell with Valhalla! I dragged you here because you got rust in your skull! I thou- Rrrrgh! I thought this would fix it!”

Ouch. Fix it? That hurt. He wanted to fix me, all the more evidence to prove that I was too wrong to ever be alright. Hurt turned to anger.

“What?! You thought I was just gonna go AH HAH and have some kinda revelation?! That's not how it works, Slit! That's not how any of this works! Fuck you!”

“I don't know! I'm trying, okay? I'm fucking trying and I have no fucking clue what to do with my life from here but I'm trying because YOU seem to want me to! And fuck you, too!”

-Slit-
The loon was picking herself up out of the slop, but the way she lifted her head to look at me, It was as if her eyes could blast away my skin like a power grinder.

"Is that your shitty way of telling me you're better off if I stick around?" She growled, deeper and nastier than I'd ever heard out of her before. It was like she was someone else.

"May- Yeah, It is." I admitted, but this is where I couldn't look at her anymore. I can't watch her when she's seeing right through me. "I want to know what happened, to them."

"Doesn't matter, won't bring them back so what's the point of talking about it?! Fuck off. Don't wanna keep fucking living it again."

She grabbed the nearest dead branch out of the sludge, wrenching it free and slinging it away with all her strength. Anger, I know anger. It put a heaviness in the air, thicker than the oppressive humidity and just as smothering. I don't know why I asked this next question. Seemed random in the moment but maybe the truth is that I was looking for common ground, anything that would make this trip worth all of the V8 damned guzz and effort.

"Why do you want to look at my cut-ups. Hmm?"

"I don't know."

"That's not an answer!"

Dune turned to face me, showing her ugly teeth as she stalked through ankle deep mud to come at me looking ready for a brawl, but she stopped several steps short. She ground her teeth and pulled on her hair, frustrated. If I wanted to, I could goad her and it would turn into bloody fists, bruised bodies and aching bones. I wanted her to tell me the truth far more than I wanted a black eye and to knock her on her ass but the fact is, Dune might not even have a reason for anything at all, which wouldn't be a surprise. Dune seldom supplied me with a valid explanation for anything she did unless it was directly related to our immediate survival.

"She don't know! Dune wants to understand you better? She thinks?!

Good. Back in the third person, usually that meant she was starting to be reasonable.

"The door swings both ways OR, it doesn't fucking swing, Dune."

That came forth more tersely than I'd wanted it, but I was sick of this. I honestly had almost no clue who I was living with. I'd known nothing about her besides how bizarre she was until after that lightning and Wilson's retelling of how he met Dune and her mother. It wasn't fair. She shouldn't get to claw me open and sedate me with her hands if I couldn't know what the shitting hell she was even about. She'd taken every shred of dignity from me when we met, tortured me with her care, humiliated me with unwanted assistance. If I had to live through that, survive her, then she needed to compromise here.

She wouldn't look at me, she just glared at the path of disturbed filth we had created as we destroyed each other again. The scavenger tried to wipe a flow of red from her lip, but only succeeded in smearing herself in yet more of the black glop. She must have knocked her face and bitten her lip on the way down.
"So, yir sayin' you'll show Dune yours if she shows you hers?"

"Yep." Sounds fair.

"Fine. She guesses." She said nothing else, just kicking at the mud and beginning to make her way back toward the hill.

"Well?" I demanded, knowing if I didn't she would conveniently forget that this discussion had been had at all by the time we got back to the crow fisher hovel.

"What?! You want to hear all the hell and shit now? Here?"

I shrugged. "No time like the present."

"You're impossible."

"So are you."

First came a sigh, a tired face with eyes drifting into the nothing while she no doubt suffered another leafy vision.

"Fine. There was this rumor that you could find green somewhere, that there was a river still wet with life an' everything. You'd know you were close when you found a wrecked thing, a plane. Did you know people used to fly? Dune didn't."

The woman pulled at another dismembered tree limb sticking up from the bog, probably so that she didn't have to stand there idly while she recounted this.

"We searched for years, we and the others. We learned things, saw things. Every podunk settlement between the salt an' the canyon, we went everywhere looking for someone who had been there. We were headed back into scav country, the remaining twenty of us. We were gonna chance the canyon, get the hell out of the dust and try surveying new territory—"

The dead wood came up suddenly, sending black globs up onto her face. She spat out what had been flung into her mouth. Never mind how shitty it was of me, I smirked at that. When she caught the look, she waved the arm length stick at me, which splattered new stains onto my slacks, No time to gather a handful of crap and fling it back at her, she continued, prodding holes into the sloppy ground as she spoke.

"We got lost, a storm scrambled us up. We got separated from the caravan. It was just Mum, Russel, Flick, and Dune then. Alone, with a dead engine, only one rifle in working order and not enough lead to put the piss in anyone's panties. The scavengers came, they came for the trailer full of goodies."

She stood for a long moment, still as the stagnant air around this dump. I almost reached out to touch her, thinking she was finished and that now would be a good time to leave before we risked catching lumps down in this shit, but she may as well have exploded, turning and bashing her muddy stuck against the rear bumper of the sunken chariot. Each impotent blow came faster than the last, until her face was red with the blood rushing under the skin, until she howled with a kind of fury I'd only seen once, the last time we fought.

"They didn't come to kill us! They were careful not to! They split us up, sent her brothers to this sin hole called Shatterbone. You don't fucking go there to be sold at that age, with a dick, and have any
damn hope of livin'. Shatterbone is for scum suckin' wasteland gladiators. Slaves are just bags of meat for the slaughter there, death for *entertainment!* We both knew, we knew they'd be dead within a day there! Mum and I... Then... Ugh fuckin-

"Stop! Stop. I know the next part. You don't have to tell that." I said, thinking it could avert a further eruption of whatever this was if she didn't have to say it.

"How?" She asked, huffing and panting to regain her breath.

"Wilson." I answered, probably foolishly.

"The *cuck.* He should know better than to motor his mouth. Next time, when I see him I'll knock out the four teeth he's got left!"

“Dune-”

“*My whole family is dead!* Why am I still here? Why did I live? Why?! What's the good in the Goddess lettin' me stay here?! What's my purpose, damn it!"

This second hunk of wood got thrown too, I didn't know what to say. I never knew she felt like that. My chest hurt, just like when I dreamt that there was a hole in it.

Dune turned then, closing the distance between us and bringing us nose to, well, her nose to my chin.

“I'd be in your Valhalla if it weren't for me.”

Crazy as it sounds coming from a war boy, That's when I began to understand why she spent that night a few days back just holding onto me and letting me feel like roadkill in her arms. I couldn't fix this for her, and I was stupid to ever think I could. Well, wish granted, she regretted, and that spite I'd been dragging around behind me for two years was nowhere to be found.

Dune looked like she was starting to sag all over. A trembling hand wrapped in scar tissue rose to grind it's palm into her forehead while she began to sink lower, wobbling and getting ready to collapse into the soggy, sick soil.

I had to hold her up with a grip on either side of her vest collar. It would be a lie of I told you it was just the flesh going through motions on its own when I pulled her in and held her up.

- Dune -

This isn't what I expected. This isn't what I wanted. Needed it? Debatable. I found that I had no tears to give, the desire was there, to fight and scream and shout and cry some more but it was much like turning a canteen spout down to find nothing left inside but a drop or two. Instead I felt like my legs were done holdin' me up, but Slit caught me and pulled me upright again.

I looked at him, and he looked at me. If he was going all pale and sick looking at my sorrow stricken face, I couldn't tell. He was painted black in the muck.

I was soon being squished between the slippery mess of his front side and his arms. Then, I felt all the will to do anything to stop it slip away. If a mean old stink like Slit was doing this, trying to
comfort me. I must be in a real bad way then.

Nothing was said after this, he just pulled away and began steering me back the way we came. I don't remember much of the return journey. I just walked with eyes down on the dirt under us as our shoulders touched and I followed. A few times, he'd reach back and grab my hand. I think I know what he was trying to do, maybe trying to make up for ripping this shit out of me, but I wasn't angry with him. I just didn't feel much of anything at that particular time and in that particular space. Once physical awareness started to seep back into the forefront of my mind, all I could manage to do was feel filthy. There was mud in every blasted orifice and it was starting to grow dark out.

I didn't want to run into Arddie, have her wondering what the hell happened out here. I just wanted to be clean and sleep.

Before I knew it, the sound of Ard's babies playing and the thump thump thump of someone walking on their stilts was heard, hidden just beyond the realm of our sight.

This woke me from my trance of silence and stopped me from moving any further. I didn't want to be seen this way. Mama's rifle even needed a thorough cleaning after this mess.

Slit paused and all I could see through the thick coat of filth was his eyes, both wonky and clear peering back to ask the quiet questions.

I shook my head slowly as I answered. "Don't feel like answering her prying, Duck."

He grunted, turning his eyes away and scratching at the back of his head. Clumps of drying mud tumbled down his spine as he clawed it free of his hair.

"Go straight across the bridge and wait then." He said.

There was another look exchanged, another question asked without words. He needed to know that I could be trusted to go back to Mum and Pa's and not wander from it. I nodded, I hadn't seen anything but the grey and black of this pitiful place since we clambered back up into the hills.

He gave only one quick grunt before we moved on and split off.

Cold was slithering passed the numbness. All of the feeling was coming back and it felt like too much and not enough in the same space.

I crossed the bridge, soon finding myself looking into the doorway and imagining the darkened room lit by oil lamps. There used to be a round table by the door, one leg was too short so we had to slide a coaster under it. There were bunk beds made from old pieces of scaffolding in the back of the container where Rus and Flick slept. I used to sleep in a hammock made from an old net. Ma and Pa slept on a mattress which got propped up on the west wall during the day. The gramophone always had something playing, mama loved her jazz.

Now the place was just a space where these crow eaters stored miscellaneous shit, felt like I fit right in here so I sat and waited as I had been told.

To be clear, I set myself upon the floor, not the skinny little cot. The matter of a messy bottom from flopping about in the mud made resting it a tricky business without soiling something.

What was I here to wait for again? Well, I could guess at what Slit was doing, and my theory was fairly spot on. He showed up with a bucket.

Wash water, probably already twice used by others. Still, wearing the grime of other bodies is better
than being absolutely smothered in the grunge of the dead world.

"We didn't bother to bring any other threads, did we?" He inquired.

I sighed. No, we didn't because I didn't think we'd be here this long. "You know me, a fistful of bullets and a clean pair of grundies for each is all I usually bother packing."

"Found the grundies under the seat when I tore that out this morning." He mentioned, setting down the bucket and emptying his pockets of the rags he'd brought for scrubbing.

We'd have to scrub out what we were wearing in this water once we were through washing ourselves with it, we'd be milling about all but in the nude until once our slacks and tops dried out. Duck seemed to have anticipated that, the toasty covers that had been brought from my kip were dumped onto the thin cot before Slit sat.

Like back home, the every few days ritual began, though much more relief was to be gained in shedding sopping nasty garments. Boots, belts, vests, socks, trousers and the underneath bits all fell into repulsive piles.

Slit had himself turned away from me, would reach around back without turning to dunk his rag and then quickly swipe away his filth in an nearly frantic way. He was all goose flesh, probably eager to pull on what few dry coverings we had and wrap a blanket around himself. That's just what we both wound up doing if I'm to be honest. We sat looking like a couple of cocoons, staring at the piles of grotesquely muddied clothing and mutually procrastinating about washing them. Slit only managed to bother cleaning up his leg, even though he needed it to walk he still had to be told to go do it before the mess dried on like cement. He had been hunched over it with the covers wrapped around his shoulders and head as he scrubbed out the socket of his prosthetic.

I had a thought. I told him what happened to my brothers, not what happened to Mum. Fair is fair and we had an agreement, didn't we?

"Mum's heart gave out."

"Huh?"

"Mumsy, she just dropped dead one day. Said her back hurt, keeled ovah, said 'I'm fine.' then she was gone. That's how she went."

The battle fodder was chewing on his tongue at that, eyes narrowing. He set aside his false limb and settled on the end of the cot next to me. It had been quiet before I went and killed the calm with that honesty.

"That sucks." He said, taking another breath to say more. "Kinda pictured something different with how Wilson went on. Going out in a blaze of glory type thing."

"Nope, just carked it one morning over brekkie."

It was hard to say, and I caught myself sniffling to hold back the wetness building up in my face again. I hated picturing her like that. Pale and cold on the hard ground.

Now I looked to the battle fodder turned to scav life, it was his turn.

Slit's lips twitched toward a frown as I watched his face. He looked tired as he eyed me, knowing what was coming, it seemed. He hadn't forgotten the agreement, but he was waiting. He wasn't exposing himself, opening that heavy door without being asked to do it. Seemed I had no choice but
to push him along. I'm always pushing him along, aren't I? When pushed myself, I only ever dug my heels in.

"Can I see?"

He deflated like a popped tire, letting out air that he must have been holding for quite a bit, but that blanket wrapped so tightly around him shifted. It was a cautious allowance of vulnerability, felt like a sneaky peak at something I shouldn't be seeing as he let out just one leg. He was so careful not to let anything else be seen now, a fist full of the tattered flannel cloth to conceal his much more private anatomy. Just the one thing, one limb, was stretched out for me to examine. He clearly intended to keep the rest of himself hidden even though I've seen it all before, and I was happy to let him have that.

Oh, it was more than I thought. Like many of his other doodles, it was hard at first to untangle one from another. It flowed together and clashed and overlapped haphazardly in some places. Abstractions of dots and dashes to make lines of patterns in some places, figures in others, then things start to leap out of the maze of flesh to startle you. Things you could recognize in eerily primal ways. Most were still somewhat pink with their newness, although closer to his kneecap they faded to a paler shade.

Scabs that had only begun to flake and fall off told me just how fresh some of these were, the new scarring under the brown and black flecks was taut and appeared delicate like the skin of an onion.

Fan blades, like from my dearly departed sled. Old world hub caps like from my collection. Drippy tear drop shapes falling into a basin. Hands. Dozens of tiny hand shapes, each like a left hand print. How he got them all precisely the same size was a mystery.

"Nothing shine or special. Just stuff to fill space." He said, turning his head so that he didn't have to watch me see it all for the first time.

I peered up from the doodles to observe his face again. He wouldn't look at me and his expression may as well have been cut from stone. My hands couldn't be stayed, so first, my right landed on his shoulder to test it. He tensed, as expected, but he didn't flinch from me. Now, with my still feeling hand, I touched only with a finger one of the scratchings which was cut with clean, straight lines. Broken tools. There's a running theme with them and it made some sense. Many of the things I'd initially given over to him so that he could play and tinker under Shirley's hood hadn't been in the best condition. His collection had expanded a great deal since then, but still some of these busted wrenches and halved sets of pliers were no more than a few months old. Was there deeper meaning in that?

What caught my attention next was what ran down his inner thigh, down down down until just before the meat of his calf. Gears and cogs over the joint, a shock absorber like his metal leg. He shuddered at my finger tracing the lines.

"Hurts sometimes. The leg that's supposed to be all there and work right. From walkin' funny with the metal one."

It sounded like that was supposed to be an explanation for this particular set of cuttings. Hmm, war boys didn't know how to fix their ails, maybe that had something to do with all the scars and mechanical bits carved into their hide. Because they understood the mechanical world, but not themselves. That's what the rumors about his kind seemed to suggest, anyway.

Oh my, Buzzards. Prickly things screaming in their death machines toward his hip. Their path was obscured by the blanket. I remember that day, hundreds back. Buzzards had been skulking through
the canyons into scav country. They got a bit too close to where we were camped. We were lucky that night, wedged into a precipice in the crags of the western mountains listening to them carry on in their buzzard speak just below us. It's incredible that they hadn't found our rides, and next us.

I can still remember the feeling as we watched them cook their catch. Slit had been bothered by the unsettling way the smell made him salivate as they spit roasted whole limbs of the war boys they had picked off from the tail end of a convoy. I'd been more worried that my roaring stomach would give away our position.

When they fled from dawn's light and abandoned their dying fire, our shared relief had been palpable. This was a depiction of that scene as they sped away in their deadly monstrosities.

"I remember that." I said. He only replied in a noise of acknowledgment.

My eyes were drawn back to the newest carvings, and the nature of it began to emerge from the still red and angry wound. A stick figure, an X carved over the mouth, and a thick zigzagging line cut from the top of the head to a broken ratchet head at the end.

It was me, and lightning striking through until the legs of the figure became jagged lines as well.

There was something tugging hard on the many strings inside me, with the feeling came realization. I had an inkling of all the meanings these wounds shared. The reason for this infliction of pain on the self. It weighed heavy as a Storm Rider's holy rollin' rig.

My fingers circled the electrified figure many times as I thought, never quite touching the red swells of skin that were still healing. Maybe he would answer if I asked, maybe he wouldn't. I lifted my hand, brushing a knuckle along the wicked tear through the right side of his face. It was only then that he turned his eyes back to me.

"Slit, these ones? When you were talking to Arddie's sprout, you said 'an asshole who deserved what he got'. I always wondered how they got there."

The former war boy couldn't seem to say anything, his brows turned up as if he might have had words to expel.

The right side always looked older to me, messy too. It screamed of a thrashing body and a clumsy hand gripping a dull blade. The other side was different, a newer wound created with a razor. It was a controlled cut which was reverently adorned with things which glitter.

Now, both hands had risen, cradling his jaw whilst my thumbs caressed the corners of those mangled lips and back toward his ears. I knew then, these were unspeakable things. Any willing mention of them was for the purpose of puffing himself up and nothing more than that. To connect them with truth and reality was too emotionally complicated.

"Someone carved your face on the right, didn't they? It wasn't just a joke."

He looked down between us, and I could spy him retracting that leg back into the safety of the woolen covers. He nodded, finally.

"And the other side?"

He made no move to answer, not audibly nor visibly. Now I understand.

He needed the sense of self-possession, and his body is something he holds dominion over. If the world around him was rife with madness, he could do as he wished to himself and no one could take
that from him. Pain could be told to come and he could decide when he's had enough.

It's control.

Chapter End Notes

I'm gonna be a jerk and plug my other fic, Nanny, down here in the notes because I mentioned him. http://archiveofourown.org/works/6872017

Now for actual notes. I wanted to address a LOT in this chapter and I could spend all day talking about it but, I wont. I don't want to bombard my readers with random thoughts about every little thing.

First, I want to say that some small changes were made to dialog in the previous chapter (as well as fixing missing italics) because at some point the timelines in my head got mixed up and I realized that Tank, an original character who is already dead in my mind before the events of Fury Road, would have still been alive when Crank left. Notch and Tank were a driver/lancer pair and the both of them mostly ran a hunting crew. They were the types to go out, find old cars and bloodbags and in general they were basically a scavenging and patrol crew. Notch became the crew leader after Tank died. I needed to make the change in the previous chapter and have Slit mention that Tank had bitten the dust a few years back.

Second thing I wanted to say, I kinda wanted to address some theoretically cannon things about the Green Place and the Vuvalini. Supposedly, Crow fishers are one of two things OR possibly both. They're either Vuvalini who chose to stay, or, they are the male counterparts who were exiled from the society and pushed away to the fringes. According to the Mad Max wiki (which I generally question the reliability of) The Vuvalini only ever used the exiled males as means of reproduction and little else. I'd rather not delve into the social mechanics of that because to be honest, it kinda squicks me that the feminism and positive impact of the film could be tainted this way in that the Vuvalini would just cut ties with half of their children once they reached a certain age.

I have to tell myself that this is cruel, but so is everything that Joe did. A world full to the brim with men like Joe is why the Vuvalini would have done that but. Toxic behavior in one group can definitely feed toxic behavior in another group which could potentially create a sick positive feedback loop. I think for this reason, George Miller and the Producers chose to omit this information in the film itself and only hint at it with the apprehension of the older Vuvalini to initially interact with Max (about to collapse from emotional and physical exhaustion) and Nux (rail thin anemic looking man-boy). Granted, Max looks like he'd kill you for a ritz cracker and Nux CLEARLY crawled out of some weird death cult. But still, that hesitation for the dudes was instant and Furiosa, who they still weren't sure was authentic, was in their eyes more easily approachable despite appearing twice as dangerous as anyone else there.

Ah I guess that's all I needed to say at the end. Thanks for reading!
The Blunder

Chapter Summary

We're all just one awkward lapse of judgment away from screwing up any friendship.

Chapter Notes

If I'm going to lose readers, this is the chapter that I'll lose them on. The first 2000 words in this chapter fill me with complete terror.

March 25 2018 UPDATE: I've got a good three fourths of the next chapter roughed out. I'm aiming for tonight or tomorrow to finish up and it will probably take an additional day or two to edit. So, expect an update between Monday and Thursday. Stay chrome, folks.

March 26 2018 UPDATE: Mistakes were made. The next chapter might end up a LOT longer than expected. My goal to publish the next chapter before the week is through has not changed. Just keeping you informed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Well, I wasn't being slapped about the head and neck, wasn't being screamed at either, but somehow I'd rather that than this, being under her hex again for the thousandth time.

"The organic said he'd be dead inside a season. With the lumps getting bigger, needin' blood sometimes..."

I've never opened myself this way. What the hell was I doing?

"Nux?" She asked and I nodded for her.

It was best to keep my eyes down or better, closed. With both of her hands on me, there was nothing to stop the cloth around her from falling into a pile in her lap. She had no shame, and I was still stuck so deep in the warrens of the War Tower that it felt wrong and awkward to look at her with nothing on, always had been. Sure, I've pretty much seen it all what with her topless sun worshiping and occasionally doing the washing buck ass nude but... I didn't get a chance to dwell on that much.

I felt the heat of her face against mine, the cold of damp hair, the pulling of her skin on the edges of my staples as she turned her face into mine.

"So you carved." Her lips were practically inside my good ear. Too close.

I said nothing because there was nothing to say. She was right. That night, when I evened up my face, I traded out everything in my pockets for a quart of what the boys working the stills had brewing for bartering. Then I sat in the Coupe, in Nux's seat, looking into the rear view glass with my kit in my lap. Down went the rotgut, and then I slid that razor in flush against the left corner of
my mouth to start the slicing.

It only hurt the flesh, the rest of me went numb. It made my bloodpump run hard and dance against ribs. To go through with it kind of put me back in that place with a warm knife tearing me open.

By then, I knew to clean the blade first, touch it with a little fire so the infection sure to follow isn't too vicious as long as you keep it clean. Stitched it closed myself too, because why not, I knew how. That side was and is proper, following the shape of my skull. *Fearsome*. The staples were an afterthought, fingers too slick with red to hold a needle. That's when Nux, on his way back from the bloodshed, caught me. I'd been digging through his tools for snips and needle nose pliers to cold forge the staples when he saw the trail of blood and followed it.

He shouted, threw anything within reach at me. 'Why are you like this?!' he said. I just stood there, ducked whenever he chucked something particularly heavy at my head, but I said nothing. I was too numb inside to speak, face wouldn't move right either, tongue too bogged down with the sharp flavors.

Nux wound up getting the tools for me once he cooled off. My hands wouldn't grip the handles tight enough, I was still too out of it. Nux cut three slivers of steel from a scraped sheet, bent hooked ends into each, then he helped me hold either side of the open split over my cheekbone closed so that the staples could go in and hold it all together. That's why the third was hanging on a cord around my neck, I couldn't let it go.

Thinking about it in that moment, even with the scav there with me, began to suck me down into that rust-pit memory of the shit with Wrecker. Now I had to say something or else slide backwards into myself and hear the sound of the pup Nux had once been, screaming.

"He kept kicking for another eight hundred days, longer than Organic said, so we thought he was full of it... For a while. Then he needed bloodbags *all* the time. And he stopped talking to me, stopped telling me what was going on with him. We were supposed to cark it historic together."

I felt numb now as I had then, outside of myself listening to my own voice. It sounded flat and matter of fact and it didn't match how the anger over it still burned holes through me. It was those cursed hands of hers in my hair, on my skin, fingers slithering under the layer between us to find a shoulder. Not fair, it was always like being drugged. Sometimes I needed it, other times it was frustrating to be *that* helpless against it. The head resisting the body only lasted so long.

Her arms were tightening around me and her chin was came to rest on my shoulder. I could look down her back and see the hideous, chrome scaring. It wasn't an eye sore, just different. I looked like that down the left side, too. The more I looked the more I noticed how she flared out toward the backside. Looking at that was a good distraction, until...

"Dune dunno what to say to you, Ducky."

My teeth cooled with a grimace, of course she wouldn't know what to say. Far as I knew everyone she's had die on her went pretty quick so she never had to watch them slowly run out of guzz.

"Shit happens." Yeah, but it isn't supposed to happen the way it did. As if on cue, she asked about how my driver went out.

"Were you there? When his time came?"

Her arms slipped away and their hold was replaced with the pressure of her leaning on me, shoulder to shoulder, waiting for me to say it. There was a stab of guilt and a good lump of that lingering
resentment just sitting in my chest like I'd swallowed a rock.

“No, I wasn't.”

I felt her head move, so I knew that she was looking at me, probably with that expectant stare. Ugh, she wanted the rest of the story. For someone who hated talking about their shit she sure seemed to enjoy listening to mine. I took a long breath and held it. I can't believe some part of me really wanted to tell her about it, about him. The air left me in a growl, not at her, just the situation from where I picked up this trash emotional cargo.

“He went traitorous, left me behind to go ride with the Immor- Joe. Next thing I know he's with those breeders who got snatched by the one armed filth, spittin' guzz into their engines. I dunno if he's dead or alive. Gotta be dead by now.”

Yeah, maybe if Dune and Phil were right about Joe, then Furiosa may have been in the right by grabbing the wives and booking it, but she still completely fucked over her crew. That meant she still wore the filth badge in my head, just one step below Wrecker.

“Oh,” She started but her tone seemed off. She must not have expected the story to end like that. I'll admit, it was a shitty ending. “He sounds like an asshole, leavin' you like that.”

I sighed, she wasn't wrong but she didn't have the whole story. I'm sure she wouldn't be surprised to hear about what a dick I was because hell, I'm still the same dick socket I've always been, but the level of wretched-shit I put Nux through. I was finally realizing that some of it might have been unnecessary. The real surprise, to me, was that the idea of her judging me for that mess made me want to shut my cola hole and never open it again.

“We were both assholes, Dune.”

She said nothing, but settled against me again. Things were getting so weird. Two and a half years ago, if some muffler sucker back home had told me I'd now be sitting next to a half naked woman who at one point had to help me wipe my own ass, first I'd have laughed, then I'd have beaten his fucking head against a wall for spouting off that kind of blasphemy. I'd have dealt out a far harsher thrashing if that same person had suggested that I might even be contented by sitting there just listening to her breathe, tamed like some castrated mutt.

After everything this past week, everything that had been said, I was enjoying the fact that we could just sit here, doing and saying nothing for a while. It couldn't last, not with us. The shine hand rose, taking a hold on my chin to turn my head. She was comparing each scar, I could see the way her gaze shifted left to right. She spoke soft, which only lent the rust in my soul more power.

“So, you really did this side yourself, huh?” A finger stroked the corner of my lip as she asked for an answer she already knew.

The scar wrinkled, I was scowling. Here comes the shame and scorn. She pulled back to look me in the eye and I expected her to say something more, but that didn't happen. The loon came in close again, turning my head in her hands. Her lips warmed the two remaining staples in my face.

Oh, okay.

My head felt like it was on fire, and I didn't dare move. This was very different from her shine hand there. A thought came crashing through my head, it brought a split second of absolute terror. I shouldn't be letting a breeder touch me like this, definitely not one that was supposed to be wifed off to Scabrous Scrotus. But Dune wasn't a breeder. It never happened. She never got shipped to Gas
Town and I don't think anything white has ever touched her. Next came craving, I wanted more of that. Maybe this was how those wives clad in their linen whites got Nux to go traitor. This, what the nutter was doing, made everything else just stop mattering.

I began to wonder how much I could get her to touch with her mouth. I wasn't even worried about her teeth as I turned my head. She bared those yellow razors and hissed at me, but it was a grin she wore, not a snarl. That's so normal, and I thought normal had packed its shit and left for good. Being wrong was rarely such a good thing.

The spot where she cut up her lip on her teeth earlier was leaking again, coloring her fangs dark and slipping down her chin in a thin flow. She must have gotten it caught on the metal embedded in me and pulled it open again. What came next happened fast, an impulse move. I've had my mouth on hers before, during the sandstorm when she wasn't breathing, tasted blood then too but that time it was mine. I wanted to taste her, and for a moment it was good. Real good. Then she bit my tongue and back handed me hard across the jaw with that scar hand.

Our eyes locked, red smeared on our faces and breath heavy. A battle was raging in the air between us. I thought this was a coming brawl, I thought I’d be catching her fist in mine next before she could drive her knuckles into my eye. You can't predict everything.

She struck again like an angry snake, quick and ruthless, but not with curled hands. She pulled me back in with a grip on either side of my skull. Teeth clicked painfully, fingernails dragged harsh lines. Was this a fight? Far from wanting to get the distance between us to tussle proper without getting bit, I had her around the waist and yanked her into my lap while she mauled me in this savage yet pleasing way.

There were four hands groping, pulling, squeezing flesh and tugging on hair. My head knocked on the steel wall, then I felt her teeth on my neck. On reflex, I thought she might rip out my throat, so I hooked my thumb into the corner of her lip and pushed her back. There was a pause, and her crazy eyes probed mine. She could easily have sunken her nasty teeth into my fingers, instead she grasped my wrist with her shine hand and curled her tongue around my thumb. The sight of it, seared into my retinas like the flash of road flare in the dark.

She took in the rest of the digit, sucking on it a little. Why does that feel so shine? Felt dangerous too because of those teeth. I still felt and tasted their sting on the end of my tongue. I tried once to bend my thumb and feel the warm, wet textures of her mouth, but she was swift to punish me for that. Dune snapped her jaws around the knuckle and held it hostage with a steady, wild eyed glare. It didn't break skin, but I could feel the threat. Fucking feral.

This wasn't a fight and it wasn't swapping paint, I didn't know what the fuck it was, but I could get used to it. Soon, my fingers were forgotten, her attention shifted to the cut-ups which spanned from wrist to elbow. The feel of cooling lines from her slick lips on my skin made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. She was feeling the scars but with her mouth instead of her hand.

My gaze drifted, soaking up every feverish vision and branding it into memory. I could watch her pulse, faintly, just under heaving ribs. It was my turn, I wanted to feel that against my staples.

It wasn't going to happen. The very second I committed to the idea, there was the sound of choked gasping. Dune's head spun to look behind her and I leaned over to see around her shoulder. It was the stolen pup, standing under the door frame, horror stricken. I still couldn't remember his frickin' name.

He dropped whatever had been in his hands and it fluttered to the ground as he stumbled back, stuttered out half a word and fell square on his ass with eyes so wide they might escape their sockets.
"Shit." Dune hissed.

The pup flinched at her voice, scrambling upright and tripping over his own foot as he bolted off toward the bridge. We could hear his sprint for home all the way across the wooden planks until the slam of the screen door on the front of the crow house. After that, a tension hung in the air like a strung up corpse. We were both fast coming to our senses.

I looked at my hands, one held in hers, the other on her right hip, and it seemed surreal. It was no wonder the brat made a run for it, walking in on something like that and greeted by two strangers with bloody mouths. Dune stole a glance at me, then dropped my arm and cut her stare away. She dismounted me with the same expression she might have worn if her rifle had misfired. For the first time ever, Dune felt like being modest. She pulled her once discarded blanket over her shoulders and closed it in her fists in front of her.

"So, that happened." She stated bluntly.

"Uh, yeah." Was all I managed to dignify words her with.

I looked down into my lap, cringing at the evidence of how much my flesh had been enjoying what the kid interrupted. I'm not a pup, I've had my knob polished by anonymous mouths in the deep dark of the tunnels under the War Tower, so I was aware that something had been about to happen before the boy wandered over here. I wound up piling most of my own too thin sheet of rat holed cloth into my lap. The rest of me was cold, but I didn't need Dune cracking a dick joke on top of shit, on top of everything else. There had been plenty of vulgar jokes before this and there were times she definitely noticed my angry thunderstick futilely greeting every morning, but I felt like I was due for a flogging. I wondered if Dune might be just as ashamed of the whole deal, if she might not ever touch me again after this thing that just happened. Was the whole day going to be some hell ride through every variation of shit my kind aren't supposed to have to deal with?! Why do I have to feel like this? I hadn't wanted things to change again.

We just sat there, dazed as if we were coming down off of accidentally getting into something that intoxicates and confuses the mind. She grunted next to me, wiping our combined red from her lips and leaving yet another stain in the worn cloth she wore. She rose from the cot, blanket around her like a cloak as she bent down to pick up what the brat had dropped. I could tell by the movement of her eyes that she was reading something on the half crumpled sheet of garbage.

"Start scrubbing your duds. Dune's gonna dig around and try to find something dry for us to throw on. Note says Ard ain't takin' a no from us on the mattah of supper this night."

Fuckin' chrome, I get to deal with the harpy pricking and prodding at us, too.

Dune started pulling at the piles of rubbish. She never told me to wash my crap before, then again, my crap has never been saturated in mud. The few times I'd tried scrubbing my own stuff back at her kip, Dune had snapped at me for doing a piss poor job and ended up redoing it. It used to piss me off until I realized that if I let her do it, it was just one less thing to be bitched at about and one less thing I had to do. The murky water was frigid, hands ached after only a few minutes trying to get the worst of it out of my shirt and vest. Also had to clean up anything that had been in my pockets.

“What a fuckin-forkin' sty,” She muttered as things rattled and clanked to the floor while she excavated the junk pile with one hand, the other held her covers closed in front of her chest. She'd never done that before, shield herself from my eyes like this.

“Ahh! Eh, that could do,” She was tugging at something, putting her full weight into it until she had to shuffle back a step to avoid a small avalanche as part of the mountain of shit collapsed. She seemed
to have gotten what she was meaning to, holding it up by a buckled strap with one finger and giving it a sniff. “Too big for Dune, might fit you.”

She tossed the thing my way. It rolled down my back after it landed on me. Would be good to get into something dry and that would hide most of my humiliation, but it wasn't looking good for me, blue denim, the worst of all apparel.

“Denim is a *sin*, Dune!”

“Oof, why??” Her voice was muffled, she was climbing up the pile and holding her blanket closed with her teeth as she dug around some more near the top.

“Because it's BLUE.”

“So?” She snapped, pulling up what seemed to be an old grey sweater with the right sleeve half torn off at the shoulder. It was kind of funny to watch her pull it on over her head. The garment had a long neck on it for some reason and her whole head was stuck in it until she pulled it down into a bunch under her chin.

“Have you ever seen anything anywhere besides old world trash that's blue?”

“The sky?”

“Smartass,” I snorted. “I mean, anyone with eyes will see it and *me* in it from a mile away.”

“It's not like you're wearin' it into battle, Slit. All that's left to be done on this waning day is eat, shit, and sleep! By tomorrow our stuff'll be dry.”

I grumbled and muttered a thing or two under my breath, but began putting both my leg and the blue abomination on. One glance down at myself and I hated the thing. There was no zipper or button. It just had straps and buckles and material over the chest adorned with a pocket.

“I'm not wearing this.”

“*Ducky*, why can't-” She started but couldn't finish once she turned to look at me. Her laughter set fire to my head again, but all too differently this time. She even pointed as she cackled. “You look like a mutant four your old in those overalls! Hah!”

“This is why I didn't wanna wear it!”

“Then c'mere an' dig! Heh, so you don't have to hear Arddie critiquing your evening wear. Wonder what Phil would think.” She was teasing me, little demon.

“I think he'd better know how to shut his hole about it.”

Something Dune called luggage was pulled out of the mess. Inside it a few things better than the “overalls” were found. I was still stuck with denim, but it wasn't as bad. It was a jacket, faded and coated in red dust. Dune said it looked familiar but couldn't place how or why. The trouser situation was remedied with something that looked like it was made more from patches and pieces of other pants than anything else. I wasn't sure if any of the original parts still existed under the overlapped layers and stitch-work. At least most of it was black. Dune had to settle for a similar pair, but there were only patches over the seat and knees of the ones she found for herself.

Reasonably clean but wet clothes were hung on whatever could hold them up, doors, hooks on the wall, this dead bush thing outside. Now there was nothing else to do but go over there to join the
others. By this time Phil had surely told everyone else about me showing up soaked in filth. Getting real sick of smeg-heads laughing at me today. What about the kid who walked in at the worst, most mediocre moment possible? What did he tell the others? Who knows. He certainly paled a shade or two when we arrived, side stepping his way around Ardith to stand behind her and duck his head. What the fuck happened to this pup? What kind of sick shit did his original caretakers back home do to him?

Ard narrowed her eyes at the cowering boy, then turned to have a look at us. Her expression twisted momentarily, you wouldn't pick up on it unless you were looking for it, but I could tell that she had some idea of what the pup had seen. She gave him a pat on the arm and pointed him to the gramophone her and Dune had been so chuffed about on the first night here. Now she came our way.

The maniac at my side looked a little like she was shrinking, avoiding eye contact and trying to appear less threatening. It was an uncommon mannerism for her, she must have felt like flat tire over the squabble they had earlier. Ardith only had to smile at her and they were soon flipping through records, looking for something called Eagles so that they could hear about somewhere called Hotel California. Guess they were okay with each other then.

I had nothing to do but stand there lookin' ugly, so I ambled toward the fire to watch that. Phil and Bones were keeping an eye on a several plucked birds and what might be some other four legged thing rotating over the flames on spits.

“Damn, you clean up good.”

I know when a compliment isn't really a compliment, so I mocked Phil's words back at him. He just smirked and kept turning that sizzling meat while I overheard the conversation Dune and the nag were having.

“You know, Sister, you two look real spooky like this.”

“Eh? Like what?”

“You an' Slit. Don't you know you're both wearing your mom and pa's old clothes? Green on grass, if he were blond I'd almost mistake him for your old man from the back. That was his jacket, don't you remember?”

I turned my head to see Dune's reaction. Her brows rose and her mouth popped open as she gawked.

“Oh. Damn, you're right. What was his stuff doing in a suitcase?”

The redhead shrugged. “I packed up a bunch of old things and stowed it away in case someone needed it. Guess nobody around here wanted to wear your pop's stuff, or try filling his boots like that. A lot of the old timers remember him bein' a bushranger type.”

“Ah,” She caught my stare, cringed and turned back to Ard. “Hey, sis?”

There was a funny gestural exchange. Ardith's right eyebrow quirked and her jaw flexed, Dune just jerked her head toward the door. They got up then, and I almost followed out of reflex because lately I didn't like it when I couldn't see where the nutter was.

“That's a bad sign.” Bones, it was his words which stopped me from trying to follow the scav.

“Huh? The hell does that mean?”
His speckled face stretched into a sneering grin. “Two women walkin' off like that, means something's wrong and that you are prolly' the problem.”

“I didn't do jack shit!” It was knee-jerk, coming to my own defense, but as soon as it left my throat, I cringed.

“Ah! See? There it is right there. You know what you did. I don't, but you do.” He practically cawed like one of the black birds.

Featherknife had something to add, just a mocking 'Ohh, yir dead, mate.' while my guts churned acid. Bones was asking for a broken jaw, smirking at me with that smarmy face. Phil mediated, lifting an arm between us and pulling down his respirator to speak. He seemed to wear it whenever he had to lean over the fire pit.

“They had a hollering match at each other earlier. Could be about that.” Phil uttered though a wheeze. Not very warboy-like of him to serve an opinion like that instead of heaping the derision upon me. Living here had done a number on him, or maybe it was his charmed married life that made him so rust.

I sat and watched the fire dance, the others held conversations about this and that which didn't concern or interest me in the slightest so it was all just noise to me. I was busy replaying in my skull the things that the loon said out in the bog, also what had happened in Dune's former home today.

I'm an idiot.

“Whus'at?” There was a cold -and slightly sticky- little finger poking into my arm. Sump, with his sister standing next to him and chewing on the end of her own sleeve. He was waggling his finger on my cut-ups, asking what particular things etched into the designs were.

“It's a thunderstick.”

“What's a thunderstick?” The girl one chirped. She was a little easier to understand because she still had all of her pup teeth, her brother was missing the top front and sounded a little lispy.

Phil rumbled in his throat and shot me a hard glare. “Ardith doesn't like me tellin' the pups war stories... but she ain't here, is she?”

That was permission.

I didn't bother much with pups back home, aside from the ones old enough to start learning how to throw thunder. Nux was mostly the one making use of their minuscule hands and nimble little fingers for the more tedious work in the garages. It was expected of him anyway, being so close to the end, that he should try to pass on what he knew before he went and burnt out. The way he talked about it, entertaining pups was easy. They like stories and repetition, he'd said. He failed to mention that they tried to find meaning or reason in every little thing. I tried a story about buzzards to give the use of a thunderstick an explanation, but that only supplied them with more questions.

“Why're they so spiky?”

“To stop lancers from hopping on their rigs and kickin' their heads in?”

And that was only the beginning. Why do they like rust so much? Where do they live? Why did you have to kill 'em? Who's their leader? Have you ever seen one without its goggles on? Most of those questions had to be answered with the best guess. It would be better to just finish the story.
I got a little too close once. I had run out of thundersticks and resorted to cutting at the rust fuckers with a glaive. I had leaned out too far to jab at the driver with the blade and got caught on the rusted sabers. I could still recall how it hadn't even hurt. The pups certainly seemed to enjoy the tale of faithful service to... Joe. Still wasn't sure how I felt about matter of an immortal who turned out to be mortal. I avoided his name when I gave the reason we were out there, under his orders which had been passed down from him to the Prime, then to the other imperators until it came to us half-life warriors. A few bands of pursuit teams bolstered the patrol crews and the daily survey of the land became a wild hunt. They had been getting cocky and roaming our territory in broad daylight, so they had to be pushed back into their badlands on the regular until they got the hint.

The buzzard driver's neck had split open at the first graze of the serrated blade at the end of my pole arm, but I didn't lean back fast enough as the corpse lead footed the breaks and slumped over the wheel. Nux hadn't seen it coming either and maintained speed as the departed enemy swerved toward us. The buzzard buggy's breaks squealed and we fanged it right passed. The prongs raked my ribs and gut, I was torn off the lancers perch and flung between the chariots. My clawing hands managed to catch the frame of the passenger window, knees and boots dragging for but a moment, still long enough to make it look like someone took a sanding belt to my shins. Adrenaline was how I managed to haul myself back up and into the lancers basket. I remember the blood streaking across the rear glass and how it smeared all around the roof hatch under my hands. Oh, the way Nux looked as he slid open the top to look back at me, like he'd been the one who just got gutted.

Keep after 'em! I'd howled. We took down another within three minutes. The air whipping over the roof of the Coupe had me painted in red all up and down the right side. Looked chrome, I'm sure, but my liver was damn near hanging out and gushing body fuel. I was too kamikrazy to feel it until I woke up in the blood shed hours later, while the Organic Mechanic was poking around inside me to put my shit back together. That was the time I almost bled out on a chase, then again on the slab where you go to get hacked up some more. I had pushed that line between chrome and stupid a little too far. According to Nux, I sort of just fell off the back after that second kill and rag dolled. Must have lost a bit too much and blacked out. The Organic said my guts looked like they went through a blender, couldn't sit up on my own for more than a week, and the road rash was murder. I tried to repress the memory of Nux, how he was there for most of the excruciating repairs I needed, the way he'd come to change dressings when he was sure that the Organic was either too high or too lazy to do it often enough to satisfy my driver. I didn't tell them about those parts.

These brats just ate up the grit of the story like lizards on a maggoted corpse. I pushed open the jacket to show them the scars and the staples. The smallest of the three tried twice to pluck at the metal and had to be stopped, but not by me nor the others. Ardith had reappeared and was the one to stoop down and scoop him up, glowering at me with the action. I could only offer a shit-eating grin, which strengthened her already visible contempt for me. Dune was just behind her, and I could feel the joy in irritating Ard flee like roaches when you light torches at the Citadel. The scav had on a tight lipped smile, the kind people wear when they want to say something but keep it to themselves for your benefit.

Plates were handed out, others whose names I never bothered to learn showed up with their spawn too. I stood in the line next to Dune, she still hadn't said a thing. Fuck, rusted mediocrefuck. The time came to sit and eat. Everyone was talking, Ardith was next to Featherknife and helping him get food into the pups while Dune and I sat a car length apart and didn't even look at each other. I ate because my meat suit felt hungry, tired limbs and shaky fingers, but my guts weren't too thrilled. I was still letting my head torture me, so the grub more or less had to be forced down. When Dune was finished with her plate, she rose to take it to the bucket of soiled dishes. She stopped to take mine. Our fingertips touched and I felt a pang of longing for the shine hand. I just wanted things to be normal.
When she first hauled me to her homestead, I'd wanted things to go back the the way they had been at the Citadel. Now, I think I'd settle for getting things back to the way they were before the sandstorm. The only thing I'd miss would be the sleeping arrangement. Shit. How was that going to work if she didn't even want to sit next to me? A body leaning into my arm shattered that thought.

“Dune don't want to talk about it, not right now. She just wants things to be normal for a while.”

We wanted the same thing, and I could give her that, so I did the most usual thing I could think of and lay my head and arms over her lap for the nightly business. She appeared comforted, soon leaning back and using the foam of what had once been a chair cushion as a pillow, all the while her left hand scratched through the hair on my face to find the ruined and shine parts. I think we were both so relieved by this that we each fell asleep on the floor of that crow shack, there could be no other explanation for waking in the middle of the night, still next to the fire pit. The fire was out, I could barely spy the glow of dying embers settled deep in the nest of ash.

At some point while we were piling up Z's, she'd rolled onto her side and my head thudded to the stone. That's what woke me. Oh, we'd be walking funny tomorrow from sleeping on the cobbled stone. I rubbed at the spot on my skull that tapped the floor and looked around. There was very little light, only the flickering of one tiny flame in a tallow candle. I could see Phil, Ardith, Bones, Featherknife, the four of them packed together on a fold out couch which sat by the far wall. The pups must have slept in a room off the main one.

I didn't really want to move, the stones by the fire pit were still warm and so was Dune, but I had to take a whizz. It was easiest to go outside and around to the left of the garage to do that, it was cold but I didn't feel like groping around in a strange dwelling looking for a pot to piss in. I checked Dune first, slack jawed and snoring. Not much chance that she'll get up to walk, so I pulled on my leg, which I must have slipped off sometime hours ago when I was half asleep.

Stumbling blind around some shoddy shack looking for a place to drop a stream isn't something that would normally be memorable, but unwillingly greeting the dirt with my face is. I hadn't even had a chance to zip up and I hadn't known who it was. My elbow flew back twice, trying get the weight off me so I could turn and slice this rust sucker from sack to Adam's apple. The sound of strained breaths whistling through black lungs and dry coughing told me who it was, fucking Phil. Must have outstayed our welcome, finally.

I flipped the blade on my arm forward, but not before a fist loosened a few of my teeth. He tried pinning my slashing arm then, so I brought the steel of my metal knee into his ribs and he went rolling off me. It became a dirt struggle, he had my blade arm, I had his pistol hand. The revolver was dropped somewhere in the darkness, and I was knocked flat again when his skull met mine. By the time I had my wits back, I found that he was crouched over me. I couldn't see it, but he had my right hand under his left boot and my left arm pinned over my head. I could feel the teasing of a shiv under my chin and the smell of his breath as he kept on sputtering and retching over me.

“I don't want this, Slit. You know I don't want it.”

“What the fuck are you doing! Get the fuck off me!”

“Who did it! Who killed him! And why?”

“Who?!”

“Joe, Assjack! Which imperator killed Joe?” It was a whisper, harsh and urgent but still inappropriately quiet. I didn't care to be quiet. I still had my freaking fly open and a knife poking me in the jugular, didn't have much choice but to say it though, tell him who.
“Furiosa.” I spat it out for him, loudly enough that something stirred inside the house.

He growled, and that blade threatened to pop through the skin and tickle that neck bleeder. “You wake up my kids, I will gut you.”

“What a loving father.” I sneered, and he only ground the treads of his boot into my hand. I didn’t give him the satisfaction of voicing the pain of that. Downright evil of him threatening to ruin my throwing hand.

“Well.” He hissed.

“Get off me first, geezer.”

He was a fool to put away the shiv and trust me. I'll give him what he wants, but not before...

“Urgh! God!” The moment we stood, I had grabbed him by his dumb striped scarf, bent him over and drove my flesh knee into his gut.

“I don't know why. She snaked his prized breeders and went east in the War Rig.” I told him while he rolled on the wet ground and likely held his aching guts. “She somehow shredded him on the Gigahorse on the way back to the Citadel.”

It was too dark to see but it sounded like the deserter was about to toss up, I could hear him hauling himself back up to rasp out another question, one I expected. “Oh, fuckin- Well?! Did she take over or did one of the others?”

“When I went to check it out, the wretcheds said the traitor filth was the top dog, givin' 'em water and food and shit. She and them breeders are running things.”

It took another minute, but once he was done hacking and gagging he had one more thing to say. “There's going to be a meeting tomorrow, you're coming and you're going to tell the others exactly what you just told me.”

“I don't take orders from deserters, why the fuck should I?”

“Because if you do it I'll put a friggin' windshield on your rusty hunk of shit car! How's that? stubborn jackass,”

I didn't need to leave him hanging for a few breaths, I just wanted him to think I might refuse. Fangin' rust monger. “Fine, I'll take it.”

“Good, now, get the hell away from me before I knock your teeth so far down your throat you'll smile on the wrong end.”

I was happy to buzz off. Once inside I collected the maniac and steered her to the car as she stumbled and muttered unintelligible gibberish. My intent was to sleep in the back like we had for the last few days, but once again, rest didn't come for me. I sat awake listening to Dune's dream rambling until the sun rose and lit up the fog. I was just waiting for yet another obligation I didn't have any choice in upholding.

-0-
Oh my goodness! Thank you so much Gatesgates! Chrome fanart! the best thing in the wasteland!
Chapter End Notes

-About that kiss fuckery-

I actually like reading smut because I enjoy reading about the emotional intimacy that comes with it, but I'm really a big wiener about writing it myself in a fic. Because... I don't know, logic and reason says it's super common fare in the world of fanfiction, but I guess I fear judgment or disappointing readers who came for platonic romance. I also have a hard time deciding what's tasteful.

With these two, I honestly figure if two adults live with each other long enough, bathe, eat, sleep in the same vicinity and engage in physical comfort as intimate as they do, deeper physical intimacy is probably one awkward interaction away at any given time. It was bound to happen and I'd be a liar if I said I didn't kinda ship this thing. Part of me does indeed hold a guilty conscious about pairing a canonical character with some random ass original character but... Eh, this is my fic, my sandbox, I'm going play how I want because ultimately at the end of the day, I write for my own entertainment. Nobody should feel so guilty for wanting to take a story somewhere that they never actually take it there. At least, I think I kept them well within character, I'm satisfied with that.

-About reluctance to look at female nudity-

The film hints at the lack of exposure war boys have with women when Nux actually LOOKS at the five wives for the first time.

"Oh, look at them! So shiny, so chrome!" -Nux

It really seems like he's never seen a kinda clean kinda normal person of the opposite sex besides Furiosa before. His immediate thought after that isn't even sexual, he says as if in sudden realization of their visual value, that he and Max could literally ask for ANYTHING from Joe and there's a real possibility they might get what they ask for. No, he doesn't want one of the wives (probably because he'd have not the first clue what to do with one) he wants to drive the War Rig, presumably back to the Citadel. He wants to drive the big awesome truck.

That's. Literally. All. He. Wants.

Makes me wonder. I'm assuming no low rank war boy has ever really gotten a good look at the wives once they were cleaned up, in white, and locked in the vault. Wretched down below kinda blend together into a writhing mass of limbs and thirsty faces so gender among them doesn't really stand out, and the segregation between wretched and war boy is clear. The only ones we see in the War tower are cog fodder and bloodbags. So, yeah.
-About healthy relationships-

Dune and Slit don't have one, period. I know I probably don't have to say it, but it's NEVER okay to hit.

Like. Yeah, they have their super sweet and supportive moments but... You get the idea. It's the wasteland, a realm where extremes are represented as the norm.
Meeting

Chapter Summary

You don't HAVE to put on pants... Please put on pants.

Chapter Notes

I know, I know, another split chapter. It's the length of the chapters lately that make me feel that it's necessary. I suppose I'm trying to tie up as many loose ends as I can and lay out a good foundation for the coming sequel to this story so that I can push forward. Chapters may be split for the foreseeable future with more emphasis on Slit's perspective, this is after all a Slit focused dealio.

Also I would like to thank the mystery readers who nominated this grand weird thing of mine in those Fic awards on tumblr, thank you so, so much. It means the world to me that you guys like my freaky story that much!

4/6/2018 UPDATE: Working on the next chapter. I had hoped to wrap up the bog Arc with this chapter, but I'm not sure how that will work. The business of the meeting is wrapped up, I'm watching where this chapter is going, but don't worry, we're getting closer to done with this Green Place business. Currently the word count is 4000 words I'm hoping to round it out between 5000 and 6000 words and to keep it concise. Hopefully, unless the Harvest party thingy falls into this chapter as well, the chapter I'm working on will be done within the next few days.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-Dune-

I woke in a place I hadn't fallen asleep. I was fairly sure I'd been at Arddie's, next to the fire pit with the battle fodder sprawled across my lap. The disorientation was only momentary, I was in the car and I could recall being told to get up and walk the night before. So, Slit must have had us move to spend the night safe and sound inside Shirley and now I was the one with my head in a lap. How curious.

He was awake, not having noticed as I shifted to peer up at him. Oh, what happened? A drying smudge of red hardened over a cut and a blotch of dark maroon. Did I serve him a wallop in my sleep? He glared into the distance, jaw clenching and releasing, which seemed to mean he was thinking long and hard about something. He jerked away when I lifted my hand to circle the forming bruise on his left cheek with a middle finger, perhaps caught off guard.

“What happened?”
“Nothin’,”

“Did I whack you?”

“No,”

“Well, whose arse am I moppin’ the floors with about it?”

“No one’s. Go back to sleep, Nutbag.”

I'm not fond of it when he doesn't tell me things. It wasn't the same as me not wanting to rehash my history and I do realize I may be a hypocritical wank about this whole subject of trading the painful stories. This wasn't like that, I don't like not knowing what is going on now. Who did he quarrel with? I could tell that I wasn't about to get more out of him, he had his stubborn face on.

“I've slept enough, but you don't appear to have caught your forty winks. C'mere, gimme that forked up face and lemme fix that.”

His beautifully ruined mouth twisted toward an irritable frown as I sat up and reached out, but he could not resist. My hands were soon full and guiding him down onto the rolled out mats that had made a home for themselves where the back seat had once been. The blankets were left behind at my old home, but there was still the tarp. I pulled that over us to let our hot breath warm the air trapped under the thin plastic. He shivered once, and I cannot say if it was the touch of a hand or the sudden change of temperature. He grumbled something about not wanting to fall asleep, that Phil would probably turn up soon, I cared not. Phil could spare Ducky a few hours of comfortable rest. I knew he'd been having troubles falling asleep.

I smoothed out his eyebrows, stroked his lower lip, down his nose, and it wasn't long at all before the grouchy look on his face slackened into something resembling peace. When he shifted to slip his arm out of his gauntlet, I saw the pressure marks from wearing it over the cord of leather which he used to bind our hands at night. Did he simply wear it all the time? It hadn't been very long on the grand scale of things since this binding of the hands became a necessity, felt like it had been a far more integral part of our routines than it truly was. For all his flaws and self centered nature, he seemed concerned enough with my night disturbances to safeguard me from their cruel effect. The unfeeling fingers of my right hand plucked at the length of leather where it still stuck to his skin. I know this scarred hand isn't his favorite, but maybe just to ease his worry, I slipped my half of the loop over his fingers and put it on, tight and secure on my right hand. He drew in a deep breath and hummed out at that.

There was a comfort here, in these strange places where insidious silence is held at bay only by the sound of two heartbeats. I hate silence and I fear it so. Before Slit, the world was being eaten up by the quiet, and in those hushed places I could hear my unwanted passenger creeping up from behind. I never want to go back to that dark place inside my mind again. The visions are dangerous, they make life harder than it has to be, but they don't threaten to chew through my identity. My thoughts only seemed dark and fitful, really I was thanking the goddess for bringing the war boy to me, the shiniest haul.

With swirling thoughts of thankfulness to old gods, I'd gone and begun to fall back into my dreams before seeing Duck through to his own, the opposite of what I wanted to do. I was adrift in a world of pure thought, some senseless, others focused, yet not quite in a dream. I was pulled from this journey of the mind by a tickling around my nose and mouth. I'd turn my head left and right to shoo away whatever insect had come to pester me, but the feeling came back again and again. Once roused, I opened my peepers to find that Slit was looking at me, a hand between us and a finger outstretched. He was tracing laugh lines and the hollows of my eye sockets. That's new, lately all
things with us seemed to be new and alien, just like at the beginning but softer. Now, I thought on the day before. That furious mashing of mouths, the way it had first startled me and how the instinct mum had instilled to retaliate kicked in at full force. He had not asked for permission, not that I'd have given it to him. There was also the conundrum of what I had done after. If I think about it, I can still feel his mangled lips and taste the blood, and I did not hate it.

Odd to be on the other side of this, being touched this way, explored was more like it. I considered the idea of trying the business of a kiss again, if you could call it that. I believed that I'd made it clear that we needed to talk about the matter of it first. I didn't want to have this discussion last night and perhaps not for a long while, but chat about that issue we must. Not now. Dangerous as it was to indulge, I scooted myself closer. My good and whole hand relocated down his arm, shoved the sleeve of the jacket up so that fingers could roam over his flesh doodles where they would stay and caress.

Looking someone in the eye too long can leave you feeling violated, invaded, not this time. He had that look about him again, when he'd seem much younger than he really was.

“What're you thinkin' about?” I asked, and he looked away.

“Not important,”

“It's important to Dune,”

The corner of his lips pulled into spiteful grimace. “Crank roped me into going to some crow fisher meeting with him.”

“Who?” I hadn't heard that name before, or maybe I had but failed to remember. Was it one of Ard's friends?

“Mm, I meant to say Phil.”

“Oh, she's assuming you don't really want to go?”

“What makes you say that?”

“Look on your face says you either haven't shat in a week or there's something buggin' ya.”

He hunched his shoulders with lips thinned into scowl. “Not much choice, already made a deal.”

“Another deal?”

“I'm getting a windscreen out of it.” He asserted, perhaps trying to convince himself that it was worth it. He had that tone that said he didn't want to do what was required for the reward, but the reward was too great to pass up. It would be nice to get that front glass, keep the cool morning wind from chewing on us when we take Shirley out. Still, there was this protective twinge in my core. I didn't like that the failed war boy felt pressured to do something. He spent his whole life before the wreck having orders crammed down his gullet. I could hear Mama, dispensing her ultra-green advice inside my mind.

“Slit, Mumsy used to say, you don't have to put on pants every morning. You're not actually obligated to do that.

His eyes narrowed, then pinched themselves shut as he shook his head and showed me his teeth in a cringe, confounded. It was as if his ears had rejected my words. “Dune- What? That makes no fangin' sense. What do pants have to do with anything?”
“Ya know, like- Hmm, like there’s no physical necessity in wearing pants. You only do it to make other people comfy and secure around you, right? Wearing pants is not a life or death matter. It's just a thing people do 'cause they feel like they have to. Same logic applies to lots of stuff, like not knowing how to say no when someone asks you to do something you don’t want to. If it's not gonna kill ya to not do it, then why do it?”

His eyes opened, shifting to and fro as if searching the air between us to locate something that might not exist. “Your mum was just as warped as you, then.”

I stuck out my tongue for him, he did the same in return and grunted a mocking noise. He still had a swollen red crescent on the tip of his tasting bits from that nip I gave him.

“And I'm keeping the trousers on, thanks.” He added, much to my frustrated amusement. Sometimes his misunderstanding of the things I tried to teach him were charming, in a way.

“Heheh, that's not what Dune meant at all, love.”

He said nothing, but I realized my slip of the tongue when eye contact was made. That small boy look again, making my heart bleed for his childhood locked in invisible shackles.

“Just a figure of speech, yeah?” I assured.

No response, just another long pull of breath and a slow release. We were both over examining everything, poised and vigilant for any misstep. I had no idea what either of us might do if we could positively identify the other pushing the line between us too far. The line already curved and twisted and blurred to nothing in some areas, so who knows what could happen.

“Hey, I'm coming around the car on the passenger side. Don't shoot at me. You lovebirds are decent, right?” Oh, that's Phil, turning up just like Slit said he would.

What he said, it made my face burn. Slit moved like greased lightning, flipping himself over to his hands and knee and pulling my hand from the loop of leather. He scrambled over the front seat toward the door to throw it open and poke his head out to look around. What the elder man said next had my teeth grinding, feeling that sense of shame.

“You guys really freaked out Jackie yesterday. Jus' do me a favor and keep it in your pants while you're around the house.”

“There's nothing coming out of any pants!” Slit snapped.

“What's your saying, Romeo.”

“The fuck does that mean?!”

“It means you need to shave your face and get ready because we're leaving in about... twenty minutes? Bring the girlie, got some questions for her too.”

“I don't give her orders.”

Phil rolled his eyes, handing something to Slit rolled up in a scrap of burlap. “Just look proper and IF she decides to tag along, that would be chrome. Give back my shaving stuff when yir done, and for the love of V8 clean it before you hand it back.”

My guts tightened, I've heard that tone before, from my Pa. Firm, not to be disobeyed, but not harsh. When I leaned over the back of the seats to look at what Duck had in his hands, it was revealed to be
a straight razor and an old altoid tin. Phil went back inside and I watched Slit as he smeared grease from the little tin through the hair on his face. Usually, back at my kip, he would sort of just vanish with into the deeper caverns with stubble and then return with a clean, smooth face. It was interesting to watch him look onto the side mirror and make faces at it to see what he was doing as he dragged the blade over his skin. Could not help myself but to run my little finger from his upper lip back to his ear to feel how soft his flesh had become. He clacked his teeth together and captured the tips of my middle and index finger between his stained ivories for a moment before letting them go and pouring water from his canteen over a rag to wipe down his face.

“Lookin' sharp, Ducky,”

“Always look sharp,”

“Gah, yir ego is morbidly in need of pruning, ya know.”

“Speak English.”

“I am, battle fodder,”

He glared back at me, but that was the end of the discussion regarding his self image. He sighed and asked me if I wanted to go with him to this meeting he was being hauled off to. If nothing else, I could see that he didn't want to go alone, so I nodded and gave him another touch, fingers straightening out his hair where laying on the mats had mussed it. That was the moment that the whole clan once sleeping inside the home before us emerged, young'uns and all. They surrounded Shirley, Phil and Ard entering through the passenger side.

“Yirs is the only running car on the property at the moment. With you's guys in tow we think it ain't fair either way to make you drive there mapless while we walk around on the stilts. I'll give directions.” Phil said as Arddie settled in the back with me.

My initiate sister's arms wrapped tight and nice around me as her little ones piled in around us, even the older adopted one who hid his face in her shoulder. Slit was driving, and it all felt so much like a family trip. I could even hear Rus and Flick, somewhere in the cacophony and Pa telling them to quiet down. I could also hear the roof of the car give a metallic thud when the weight of Featherknife and bones made it cave in ever so slightly as they sat on top. Slit cursed and I could spy his hands gripping the wheel with white knuckles as Phil helped him navigate.

He wasn't prepared for this. I could see it, smell it even, that there was more to this business of tagging along to a sky fisherman meeting than I had been told. My right hand was held in Ard's, she seemed to examine the destroyed flesh with a kind of calm sadness in her eyes. My left arm stretched out so that I could brush my fingers over the back of Ducky's head. It was an action without thought. He turned his head slightly, jaw set, but his shoulders relaxed. Perhaps him knowing that I saw his tension helped to ease it, just a little.

Time seemed to pass in a strange way, soon we were parked before a tree. An incredible monolith of a trunk and dead branches holding up a whole house built from the salvaged remnants of a ruined past. I could see others, on their stilts and making their way across the muddied earth to meet us. There was a ladder of rope to the top, up we had to climb. Poor slit had quite a rough time of it with his heavy metal leg just hanging there useless, but he managed, puling his lower half up one rung at a time. Once at the top and standing around a kind of front porch, we watched more arrive, piling their walking stilts against the broad stalk of the tree. I could feel the sky home sway under us with any breeze. It was the wind of this strange day which made it possible to watch the others come to the place. The moving air picked up the fog and carried it away. Most of those who joined us were old men, grizzled faces and hanging tendrils of gray hair when they lifted their masks and bandages.
Some looked at me and Ard, heads bowed and eyes on the floor.

It was status, women held higher standing here for years before the water turned sour and our place of green began to die. There were a few older women, one in particular who had to be carried in her ancient fragility. It was a man about Slit's age who carried her, perhaps her grandson. I recognized her, one of the elders who was too old and weak even fifteen years ago to leave this place with the caravans. Her name was Heta.

Phil leaned in between Arddie and I, a hand on each of our shoulders. Slit glared at him as he spoke.

"I'm leaving the kids with Jackie watching um. I need you two in there today. Ard, honey. What we talked about this morning."

She nodded, but I was confused. When Phil went inside with Ard and her other two men following after them, I reached out to grasp Slit at the wrist.

"Do you know what's going on?"

He glanced down at me, expression contorting into what I suspected to be concern, but not for either of us. He took a look around and leaned in close, speaking quietly enough for no one else to hear.

"He's trying to - I don't even know how to start explaining this in five minutes. Come on, you'll probably hear the whole thing in a minute anyway."

In we went, Ard had to vouch for us and my full name was given. Something I hadn't heard in years. My ears wouldn't hear it, a garbled mash of words from a time when surnames actually mattered. They didn't anymore, it was just a reassurance to the old ones who still abide by their social relics.

"That's funny name," The battle fodder remarked.

"Forget it. It died with Ma an' Pa."

Whole place was circular, built like the nest of a mud dabbler with a hall which wound around the exterior wall until we reached the interior, a single room with a fire burning under a metal grate in the center. There was no food being cooked, only the old ones throwing dust over the flames to smother the licking tongues of orange enough that people on directly opposed sides of it could see one another.

The old one, Heta, and a man very nearly as decrepit stood, gnarled hands motioning all others to sit while they remained on their feet. They were hunched and leaned against one another just to stay upright for long enough to address the group of perhaps twenty five individuals. So strange, being here on the outer fringe of the green place, traditionally territory of the Sky Fishers, and seeing both men and women speaking together.

"We come together this day, the same as we have every passing quarter year, to assess what remains. I see young faces, more than there had been the last time we met,” I felt Heta's eyes on us. “And this concerns us. We cannot feed more on these lands-"

“What if them showin' up brings hope?” The entire room turned their gaze to Phil, the eldest among us clutched the ornately adorned rams horn in her hand closer to her chest.

“You're speaking out of turn, Mechanic.”

Phil stood then, reaching out with an open hand for the rams horn. The tension in the air could be cut with a knife. It was passed slowly, and he sighed with his relief evident. He hadn't been sure they
would allow him speak.

“Does the name Furiosa mean anything to any of you? Her mother was Mary Jo Bassa, so Ardith tells me.”

Some around the room broke their silence in murmurs. Others, the women, snatched their memories out of the air and pulled them to their hearts. The crone shook her head harshly, waving her cane at the former war boy.

“They were taken more than twenty years ago, during the first raids. They are among the lost, or dead, the latter being the most likely. What place could the remembrance of a stolen mother and child possibly have here, now?”

“She's not dead, I've met her, fifteen years ago when the fever rashes broke out at the Citadel and she was cast out of the vault. Never knew she was from here, not till I met Ardith.”

“So what? The child lives. Is there a point to your babbling, war boy?”

“Hearken to these words!” Phil called out, pulling the curved horn further out of reach when the old man moved forth to snatch it back for Heta. “Furiosa rules the Citadel, in the west. It's green there, with water. More than you could ever drink. I- I have proof that one of your own took control there. And that proof is sitting right here among us.”

A resurgence of hushed voices spread through the room, but quieted as soon as Phil moved to hand the rams horn to Slit. My ducky froze, taking the artifact slowly as he mouthed a few words at Phil. It looked like his lips soundlessly formed the phrase ‘the fuck do I say?’, to which the older failed war boy specified with: “The whole story,“

“Okay. Fine.” I could see his lips form another silent word, windshield, before he started. It was a reminder of what the gain in this venture was. “I was up top on the skull tower, hosing down the spinach when I heard the rallying drums and-”

I couldn't help it, interrupting him, but I was having a hard time picturing what he just said. I wrapped my hand around the end of the ram horn held in his hands. “Wait, hold on... You know gardening?”

His nostrils flared at that and his brows knitted themselves together. “It's not like I was on the back of a pursuit car ALL the time. Who do you think did the waterin' and polatinin' on the plants? It sure as hell wasn't the Imperators.”

I had to laugh, in spite of the grumbles I could hear around the fire. “I'm sorry, mate. I'm having a hard time picturin' that, war boy gardeners! How queer!“

Duck ground his teeth and hissed at me. “Could you be any more inappropriate?”

That was when Phil cleared his throat and nudged at Slit's shoulder with his knee. “You should stand up when you talk.”

The story began anew, starting with a grunt and growl as he rose. So, not everything he said made sense to me, nor to others in the room. The problem was the terms and slang unique to the cult of the V8. Phil nodded at some of it, sighed and scowled through other parts, but you could see in his eyes that he understood the gravity of the words my Ducky spoke. I only understood how serious this road war had been because of the tones and textures in his voice.

men who had been raised in ignorance and culture death, for what? For water, for half a chance at life longer than only a handful of years. Could their mothers have known? Could they have understood that they were handing over their babies to be placed in a world of cruel ritual at the expense of the individual? The sacrifice of the true self? Joe might as well have slaughtered them with his own hands, that was my opinion.

I think the story from his perspective was enough for them to understand what kind of power Joe Moore held at his total command. There were parts I heard which concerned me more, things that he seemed to gloss over, anything to do with Nux and anything to do with someone he referred to simply as the bloodbag.

Slit had to stop once, at Heta's insistence, to explain why Joe had five wives in the first place, and why he felt compelled to chase after them. Healthy pups was what Slit answered with, even he seemed to hear the absurdity of what he had just said, and he looked to Phil before he could go on. The old battle fodder could only nod his head, stoic features falling into a state of distant guilt as he crossed his arms and looked down. It was like... Hmm. It was like Phil was ending a conversation with Slit that I had never been aware they'd had. Slit appeared for a moment, between two blinks, to have unraveled a riddle inside his own mind. He had to slam those wonky eyes closed and shake his head before he could continue.

“...She took the war rig through here, through the Toxic Lands and after his favorite wife carked it we had to turn around. We lost them and Joe, he just didn't give up. He had us search everything, everywhere around the swampland and back toward the canyon to see if she had come out of the fog to- Well, I have no idea why she would, besides the fact that we all thought no one would hang around this mud pit for very long. Would have been smart to hang around here if you people are still hanging on after all this time. Doesn't matter, she still came back through, took the Citadel after she shredded Joe. Now she's up there with a couple old bags and the ex-wives, handing out food to wretched folk. That's all I know. I was wrecked a few miles before the canyon.”

Slit then extended his arm to his left, held in his hand was the rams horn for Phil to take back. He was done talking. I could see it, he hadn't wanted to be forced to speak out about this, the last day of his time as a warrior for a false god. That had been the day his world dissolved. I might not condone a lifestyle centered around servitude to a terrible man, but to stay my hand was impossible. A point of contact at his knee as he settled himself on the floor once more, and after he was seated I had to take his hand. I spied his left eye roll toward the corner to see what I was doing and he was as still as stagnant water, but he did not pull away. He was still wearing my Pa's jacket and I wondered if the old ones around the room recognized it. Probably, it could be why Heta squinted so intensely at him. I shifted the thought out of my head, instead rolling the cuff up his arm to trace the shapes of his scars. I was busy trying to piece together the reason for all of this fuss in my mind. The name, Furiosa, sounded familiar but I couldn't remember why. There's a chance I may have met her when I was a sprout. Perhaps Mumsy knew her.

It was certainly illuminating to have it revealed that the Citadel indeed boasted a wealth of crops, as rumored. I'd never actually seen the place and I had only ventured a short distance over the mountains, with great caution, upon the cycle for scavenging Buzzard mash-ups. Slit came with me a few times, when I was teaching him how to negotiate the treacherous mountain trails which were simply impossible to navigate by car. The mountains are a playground for beady eyed snipers. Never a greater thrill than to best a gunman at his own game or survive a narrow miss. Why did Phil feel such a need to bring this up? The only thing I could wager was that Phil wanted to go home, maybe convince others to go with him. My thought on the matter was soon echoed in the man's very own words. Phil dropped the ram horn. He was forfeiting his right to turn by turn talking. This I could remember from the mother's meetings my own mum attended, the rule that if the horn is dropped, a debate was to be initiated. The faces around the fire were astounded.
"I'm going. Ardith and I are packin' up the family and taking our chances at the Citadel. Anyone is welcome to join us, and I urge that you do. If you think this swamp can support the clan for another ten years, or even another five, then you're just gullible. I wanna hear what everyone else has to say."

The room was dead as a graveyard for a solid second, but the break in sound was only momentary. The room fairly exploded in a roar of voices, all different thoughts and concerns. Some shouted to Phil that he was an irresponsible fool.

"You can't drag those children out there! Animal men dwell in the sand!"

"Featherknife! What of your daughter! Do you want her out there? Among the monsters who would jump at the chance to sell her to the pleasure houses in the North?!"

"I'll join you!"

"You will NOT join them."

"How long ago did that happen? How do we know Furiosa is still in power there..."

"...Too risky,"

"Yeah, can't put all the eggs in one basket..."

"You only resent the idea because he's from the Citadel, ya old rat!" That shriek was a furious Ardith.

They all snapped or shouted over one another. I could barely make out half the things that were being hollered in every direction. The cacophony was simply too much. Hands both whole and scarred fluttered in the air before me, as if to deter a kind of attack on my person before my palms clapped over my ears. It's not often that noise bothers me, usually it's the opposite that chews at my skull, but this time it was far too much to take. It was Slit's hands, shoved under my arms, that pulled me up from my spot around the fire. I think he meant to leave now, for what he said to the elder war fodder seemed to suggest it as they now argued.

"Wait! Where're you goin'?"

"I said my bit an' I'm done."

"I still need what you know about the Scavenger Lands to make this work, you can't just abscond from a meeting!"

"This is not what I came here to do!"

"I know, but what if going back an' taking her could do more good?!"

"I really doubt that."

"Why?!!"

"I- Becau- Look at her! She's damn near fangin' feral! Remember what we used to do to ferals?!"

"It might not be like that anymore, Slit!"

"You can't guarantee that!"

"If Furiosa is holdin' the power there, then it might be..."
“Furiosa let her whole damn crew get chopped to meat by Buzzards and a sandstorm, what makes you think she would give a shit about you and yours?!”

Oh, the two were caught in a full on shouting competition now and it blended into the raging storm of voices throughout the room. I turned away, going for the door. I could just hang around with the young'uns. Yeah, their playing and happy little cries are nothing compared to this riotous ruckus. Just as I was about to exit into the spiraling hall, a hand caught my wrist. Reflex is a dangerous thing, I very nearly socked the old crone right in the eye but had enough of a shock when I turned and saw her face there to stop myself. I was surprised by the strength in Heta's arthritic hand as I leaned away only to be pulled back in and tucked under her cloak of feathers and baubles.

“You stay, child.” She said, and a kind of calm swept over me, like the numbing peace which came with Theta's moonshine. I could sense something from deep in my happy childhood stir, what I cannot be sure. Just a vague memory of sitting upon a lap, not my mother's, and waiting. So strange. Now her hands slid over my own to doubly hold at bay the chaos of the room, I could still hear her holler in all her authority, and the pause of all others left my ears ringing. _Silence_, she had called and everyone listened, even my stubborn Ducky.

When I escaped her hold to look about the room, I could see all men, with one exception, bowing their heads in submission to the elder. Only Slit stood there not knowing what to do because no one had told him. Phil was the one who had to grab him by the back of the neck and shove his noggen down. The women still stood tall, as is their right.

-Slit-

“Someone get me my damn chair.” The old breeder snapped, the scav still shielded under one of her emaciated arms.

I should have just pushed Dune out of the room instead of engaging Phil about this stupid ass plan of his. There was some virtue to it, _nothing ventured nothing gained_ is an old saying and a true one, but this idea of his was bordering on suicidal. Pulling me down to bow at this swamp witch got him slapped but it didn't matter, soon Dune and I would be out of here, unobligated, and out of the way of an old war boy's mad ideas. Right?

Their elder's request was fulfilled swiftly, Featherknife was the one to dart around the grated fire pit with a fold out chair and position it behind her shaking knees for her to drop into it with a terrible creak of both metal and worn bones.

“What I was going to say, before our mechanic took his time to speak, was that two new faces, who seem to be well fed, have appeared. It indeed disturbs us. I remember you.” She motioned for Dune to sit next to her, and the scavenger did as she was told. She had this look like a dumb kid who wasn't sure what was going on, but satisfied to be lead along. The old one's hand landed on her head, and Dune did not move. “I wanted to ask if you had found new green.”

The nut shook her head, speaking quietly and scratching around her right ear. She was nervous. “No, the wastes provide.”

With a nod, the elder began again. “So, the answer I sought did not come from where it was expected. Still it came. We of the old world have shared our whispers long before this day of meeting. Even the _crows_ are leaving this place. The mechanic says we'd be lucky to eke out a living for another five years, I'd say we'd be lucky to last another two.”
I could see it, everyone shifted with a distinct discomfort. To hear their old one agree with a rusted out war boy struck a note no one wanted to hear. I may have lived in Dune's parched world too long to see it myself, but the way this old hag said it, the place was dying a second death. Seemed that no one really wanted to lend that revelation any credence. I think I get why Phil saying it caused an uproar, his kill count, even though he was more repair boy than warrior, made it look like the Citadel was nothing more than a swarm of rats chewing up everyone and everything in its path to sate hunger. This is both true and not. Our people are born of war and die in its throws, as the mighty V8 intended, but I can't say we kill completely indiscriminately. We had alliances, although, they all wore Joe's logo. Water owns oil and lead. Can't live long enough to drill for crude or mine for ore if you can't slake your addiction to aqua cola. Fuck, I never had to think this much before Dune found me.

Never mind my pondering. They hadn't wanted to hear Phil, because he's a killer, like me, like Joe. Even Furiosa has red on her hands. It doesn't make a difference if she was from here, according to Phil, She's still got a kill count that even makes mine look like nothing at all. They hadn't wanted to hear a war boy's foolhardy hopes, but their old bat? That's a different matter isn't it?

"You say you're going to the Citadel. I'm going too. I'm too old for the young ones here to keep supporting. It would be best that I go, if nothing else, then I could perhaps aid the negotiations with the child who survived. It would be my last offering to the goddess.” The old one said.

Now I looked to Phil, who seemed to be in some kind of state of disbelief in what we had all just heard, mouth hanging open and everything.

"I- I will take you with us.” He said. “I'm old, for my kind. I've got maybe a few good years left. Losin' weight too. I'm going because if I don't, I'll die here. My brothers and these little ones of ours will never see any green if we don't do somethin' about it. I'm tired, I know I've only got a little guzz left. Might as well use it to be there when they see it. Ardith and I want them to see it, the green.”

Made sense, he sounded like he could drop dead at any time and he sold a solid sob story too. The old woman heaved a great sigh at Phil's words.

"An assurance is still needed before the matter can be taken to a legitimate vote. We need to know that a path can be traversed from here to there. More than half of our people need to be willing to go. First, a show of hands, those willing to hear Phil out and consider a new place of green.”

Damn, it looked like Phil's asinine plot was going over well, there were only a few who didn't lift an arm to show their support. Once again, it was the word of their elder which must have spurred on their hope. They should know better, hope beckons death, yet even I was starting to see the luster in the plan. My eyes returned to Dune, her neck craned to see over both her own and the old one's shoulder. She looked confused and maybe overwhelmed by what was going on. Six years alone will do that. I wanted to declare that we lived in Scav Country and there we would stay, but Dune's hand rose with the others and she looked at me, speaking for the first time since questioning me about the peace time duties around the Citadel.

"Is it really that green, Ducky? Can it feed an entire world?”

She wanted to go, and I didn't know what to do. No, you couldn't feed a whole world on what I remember being grown back home. Definitely not the entirety of the wastes. Diligent growing might feed the wretched plus another group or two. We traded most of it away for other things. Stuff Immorta wanted to build, to create alliances, to keep Gas Town and Bullet Farm happy. The way I heard it when I spied from among the wretched, they were feeding people with it, not trading it all for metals, engines, and raid support. I didn't want to get her hopes high for no reason. I've used harsher words to keep Nux's hopes low and reasonable. He looked at your bloodbag I'd said once
and immediately after he was scanning the horizon. Hope is lethal, but like Nux, her sanguine nature made it hard to tell her that it was all a fools errand.

“Eh, It's a lot of green, but I dunno know the full scope of what they're doin' with it.”

The elder sat back in her chair, cloudy eyes leering into the unseen void. “If the war parties we saw two years ago were in pursuit of our Furiosa, then perhaps the old faith lead her though here. There is nothing in the east but the memory of this place. It would be the only explanation. It could be that she simply could not recognize these lands. It was indeed bountiful before she and her mother were taken, along with the many others. She would not have seen us, nor remembered. Furiosa was too young... Tell me, is there a way to bring a caravan through the parched land from here to your Citadel?”

She was looking at me when she asked this, it's not easy to say no to somebody that frickin' old. “I don't... know. The mountain roads aren't in any kinda shape for anythin' with four wheels exce-”

Phil, too eager that this was all going his way, cut me off and earned himself a glare. “I came here through the canyon, I traded to the rock riders. Gave um maps through Joe's lands to avoid convoys. Wasn't that hard to break bread with um.”

Things have changed since then. Rock Riders don't control the canyon anymore, couldn't let the idiot lead everyone to their death. “Rock Riders scattered after the road war. We only ever see them in nomad packs, occasionally trade with them at the local organic mechanic’s place. So we know it isn't them up there. Far as I know, the canyon isn't passable to anybody we've met. People in Scav Country avoid it because they see scope glint outta there all the time, but Citadel convoys come through every month. I'll bet my right leg that Furiosa set up a small outpost there. If she did, then she must have cleared the Buzzards out of the badlands or set up some kind of treaty with them... Though, can't be any solid thing, we still see Buzzards shoving bits of war boys down their rashy cola holes all the time.”

“Well, that solves the problem, doesn't it? If her people are out there, we could get through. All we'd have to do is say her name.” Bones piped up but he was wrong, so fucking wrong. It felt like a great opportunity to point that out for him, and I owed him scorn for the night before.

“Don't bet on it, Freckles. No one would believe you if you shouted 'We know your boss!'. If that was the case, everyone would do that.”

His face started turning a funny color and he rose from his spot. Couldn't help but grin and hiss, wouldn't mind rearranging his face for him. Phil, once again, threw up an arm to stop the ginger bastard from making a painful mistake.

“He's right. If any of our kind are stationed there, there will be no getting through. We're world class bullshitters and we're quick to declare B.S. in the same vein. War Boys aren't likely to believe anyone claiming to have some loose association with their leader. We'll look like a war faring caravan to them.”

Dune squirming next to the elder caught my attention. “I only know a handful of the bike trails between craggles, no way you can get anything more hefty than a ratty little crotch rocket up those paths.”

“Good oil, How many bikes we got?” Someone asked from behind me to be answered by another across the circle.

“Ah, a couple dozen maybe, most not in workin’ order. Not a plan when we only got three or four
members that can actually ride with some confidence. Phil, your opinion?"

“I've seen those mountains, unless you guys got Scav Country or Rock Rider blood in yir veins, there's no way we're getting over um without half the damn clan breaking their necks on the shale.”

I might have made a suggestion sooner, but between getting interrupted constantly and not wanting to be here, I didn't really want to offer a solution to a problem I was being dragged into unwillingly. The idea of going back didn't sit too well with me either, and that was on a personal level. I think I was much happier at the time not knowing for sure if Nux was alive or dead. Logic says he'd have carked it a long way back, but if I didn't know for certain then that meant I didn't have to think about it too much.

The entire group wasted a great deal of breath on the pros and cons of trying to get enough bikes working and others accustomed to riding them in order to make the trip. Phil was vocally pissed that if they chose this option for transport, he'd have to scrap the truck, for that was the vehicle he'd been meaning to modify to make the journey. None of that mattered to me, all I could see was the way Dune looked around the room with eyes sprung wide open and chewing the knuckle of her trigger finger. It could be that the whole ordeal was confusing to her, it could be that all of this talk about the green growing atop the place I came from had her hallucinating it. I couldn't tell you what was happening inside her rusted skull, but I could say that I didn't like her being across the room when she looked like that. Took a bit to get her attention, chucked some debris tracked in from outside at her and once she was looking my way, all it took to coax her out from under the old bird's wing and back under mine was an outstretched arm. I didn't bother to check how the others interpreted that, because fuck um, that's why. I could possibly convince Dune to step outside with me, after that we could conceivably hop into the Impala and just rack off back to Scav Country. Not sure how she'd take to that, she was still following the conversation, getting sucked in deeper still when Ardith bent an elbow around her arm and started prying at us for more of what we knew.

“How long do ya think it would take to get around the mountains?”

“Oh, weeks. Dune never made the attempt herself, an' the caravan she an' mum were with never had enough water to try it. It gets wicked hot out there, an' dry. What you an' the wee ones drink here in a week is what Ducky an' Dune drink in two days out in the sand, searching for the blessed scraps.”

“Damn, where are you two gettin' that much water from?”

“Oh, er... Um.”

That must have awoken Dune's rightful reluctance to share information of such a value. The only people who know about the cavern's location and qualities were her, myself, and Wilson who was smart enough to keep his gob shut if he wanted to keep being supplied with cola in trade. It was a serious risk to let too many in on the secret. While we had an excess thanks to Dune's frugal nature and tendency to hoard shit like plastic bottles and old jugs, it's important to remember that our aqua cola only came in drips from a few points in the roof, deep under the scorched rock. We exchanged a look. Ultimately it was her territory so it was her decision. She could probably figure out my opinion on the matter just by looking at me anyway, so I didn't say anything.

“Ah, we have a source. Reliable one. Low cost.”

A wise answer. Truth that doesn't reveal too much. Desperation can turn best mates into enemies quick, even Dune wasn't too skull sick to understand that. Took her more than a year to give back my blades and blender wrenches. That's because she's no fast trusting moron, although, I suspect part of the reason it took so long to get my stuff back was because she forgot where she hid my crap in the first place.
Everything was falling into small conversations and bush beating between groups on what to do, how to do it, what to take. Ugh, not my problems. When Phil pulled me back into the debate, it was to try getting us to stay even longer than I'd already agreed to. I was going to have to take a hard pass on that.

“Ey, what'cha think about hanging around until this issue is sorted? Apparently I've got a metric fuck-ton of bikes to bang the dings out of, extra hands would help.”

“I'd rather kiss a radiator grille movin' fifty.”

“Ey ey! I've been real fuckin' shine to you this week, ya little turd. Ya could at least talk with a lil' respect for your elder.”

“You tried to kick my arse around last night while my donger was out!”

“You'd do the same to me if I had somethin' you needed! Now you got somethin' I need again and it can either come with a size ten boot up your arse or black fingers that can sort out dressin' up your bare nekid car.”

I wanted to yank out my hair, and I almost did, with fingers curled like claws in the air around my head. I just wanted to leave but Phil, probably desperate, wouldn't let me walk.

“AARrgh! What if I told you that you don't even need to fuck with motorcycles?!”

Phil's face hardened, he knew I had been withholding. “Alright, spit it, pup.”

“There's...”

A growl rose up in my throat, took too long to find the right words and everyone had shut up and begun staring at me by this point. I couldn't talk up my experience getting passed the mountains, once to check on home and a second time to get into Buzzard territory to steal guzz. It's not like it was much better an option but still smarter than going through the canyon. Nothing out that way comes without the risk of getting creamed and turned to maggot shit. If they hauled ass down one particular road, they would have a fair chance. I dropped my arms at my sides. So, you can say that I gave a shit if they died trying to do something enormously stupid just to see some green. Living with Dune made me soft, so rust.

“There's another road weavin' through the mountains, it's a little further south than anybody would care to go. Plenty wide enough for four wheels and it'll take you out into the Dead Barrens. Long as you steer clear of Pink Eye and Gas Town, you shouldn't run into much trouble. Just, stick close to the mountains once you're out. Most outposts out that way are scrapped nowadays. Reasonably safe, cuts a week and a half off a trip all the way around the mountains.”

I could hear Dune utter a simple ‘huh?’ and that would be because this is the first time she's hearing about this mountain road, too. By the end of my admission, I was looking at the foot of the metal leg while I pushed around some dried clods of mud brought in on boot treads. I truly hated how small Phil managed to make me feel in that moment. All of the old bastards back home from the crew that trained me up seemed to have that power right up until my last day at the Citadel. I expected the hammer to drop, not a hand on the shoulder.

“Ah, you knowin' what's goin' on back home makes some sense, now. You've been down that road. Lay it out, I know there's gotta be a catch.”

I managed one glance at him, instantly regretted it. He looked almost kind, and I dunno what to do with that kinda thing.
“Once you're on that road, no matter what you see. Do. Not. Stop.”

“You're certain it's a passable road?” The old lady wheezed.

I nodded, eyes back on the floor. “Went down it to knick guzz off some buzzards a day or two before Dune and I took off outta her territory to come out here. It's clear, just not anywhere you wanna stop.”

Dune made an odd noise behind me, I didn't get a chance to turn around and see what her problem was before the old one swept up the horn from the floor and announced that the meeting was adjourned and would resume again the next day. She told everyone to think hard about what they had heard today, and tomorrow they would talk again and vote. I guessed that meant I had to come back to this weird house. I didn't like it, too many eyes and the place didn't move right being up so high in a dead thing.

-D-0-

Dune had nothing to say to me, probably pretty miffed about finding out what I went off and did by my lonesome to get her here. When we were all on the soggy dirt again, she was walking ahead with Ard while I fell behind trying not to let my dumb leg get sucked sown by the sludge. Phil fell back and waited by the car while the others rounded up the pups left outside with a flock of other ankle biters.

“Why exactly can't you stop on this road yir talkin' about?”

I really didn't want to get too deep into it. The first time I made the trip passed the mountains, I'd made a mistake that I didn't want to own up to. It was best to give a simple explanation that summed up the worst of what they'd have to deal with. I popped the trunk and dug passed the now nearly empty jugs of cola and still half full the jerry cans. When I returned to dune with enough guzz for the trip, I'd found this thing sticking in the car, and I'd tossed it into the trunk to keep the nosy woman from questioning me about it. My fingers found it way at the back, it was a thin shaft of steel with red clay painted in rings around the blunt end. There was fletching made from thin bits of aluminum can, the other end was once sharpened to a point, now it was bent from what it had struck. I handed it off to the mechanic.

“Found that between the seams around the trunk once I got back to her kip.”

To show what else undoubtedly got launched at the car on the way down the road winding through mountain valleys, I scrubbed my thumb at the scars where other flying metal needles scratched off the matte paint. I didn't need to think about this, it was spooky enough the last time I was there, downright a nightmare the first time. That's why, more than a year ago when I checked out the place I came from, I took the long way back.

I was distracted, looking over his shoulder to watch what Dune was doing and Phil must have been distracted as well by the scrap crafted projectile weapon in his hands. He turned, presumably to go find someone else to talk with about the arrow, and the stolen pup ran right into him. What the kid was carrying in a bag slung over his shoulder got spilled in a mess on the wet ground. The boy whimpered like a kicked mongrel.

“Aw, I'm sorry Jack.”

Weird, never heard anyone with a brand on their neck talk that soft to anybody. Phil even leaned
over to help the pup pick up the mess and pulled a rag from his pocket to wipe the filth off. At first glance, it all looked like trash to me. Just paper that looked good for shit tickets and assorted crap.

The breeze picked up, it scattered the sheets of rubbish and a bit of it blew right into me. Peeling the mud stained scrap off and having a look at it revealed something. There was an image scratched out in charcoal. Two faces, one smiling, one not. The grinning mouth was lined with points. It was Dune and the other scowling one was me. It looked almost real, and something about that was incredibly disturbing. My right eye was smudged out with red, Dunes teeth were similarly decorated this way. When I looked up from it, there the boy stood in front of me, having gone so pale that he almost appeared to be wearing a coat of white clay. I kind of wanted to ask what the fuck, but the pup looked like he might die on the spot if I so much as breathed at him. The freaky art was snatched from my hands, by Phil, and slapped between the pages in a word burger before being shoved back down into the depths of the kid's bag. Hell, I wasn't about to ask. Everyone was cramming themselves into my car and I pretty much just wanted to repress the all the weird from today, eat something, work on plans for the Shirley's interior, and drop for the night.

Most of the ride back to their hills was quiet, besides the younger pups bickering and yowling in the back. Everyone was probably up in their own heads, figuring out what they thought of what happened at the meeting. Not my business, but I did wonder what Dune was thinking, and how pissed off she might be that I'd antagonized Buzzards a week and a half ago to get fuel. I overheard the redhead asking Dune how much she knew about Scavenger Country. A lot was the answer. I know she has a general idea of where territories end and overlap, and she knew loads of routes to avoid certain groups. Ard wanted to have as much information as possible for when the meeting continued tomorrow. Shrewd of her, convenient for me too because it probably meant there was less I had to say when the time for talking came.

Upon arrival, Dune still hadn't spoken to or so much as looked at me. Must be in a mood then. I Cut the engine and got out, these trousers were chaffing nasty around my crotch and the metal leg didn't bend right sheathed in a form fitted pant leg. Didn't bother telling the others where I was off to.

Across the bridge I went, found that my threads were for the most part dry, vest was still kind of wet around the bottom and the inseam of my slacks was still a little damp. It was probably the humidity here. Well, they'd dry eventually, on me or not. Clean stuff always feels scratchy when you first put it on, still came with a comfort because it was mine. I didn't care for the idea that of wearing a dead man's duds. I took the blankets that had been left behind, too. I was sick of this cold hell-hole and I wasn't spending another night shivering.

At the grease pit, I found that I was alone. Phil must be inside with the others, talking and planning or whatever. Dune was nowhere in sight, but I was fairly certain that I'd seen her going inside with Ardith, holding one of those pups in her arms. She seemed fond of the one who looked like Phil. Honestly, I kinda liked that one too. Out of all of them and perhaps even more than the older one, he was most like a war pup.

I spent my time checking that everything under the hood held up the way it was supposed to after that first run since being fiddled with by the old black thumb. She wasn't knocking or making any odd noise, I was just looking for something to do, really.

"Hey,"

The harpy, I hadn't heard her creep out from the door through the inner garage. Chrome, what could the wench possibly want with me? Well, I knew what I wanted with her. If she was out here, then where was the mad longshot? I turned my head to the left to see out of the corner of my good eye, she was just leaning on the wall with her arms crossed over her chest and doing nothing in particular.
"Hey, where's Dune?"

"She's helping Featherknife scrawl out a map through Scav Country. He'll need you to fill in the blanks on that mountain pass, later on."

Well, if that's all she wanted, might as well get to it and avoid being out here alone with her. I let the hood fall closed and turned to head inside, but, to my great irritation, she had more to say.

"Wait, Wait! I'd like to have a real conversation with you."

I suddenly felt bored, but it was a boredom with a sharp edge to it. I didn't want to talk to her, what could we have to say to each other?

"What's there to talk about?"

From the look on her face, I think she felt the same as I did. We had absolutely nothing in common and we both knew it, except the one thing and she made a point of that.

"There's Dune to talk about. Her mother, her brothers. I know she talks to you more than she can with me... Look um, I'm a bit older than her. Used to be the one keeping her stubborn butt out of trouble. When you take that kind of responsibility, you never lose it. I still feel like it's my job to be lookin' out for her. Seems you're not so bad at it, though."

I thought about that, pointing my eyes down at the concrete platform under my foot. I was pretty sure what she said had been some small form of praise, couldn't seem to feed my ego with it, though.

"She told me about you, how all of that started. Then about the storm, how it changed everything. Presented you both with big questions..." There was a second of awkward hush and she was pushing her fingers through her hair. Doing that is probably what gave her a cowlick up front. "And I don't have answers for that either. Phil was already neck deep in this life with bones and Knife when we hooked up. They're the ones that had to deal with the damage Joe did to him and Jackie, not me. I know about it, but- You understand, don't you?"

I sucked in a chestful of air through my teeth. This is not anything I wished to talk about, but I had heard plenty on the subject because Dune was always just full of opinions.

"Yeah, child soldier sickness, S'what Dune calls it."

"You can take the war boy out of the citadel but you can't take the citadel out of the war boy," She recited as if from a mantra. "Welp, you saved each other, there's that."

I could feel my lips thinning, pulling wide and twisting at the scarred corners. "We through with the small talk?"

She laughed, sounding annoyed with me. Good. "Yeah, we're through. Real talk, what happened to her mum?"

"She tells me it was a bloodpump thing."

"Heart attack, then. What about Russell and Flick?"

"Some place called Shatterbone."
Ard blinked a few times before her eyes narrowed in what looked like both suspicion and worry. "They all got tangled in the slave trade?"

"Yeah, thrall rustlers gave her those burns."

"Damn."

"Yep."

That shut her up, got her thinking, or backtracking more likely. I bet she thought I did that to her, too. We stood there, about two meters apart, saying nothing and looking at each other like you'd look at a hostile from another faction.

"You love her?" She asked, and the question blindsided me.

What the hell do I answer that with? Dune and I weren't- but yesterday. That's not what she was asking about, though, was it? I knew that word but I didn't know what it meant. I was handed away by whoever my mother had been, I was left behind by my driver, and Dune- I didn't know how I felt about her. I didn't want her to die, I wanted her to get back to her version of normal, I know for sure that I'd eat a bullet if I had to be alone for good. I might just be sticking with Dune because she was available, liked me for some reason, and didn't seem to want me to die either. There was more to it than that, I was selling her short, Nux too. What my driver did, I probably had that coming. The conclusion? I think neither Dune or I have much choice but to keep on the way we do. I need her around, she needs me around, both of us have said so at least once.

Ard had earned herself a glare that could kill. Talking about questions she can't give an answer to, then expecting me to pull one of those answers out of my ass? I knew what she wanted to hear, but I just don't know what love is.

"I trust her," It was more of a correction than an answer.

She let out a breath with a shaking head and lips forming a tight O shape. "...which is important, really. A big deal for a war boy, too."

"Not a war boy anymore."

"Keep telling yourself that."

"Eat me."

"Ah, back to the usual program. I'm going inside, Dickhole."

"Arse master."

The door slammed as she retreated back into her lair. V8 damn me, but now my head was a mess of forking roads that lead to everywhere. Small things turn big, I've seen skinny pups become tall and broad, I've seen wilted cuttings from Joe's crops turn into new plants. Complete regrowth.

Two years with Dune, I still wasn't sure what was happening to me. It was like a slow grind, a wearing down of all the moving parts of my machinery as if someone was periodically sprinkling just a few grains of sand between the interlocking teeth of the gears. Everything I had been is dying, succumbing to his half-life in a way I didn't expect. The body still lives free from the need for blood,
no black lung, no kidney rot, no fevers. Nothing to kill the corpus yet, but who am I now? I'm not the last devout War Boy, and what's left if not that?

I didn't want to go back and face that place, befouled by disillusionment, but the green there. Dune said she hadn't seen green in fifteen of her years, five thousand four hundred and some days. I wondered if taking her to the green crowns of the Citadel would help, probably not, but she might like to see it anyway.

If we went, I'm not sure what would happen. Could wind up obligated to stay. Fuck, things would change more, of course they would. Scav life is really no way to live, though. Good for her being able to survive that damn humble and enjoy it but... I don't even know what I'm thinking.

She'd be less likely to kill herself in her sleep if there were a hundred sets of eyes on her, not just my one and a half.

Phil was aware of his condition enough to know he was going to die sooner than everyone around him. His desire to go home probably came from worry. This place is a rust hole and he wanted his brats, his mates, and his woman out of it before he wasted away.

I sat on the hood of the Impala and I imagined Dune, years or maybe just months from now, on her own again. My existence is not something she could count on, I don't think she even realizes that. I could start dying next week, tomorrow, maybe even tonight because who knows? I have no idea what condition my parents were in when they made me. I could be full of lumpy potential and no more than absurdly lucky up until now. If I was gone, what would Dune do? Be alone for another six years or more? Phil was trying to give his brood and compatriots something better than this. What am I doing? Just trying to halt change.

I tried working on scratching out those plans I had for the interior, both marking where I wanted to put a proper gas tank on the floor boards and digging into the trunk for the other, far more grand blueprints I had drawn up over the last seven hundred and sixty-ish days. None of what I'd dreamed about doing to this chariot was possible, not without even more than Phil's collection of tools and equipment, but I liked to imagine it. It helped put my head somewhere else when Dune's left hand wasn't there.

I was called in to eat with the others earlier than the days before this one. Dune was the one who came to practically drag me indoors. Seemed her mood had improved through having another go at that moonshine with Ard. I could smell it on her. Those two laughed and wobbled around, hanging all over each other and singing badly. The rest of the night was the usual line for bird meat and Sump pestering me. Dune eventually konked out on the fold out with her loud friend, leaving me sitting there listening to the others talk this and that. Somehow they got on the topic of who their parents were, nothing I could add to that. Phil, when asked, spat out a story which sounds as ridiculous as anything could.

"...My parents? Hmm. They were dentists, turned to preparing for the end of days in the seventies. I was born in a bomb shelter next to enough canned goods and military rations to feed two people for twenty years. Lived in there till I was about 8. That's why I still got fantastic teeth. Floss every day laddies."

Bones snorted, jabbing at me with an elbow as if I was actually a part of the discussion. "The story changes every week. On Monday his parents were secret agents and he was born at an air base in a whirlycopter."

"And the week before that your daddy was a cattle rancher and your momma popped you out on the
back of a horse... C'mon Phil, would it kill ya to let us in on where you actually hail from?"
Featherknife added.

Phil only grinned, clicking his tongue and waving his finger and thumb like a gun. I knew the truth, he can't remember where he came from, few war boys can. The others laughed it off.

“Hey, Knife. Spot o' night hunting?”

“Fuck, yeah.”

Bones and Featherknife rose from their spots, looking a little too eager to leave. I could guess what those two were scurrying off to do, and it wasn't casting lines for birds that were by now roosting.

The older boy, Jack, was the next to leave, muttering so quietly that he was going to his bunk that you'd have thought he was saying it to only himself. Once again, he looked back at me like he was expecting me to throw something at him.

Did I do something to him, years ago back at the Citadel? I was starting to think I had, why else would he look at me like that? I don't remember kicking around anybody that damn short and scrawny as he'd been then.

“What's wrong with him?” I blurted the moment he was out of sight.

Phil looked up from the pipe he was packing up his choof into. “Jack?”

“Yeah, what's his deal?”

Phil just shrugged and lit up. Only after he was done hacking up a lung did he say anything about the kid

“He jus' doesn't know you too good.”

That still explained nothing. You don't look at somebody like that unless you were convinced they might kill you.

“He got head rust or something?”

“Naaah, he's as sharp as road tacks. It's something else, he's got some wires crossed. Jack can take a piece of charcoal and draw a person he's only met once, perfectly. Almost looks like a Polaroid picture. He's great at that, bad at actually dealin' with people and- I dunno, his senses hurt him sometimes, things we hear an' see an' taste an' smell, he feels it ten times as strong. It's amazing he doesn't just scream 'cause of it.”

I had no clue what a Polaroid was. Words like that put a fine point on Phil's looming expiration date.

“Why take him?”

“I suspect him and his mum were from here before he wound up a war pup. Long story but, he draws what he sees. Somehow he could remember things he saw when he was just a little thing in his mama's arms. He brought me here, drawing those things an' showin' me the way. I thought, if this place really existed, maybe I could sneak back one day an' convince the rest of my crew to leave too. Too bad this place went to hell long ago, probably around the time that kid's head started recording all those pictures.”

“Ah,” I said.
I wasn't sure how much of that I wanted to believe, or how much of it was possible to start with. No one remembers things that far back. No one draws shit that precise either. I might have thought on that more, but my skull abruptly refused any further thought on any matter aside from how shine the bedding in the back of the car would feel right about that moment.

“I'm gonna grab the loon and drop.”

“G'Night, pup.”

I gave Dune's arm a nudge, then a push. She groaned and swatted, but a little persistence got her up. She wobbled and stumbled and had to be caught. She'd probably be hungover again tomorrow. She didn't stink too strongly of hooch, so maybe not. A precautionary bucket was still taken. She had to be helped over the seat and into the back, then reminded to take her boots off. Oh V8, the little idiot giggled the whole time, claiming she forgot how to untie her laces. I was yanking off her boots when she grabbed me at the collar of the shirt, pulling clumsily and brushing her lips over my staples again.

“Can't wait to see green again, Duck.”

Aw, fuck me.

Chapter End Notes

What are blender wrenches?

Look up pictures of Slit, hanging off his belts is a set of knuckle dusters with friggin wrenches welded to it. Imagine getting punched with that. There's a similar weapon upgrade in the Mad Max video game called “blender wrenches” which is where I borrowed the name from.

(Holy shit the typos. Sorry. I did mention at some point that I only write shitfaced, right??)
Chapter Summary

No one is angry except Slit.

Chapter Notes

I really do apologize for how crude and terrible Slit's inner dialog is, but c'mon, It's Slit. Sorry for such a short chapter, but it felt complete.

4/15/2018 UPDATE: The next chapter is coming. Just been having a hard time putting myself in a headspace to make a wild ass party believable... But I think I'm getting there. R.I.P. Ard's good china.

4/23/2018 UPDATE: The next chapter is DONE I just need to edit and proofread. Holy crap this one was hard.

“"I didn't agree to that,” I said, but Phil shook his head and went on.

“It's the only way to know for sure it's safe. She'll be fine, Ardith will look after her.”

Not possible. I looked over my shoulder at the car, at her sleeping in the back. I couldn't go through with it. Phil wanted us to go with them across Scavenger Country, fair because we knew the way, but he also thought that it would be far safer for everyone if it was just he and I that approached the Citadel. It made sense, we had brands, there should be boys who remember us, knew us. We could ask to speak with an Imperator, or whoever the next link in the chain of command was, and that might get us a word with Furiosa. Wasn't happy about that last bit but the rest was reasonable, except the one thing. I can't just leave Dune somewhere in the badlands with the rest of the caravan. It could be that I didn't fully trust Ardith, it could be that I didn't want to leave her in buzzard territory. It could be either of those things and I'd use one of them as the excuse, but I knew the truth. I didn't want to go back without her with me. I've only ever left the caverns three times without her, first to check out the Citadel, second to fetch the crap we left behind after the sandstorm, third to get guzz for this stupid trip which kept making everything more complicated. It's a matter of feeling naked when you're not because something that should be there isn't.

Another excuse to avoid admitting the humiliating truth, it's her fault we're going, so she was obligated to be there when I had to go.

The night before, she'd made my choice for me. Fucking psycho nutter, couldn't say no to that dumb drunk smile. We were going with these strangers, apparently, back to the place I swore up and down that I would never return to, not even on pain of mediocre death. Why? Because the little idiot kissed me, not on the mouth, but still. She always had her way of rendering me stupid and compliant, so that I'd do the stupid ass things she wanted me to do. Make no mistake, I was pissed. I just couldn't really channel that at her when it was my own pathetic weakness that made it possible to say 'Yeah, you'll like it there' instead of I'm not fucking going because I don't want to and you're not fucking
going because I said you're not'. She just had to put her damn mouth on me again.

On the other hand, I might have agreed to it at some later point without her forcing it, because it may just extend both our lifespans by a few years. The fact was, it's likely that I'll eventually need clean blood just to function, much like many other half-life war boys. The problem with her was, she isn't exactly a person who should be permitted to live on her own for a number of reasons, and inevitably she'll be on her own again if we never leave Scav Country. Dune is plenty capable of killing, surviving, collecting necessities, whatever, but eventually her lucky streak is going to run out and she's going to hallucinate her way into some kind of situation and without someone there to wrangle her loony ass... I refused to finish the thought, it made my guts burn.

Phil kept pressing for details about the dried out rust hole we came from, I told him he'd need sand cups on his tires if he could get ahold of something like that. The answer was simple, he couldn't, and I knew that feeling. The tires on my ride were the same ones that came with it when Dune shot the former owners. I can't tell you how many times I've had to patch them half-assed because I couldn't find the supplies to get the job done right. I was even starting to think it might be worth it to stop fighting the dry rot and stuff that rubber with as much trash as they could hold so that I wouldn't wake up one morning and find the Impala sitting on her rims.

Dune woke with the sun while Phil picked at my skull meat and worked on the pickup. She hissed at the light and rolled over with the covers pulled up over her head.

"This scav is never gonna get used to this."

"Hm? What?"

"Sun, waking up to it. Stays nice and dark in the underground where we nest, doesn't it?"

She was right, it did stay dark back at her kip where we slept. I never really thought about the weirdness of sleeping in the caves, much like the warrens, then here in this bog where we slept in the car, much like when I slept in the war chariot Nux and I rode on long patrols and places that take a while to reach and raid. I was used to sleeping wherever I happened to drop, she wasn't.

Once she managed to uncover her head and stumble out for a stretch and a yawn, she looked my way and declared that I looked like shit. Had another crap time getting to sleep and I couldn't be sure how long I slept. Felt like between the frenzy of chaotic dreams about home and Phil waking me before the crows start cawing, maybe a couple solid hours of shuteye? It wasn't enough, one look at the side mirror on the truck and I knew that I looked like a corpse.

"Aw Duck... Maybe when we head home we should stop by Wilson's and see if he has anything for sleep. Sorry, it'll probably be some kinda tea."

"Don't worry 'bout it."

"...something buggin' ya, Slit?" She asked. I must have had a tone.

"No,"

"But-"

"Dune! Just... Not right now." Yeah, I was pissy and she was being all soft about me looking like hell.

Roaring at Nux every time he pissed me off for his softness or for putting me in a position I didn't want to be in is what got us where we are in the first place. One dead -probably- and the other in
self-imposed excommunication. Don't need to repeat history. It was better to avoid talking to her about anything until my head had time to cool off and think right.

When I turned away from the side mirror to look at her, she had this face on that I'd seen before, just not on her. It was a blank stare, not quite hurt, not quite angered, just stalled out for a second. She changed the wraps on her feet, pulled on her boots and went inside the crow hovel. I cursed. Damn, even when I fucking try not to I still find a way to screw up and send people off with that look on their face. It's only when you start to give a shit and them in return that you can actually make someone look at you like that. Never know how deep the blood runs until you find out if you can piss somebody off to the point of shooting streams of cola out of their eyes. Did that to Nux a couple times, even laughed at him for it. Great V8, what the shitting hell is wrong with me? Phil had something to say, of course, he did.

“What's got your britches in a bunch?”

“Nothing.”

“That nothing doesn't sound like nothing.”

I'd backed myself into a corner. I dragged Dune here, it was only fair that she got to haul my carcass back to the Citadel so I really couldn't argue it, plus she knew how to get me all rust and dumb enough to agree to anything with the shine hand and the mouth now too. I realized, if I went back, it would make everything that happened real. That's the problem. I don't want reality. I wanted to pretend that I was on a long walkabout and nothing had changed at home. I swallowed down the lump rising up my neck, prepared to repeat myself, but what came out of my mouth wasn't what I meant to say.

“Nux won't be there, and I don't want to go home to that.”

I couldn't see what Phil was doing, eyes still glued to the door Dune had disappeared behind as she went inside, but I could hear him shuffling in my general direction.

“Did he die on the road, or in the blood shed.”

My jaw clenched til my teeth ached. It was just another symptom of the neurosis I didn't want to confront, and with that came talking about it which I never had any real desire to do. Too late, he was already expecting an answer and he was even worse than the nutter, I'd rather not have him knock me on my ass while I'm trying to take a leak again.

“I don't know.”

“You didn't witness him?”

“No,” I felt a tension in both my whole leg and the ghost of the other, an instinct to move and get out of this grease pit and away from Phil's pity as quickly as possible. I made up an excuse as I turned to walk around the shack toward the outhouse. “Gotta take a dump.”

I didn't get far, he had me by the elbow and almost got himself decked for it, but he slipped the move easily by throwing up an arm and grabbing at me again to pull me along in another direction.

“No you don't, and now you're not. C'mon, follow me and don't tell Ardith.”

Alright, I'll humor an old war boy getting close to the end of his half-life, but I won't be led about like a pup. I removed myself from his grip and hobbled behind him at the pace I chose, rather, what the metal leg would allow going uphill.
Another bridge, in even worse shape than the one I'd just begun to disregard the inherent dangers of. He went across and waited at the other side for me, finally he revealed that the destination was what seemed to be a tool shed next to another dwelling that had caved in at the top some time ago. He opened the door, went inside, and lit a hanging oil torch in a tin can.

“You gonna stand there like the plastic people behind the big windows in the ruins, or are you gonna get in here and take a look’it what I brought you here to look’at.”

I rolled my eyes before stepping inside the five by five rust box. There was hardly enough room to stand, had to cock my head because the roof was so low. It was bare inside save for the hanging torch and stacked boxes under a sheet of mildew stained cloth.

“Okay, now what?” I snapped only to be jabbed in the kidney just hard enough to feel it.

“Be patient, I'm gettin' to it.”

Off came the sheet and what was there to be seen was a wheel shrine, a miniature version of the one I would remember at the very back of the blood shed. It was just one wheel, a skull made from ornate coils of copper wire adorned the center with spent shotgun shells for teeth. It sat up on a stand made up of two shock springs and a steering column. I recognized the wheel.

“Is that-”

“Yup. It's my driver's wheel.”

I could remember Phil being part of a three-man team. Made sense that he was again in a situation with two other dudes and they were all riding the same thing. The lancer Ike, The driver Dunny, with a name like that because he had a mouth like a friggin piss pot, and Crank, the repair boy on the go.

“You stole his wheel?”

“I stole his car, Slit.”

Yeah, I could remember that too. Nux and I would still occasionally hang around Tank and Notch's patrol team. I could clearly recall the crew coming back from evening patrol and Dunny just bawling, Ike raving fuckin' mad and taking out that fury on whatever face got too close to him in the pits. I wondered if Phil would like to hear about the fallout that came after what he had done. I also wondered what the hell he brought me here for and what it had to do with the fact that Nux must be dead and I wasn't so chuffed about going home to confirm it.

“A deserter and a thief.”

“Shut it, get on your knees. We're doin' prayers. C'mon.”

In the last two and a half years I had only prayed when things got bad or if I wasn't sure that an engine would start, just the usual quick pleas to the might of V8 not to let everything get all fucky and ruin my life some more.

Phil was already on his knees with his fingers over his head in salute before I decided whether or not I cared enough to do this.

“Bet your 'wife' gets real suspicious about you coming home with dirt on your knees.” Dune is rubbing off on me.
“Don't be nasty, this is a holy act. Get down here.”

I didn't even know any prayers which didn't directly make references to Joe as the supreme god. Would feel weird now to do this, especially right next to Phil with his opinions. He was waiting, not having said a word yet. Did he still believe in Valhalla? In the mighty V8? I didn't think he would, what with the way he talked.

Still, we waited on me. I huffed, snorted, growled, but I pushed the knob of the metal leg down and let it collapse under me as I got down to the dirt floor.

“I dunno what I'm supposed to say if Joe wasn't what he said he was...”

“Just say what you think Nux and your brothers would wanna hear, mate. Jus' talk to them. Everyone dies, but they ain't gone. Okay? Just pray, an’ if he doesn't hear it, then guess what? Must still be kickin'.”

My face contorted at those rust coated words. If it was true, it could be a comfort, but I'm not one for fairy tales.

“How the hell do you know if they hear it?”

“You can't know everything, Pup.”

He began his mantra in mutters. I heard words I don't think had ever been used in our prayers, and there were names of the fallen brothers. There were some familiar phrases: Live, die, live again. Instead of honoring him with deeds Phil said honor them and I couldn't be entirely certain what 'they' he was referring to, but I guess he could have meant the brothers long gone before us.

It might not be so out there. There had been times I was convinced Nux could hear me from the other side, even speak to me in my own mind although I sort of knew it was just my head churning out what I think he'd say in response to this or that. I didn't hear voices in any sense the way Dune did. Easy to see the difference between the memory of a person and the effect of that versus half-feral madness.

I did the usual prayer, without any mention of Joe, then I told Nux about the car and how much he'd drool on the thing. That's just small talk. Once more, I had no idea what to say, much less to him. It was awkward with Phil there, but he was busy with his own stuff, talking to Ike and Dunny. Dun, I'd seen him die, burnt up in the blood shed. Couldn't be certain how Ike was doing but he was looking really lean last time I saw him.

I tried talking about Dune, and that was just a mess. I didn't want him to think he'd been replaced, even though that's how I had felt when I saw that feral blood bag puke pat him on the head and take over for him when they were spitting guzz into the engines of the War Rig. So long later, I think I've cooled off just enough to stop wishing that feeling on him.

“Did you hear it, when I thought I was at the gates?”

I still remember that last moment, the blood bag was right there, if I could just get that chrome slice of wasteland beauty to accelerate before the people eater's limousine came in on my left, I might have shredded his fucking head against the bumper. Oh, the fury that flowed so deep and pure that I thought I might combust, and then I did. At the time I wasn't sure if it was me or the gas tank that blew. I just wanted that driver thieving retch dead so bad.

This whole time I've been letting myself act like that was the moment I actually died. Some part of me was dead after that, besides the leg. I don't know, maybe I had dead pieces even before that. Who
Phil must have up and left without me noticing. I was alone in that shed, praying weird shit at some wheel that didn't even belong to my own driver. I think I still appreciated what Phil was trying to do. He might be a deserter and he might be a dirty thief, but I knew why he had to do what he did. I think he wanted better for all of us, shame most of us would've been too damn dumb to see that.

Jesus Chrysler everything was wrong and I felt like I was falling down a long dark hole into someplace totally unknown. I'm on a road to somewhere, but it feels like nowhere. I wished that I could ask Nux where we were headed because he always knew where we were going even if I couldn't clearly remember our orders.

“Fuck I hope Dune ain't pissed. No offense to you but, as kamikrazy as you could get, you never bit me. Heh, that shit hurts.”

I know he'd laugh at me for that, taking that kind of guff off a scav only two thirds my size and with half the gears upstairs turning in the wrong direction. V8, I could hear his voice in my head, and I know it was just a memory. That was exactly enough of that. I think I felt comforted, but comfort isn't a word you should throw around lightly. Comfort is rare, and I couldn't quite equate the feeling to that. Numb might be better. Being numb is better than being in pain.

The day crawled on, nothing to do but go with it. The meeting reconvened and I was physically present, although I was asleep through most of it, sitting against a wall and hearing only bits and pieces that crept through the dream-like state that I fell into. I dreamed about maps and territories and dangers the others talked about with Dune as if I was there, in Scav country looking at what they were talking about at any given time.

I woke to a dry, foul tasting mouth and Dune talking about supplies. We had supplies, scavenged munitions, water, things we could trade to the Citadel to secure entry. She was so dead set on going that she was offering to pack up our supplies and hand them over, to cement our place in the caravan and to ensure that we got our spot on the lift. That is if they let us up.

My blood pump did a back flip in my chest cage. We can't put all of our resources in this when the chances of it going down in flames were as good or better than any hope of success. I wanted to know for sure, that if I had to do this, at least there was a second option if the first backfires. I wanted something to go back to if everything gets screwed.

No time to grab Dune and tell her she was acting insane. They agreed to meet her, and me too I guess, at a point on the map Featherknife had scrawled out. It was somewhere between Wilson's and the dunes, at a rock formation that Dune had to scribble out for them so that they would recognize it when they saw it. I wasn't awake enough to say anything, I was just trying to make sense of what I was hearing and seeing as I watched over her shoulder and scrubbed at my eyes. They seemed to assume that I knew what was happening, I didn't. The meeting was over before I could argue that this was nuts, way more than we should give, and downright idiotic. And I had almost begun to miss Dune's delusional optimism.

Before long, we were outside, around the car again and piling in to return to Ardith's home the same as the day before, and once again, Phil waited to say something to me. He stopped me with a push on my shoulder to turn me around.

“Hey, I'm sorry, Slit. Yeah, I'm using you. It's because I'm old, I need help to do this, help from somebody who knows what it's like out there. Not an excuse, just an explanation. You don't have to do anything, just think about it, alright?”

“Decision is already made,” I muttered, shouldering my way passed him to the driver side.
He probably thought I looked miffed because of him, because of what he had me do earlier. No, I was just hot in the head over what Dune was doing and worried she was just as heated over what I said this morning right after she rolled off the mat in the back of the car. Things never end great when we were both moody.

Repetition is torture anywhere but home, and I was realizing that Dune's kip had become my home, not the Citadel. At home, you do the same shit you do every day and it's easy, safe, makes you feel secure. If you're anywhere else, it feels like at any minute everything might break away from the routine and remind you not to trust anything to stay the same. I hate it here, and the ever-present gloom of the fog was starting to make me want to scratch my eyes out so that I wouldn't have to look at it.

When Dune got out of the car, she looked back at me for only a moment before following Ard inside. Blood pump did another flip, and I was following them inside too, trying to get a word in before Dune and her lady friend started talking about whatever it is they talked about when I wasn't there to eavesdrop. I reached out and took her at the elbow to stop her from sitting by the crate of records she seemed to like so much.

"Hey, can-" It didn't want to come up my throat hole and out, the words just clung to my tongue and wouldn't let go without being forced. She looked at me like I had smoke rising out of the top of my head. "...can we talk?"

The loon shrugged and shook her head, it wasn't a no, it was a way to say that she couldn't see why talking would be as problematic as I made it sound, which made me feel like a moron as I led the way back outside. Phil passed us as we went, and his eyes pried right up until I slammed the door on him.

"Duck, you tell Dune what's wrong with you. Been acting funny all day."

*How the hell do I start this?*

"Dune I... I'm sorry I snapped at you this morning." I choked that up, and it burned on the way out like bile.

Her hand thumped over her blood pump and she had the look of a snake that had just been stepped on. "What the hell?!"

"I said I'm sorry!" It came in a shout, stooped to her level as my face got hot with both embarrassment and what felt like a kind of mild anger.

"Slit! Stop! Okay, did you think Dune was mad at you?"

Well, yes! I did. What else was I supposed to think if she wouldn't talk to me all damn day? She seemed to see it in me, what I thought, so she stood straight and held out both hands as if she were trying to calm some feral.

"Slit, Duck, one of the first coherent things you ever said to Dune was 'I hate you'. You think she'd have kept you around for very long if her feelings were easy to bruise? Dune ain't cross with you! Jus' seemed like you needed space, so she bit her tongue and went to annoy Arddie for a while, with EVERY intention of coming back to irritate you later."

"Oh."

It felt like I had been preparing for the worst, maybe for Dune to not care if I went with the caravan
or not.

“Slit?”

“Huh?”

“What else is troubling ya?”

“Eh, I don't like it when you make plans without me.”

“Oh, do you... Not want to go?”

“I- I dunno what I want.”

She sighed her answer, looking away from me toward the door. “I never asked how you felt, I'm so-

“Don't!” She was talking in the first person, never a good sign, and I could sense another apology coming. I didn't enjoy giving mine, and I know I wouldn't enjoy receiving hers. “Don't say you're sorry.”

“We don't have to go.”

“...Yes, we do. I'm just not gonna like it.”

“Ducky-”

“Don't stand there and act like it didn't suck for you on the way back here. It's the same thing. I'll deal.”

Silence. She looked down at her feet like I had stepped on a nerve, or maybe not.

“...Yeah, it did. I'll be there with you. Only fair, right?”

Stupid to think she would ditch me.

That night I slept like a pup. We did the usual thing, eating with the crow fishers, but in the back of the car, later on, she grabbed me by the ear and dragged me across her lap. I protested, at first, but a shine hand on my head and the other held in my left stopped that. She stroked from the back of my head to the waistband of my trousers, and it didn't take much of that to get me leaning into her for more of it. Late in the night, I woke, startled and uncertain if I had remembered to tie the loon's hand to mine. I was the one being spooned and when I moved to see that it was her on me, it came to my attention that she had tied our belts together since her arm was too short to fit over me and reach my wrist. Slick of her. She pulled me back down and yanked the covers back up over our shoulders, all the while doing her inane murmuring.

Every night she did that, sometimes she sang too, and looking forward to that helped to keep the dread of what was to come after we left here at bay. We were going back to her kip after this harvest thing, packing up our shit and taking it to the place where we were supposed to meet the others in six weeks time. It was long enough for everyone to get their affairs in order, and a long time for me to consider backing out.

I hate not knowing the road I'm headed down, I guess I should just be thankful there's still a shine hand to make it all tolerable. Soon the harvest thing was upon us, and that meant the end of everything safe and easy.
Wrecked Tonight My Good Son

Chapter Summary

Parties are a real drag.

Chapter Notes

MAY/6/2018 UPDATE: chapter 28 is coming slow. Trying to put thought into how things should work. It's still totally coming, though. Writing daily, thinking very carefully about how to proceed and what would be the most ideal way to go about the next six weeks before they attempt to go through that mysterious mountain pass toward the Citadel. Mostly thinking about what a pragmatic wasteland butthead would do. Being that survival is their number one priority and they need to think about things like food, ammunition, Slit might have to craft thundersticks, etc... Need to take all of that into account.

MAY/17/2018 UPDATE: Still working on the next chapter. It's coming along. I feel bad for such a long pause but... Eh, been dealing with a writing block and some health issues. It should be a fairly long chapter, and again, mostly from Slit's perspective although I should really try to update with more Dune centric junk. Slit's internal dialog has been easier to write lately. Anywho, I don't know how long this chapter will be but I think its getting close to finished.

MAY/19/2018 UPDATE: I only have two scenes to write before I'm comfortable posting the next chapter. I'm seeing Dead Pool 2 tonight and after that I'll probably have time to work through those scenes. After that it will be a matter of editing.

MAY/21/2018 UPDATE: I have given up trying to keep things concise. Chapter 28 will officially be the longest chapter of the story so far. Current word count is literally 'holy crap'.

MAY/22/2018 UPDATE: Chapter 28 is done. It's... long, so It will take a bit to skim through and edit but it should be posted by about 10:00 PM EST tonight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-Slit-

This is just a dream. I flung my thunderstick, aim true, intent deadly, and it struck its mark. Nux cursed as the Rock Rider's head exploded, the skull meat spraying across his windshield as he swerved quickly to avoid tearing up the undercarriage by running over the bike which now lay on the floor of the canyon behind us. I turned my head to see, a body still convulsing and the bike's tire
spinning wildly with no hand to manage the acceleration.

“You're cleaning that!”

“HAH! Suck what?”

“You're gonna suck bumper later when I make you wash the car with your fuckin' tongue!”

“Yeah, yeah. We'll see.”

“I'm serious, Slit! It's gonna be stuck on like concrete! An' it's gonna stink!”

“So what, ya could use som'ore brains!”

He tapped the breaks to slam me against the roof and back window on that one. Didn't hurt, happy dreams don't hurt, so I laughed and pounded the roof.

“Isn't it lovely, Slit? Isn't Valhalla great?!”

Valhalla?

“Wait, what?”

“Don't you know? We're dead mate! But alive again! Just like he said!”

Who was lying? Did Joe lie, or did Phil and Dune lie to me about Joe lying? We sped forward, racing faster and turning tighter corners than I remember the Coupe Deluxe ever being capable of. I had to hang on tight to those handrails. We were going so fast that a plume of dust rose so tall and thick that it mimed a sandstorm. Lightning even flickered through the billows of kicked up sand as I watched it climb toward the sky behind us. When I turned back to see ahead, I got worried. I knew this territory, and we were moving too quick though it, causing too much racket. This is scavenger country, and not too far ahead was the patch of dust I knew far too well. This isn't Valhalla.

“Turn back!” I had to bellow over the wailing of the engine.

“Why?!” My driver called back through the roof hatch.

“Too risky up ahead!”

“Are you afraid?! Coward!”

“Shut your cockwasher and listen!”

“We're dead! What can hurt us now?”

“Damn it! Nux, Turn around! Before she hears us!”

“Who?!”

On cue, I heard the thundering echo of her rifle crying. You duck when you hear it, a too late reflex to the sound of a leadslinger's instrument of death. Most go down before they realize they were in the crosshairs, that was just her warning shot. Next came the growl of an engine, another V8, but nowhere near the pristine condition that ours was. I know that sound, it was Shirley, the car a mad scavenger had given me and named for me too.

I saw it come, emerging from the rolling clouds of dust behind us. It was just a dark shadow at first,
then a grim wraith come to steal away my pleasant dream. Nux was screaming, ordering me to pick up my thunder and fling it. I saw Dune, standing up through the roof hatch Phil had cut out for us this past week. She had a foot on the dash and the other on the backrest of the seat. Her aim was ruthlessly accurate, I know this, and she had me at the end of her barrel the moment the Impala pulled up next to us. What was happening? Who the hell was driving it? Did she not recognize me? Or did she? Her aim shifted, trained on the back left tire of the Coupe.

“Nitro! Nitro!”

“Take that scav OUT, Slit!”

I can't. I clambered over the roof and down the front glass to the lancers perch and grabbed a thunderstick. Maybe I could take out the driver instead of her before she squeezed off a shot.

“SLIT! TAKE HER OUT!”

“I can't! I can't!” Can't kill her, wouldn't be right. She'd realize who she was aiming at any minute now, right?

I spun and leaned over the bonnet to jab into the driver side at whoever was at the wheel, but what I saw...

Bang!

That wasn't my thunderstick. That was Dune's rifle. Nux lost control, spun the car and began to roll. I was tossed to the gravel. If it weren't a dream I'd be dead. I knew I was dreaming, but I couldn't wake. Everything is going wrong and I can't wake from it!

The impala's breaks screeched, Dune whooped her victory cry from atop Shirley, and another threw open the driver side door to emerge into my nightmare. Fuck. Fuck!

I don't know who I thought might be driving my car with Dune slinging lead for them. I saw a glimpse of it when I froze and couldn't chuck thunder at the driver. It was me, and I needed no more confirmation than to see the bastard wearing my metal leg and pulling my colt from his belt. There can't be two of me! Even for a dream, this was nuts. Rumor has it that you can't see yourself in a dream unless you're about to die, or is it that if your doppelganger kills you in a dream, you really die?

Seemed stupid to agonize over this, try to tease out which legend was the case when another you was glaring down at your sorry face. It had no eyes, the other me, just empty sockets and red hot embers burning in their hollows. I was frozen solid, couldn't move, couldn't breathe. As the thing looked down at me, seemed like it sucked all of the air out of the world just by existing. Every time it exhaled, smoke escaped its mouth and ears.

“Slit!” That was Nux, he survived the crash.

I looked passed the knee of the abomination standing over me. My driver was still in this fight, running my way and loading his sawed-off, pushing two shells into the chamber and flicking up the barrel. He was ready to unleash kamikrazy hell, but he isn't fast enough, he never was. Even before the sickness started to destroy him, I was always faster than him.

“Run you, idiot! Nux! Run away!”

Bang!
The other me, he shot my driver like it was nothing. He just turned, unfurled his arm, took aim, and sent lead right between his eyes. Those eyes still looked at me from where my driver lay in a heap. Two big blue eyes that seemed surprised at what had happened.

“No! Why?” It was useless to cry out, no one seemed to hear me or care.

“Aw Ducky, was that really necessary?”

He ignored her, turning to face me again. Still, I couldn't move, couldn't wake. All the slapping and slicing with my bladed hand couldn't hold him off. Every strike seemed to slide right through him to see the wound fuse back together. He took me by the dust cloth around my neck, lifting me like a pup and slamming me against the flank of Shirley. I still had both my legs and he didn't, why couldn't I fight my way out of his hold?

When he opened his mouth, I saw nothing but a torrent of flies buzzing inside. The hum of a thousand wings hurt my good ear, had me struggling against him as he held me down and smothered me with his hands.

“Shh! Slit! It's okay! It's just a dream!”

I still wasn't sure what was happening, just that hands were on me and I couldn't tell whose. What is real and what is a dream? Instinct had me flipping over, throwing whatever or whoever was on me away, and they couldn't go far, because waking from the dream meant that I was behind the driver and passenger seat of Shirley. Even without the back seat, there wasn't much space. My attacker came back, pressed their mass against me, held me down by the back of the head, but it didn't hurt. I could breathe, but I only knew that for sure after they told me so. After a few more repetitions on their part, it finally got through to me that it was Dune telling me to take in air and shoot it back out, just breathe. I was okay, nothing was trying to kill me.

'breathe with me' She said and I leaned into her, where it was safe. I was shaking and I could smell blood. She wasn't the only one there.

“You're alright, Boy. You're alright.” That was Phil.

I found myself trying to hide under Dune when I fully came to. The morning had lit up Phil's grease pit, which meant he'd been working. That's why I heard the banging and dreamed of Dune firing shots. Still, I was horrified at what I'd seen inside my skull as I slept. The Scav had her hand on my head, forcing her fingers through the unruly hair there. Phil was somewhere in the tight space within the car too, trying to hold my arms down. When I finally found the strength to open my eyes, I watched red drops fall onto the mats we slept on. It sank down into the fibers until it looked almost dry. I counted four drops. When I looked up, Dune had a bloody nose, but she wasn't angry, wasn't looking at me like she wanted to throw a fit about it. She looked terrified, sad even. I just wanted to disappear. My hands covered my face and all she did was hover closer, patting my head and talking her coddling gibberish.

Full body shakes that are neither from cold or fever feel like nothing else, it's like no matter what you do, you can't control what your meat is doing. I even felt it in my ribs.

"He's dead! He's dead and it's my fault!"

Part of me knew it was just the dream talking, another part argued with logic and told me it was the
truth. I pushed him away because I could, because it was easy, because it was less painful than accepting that I couldn't handle his impending death. Dune, the full-life nutter, just stayed where she was, keeping the pressure of her body weight on me as if she knew that I felt like I might float away at any second. I could hear her talking to Phil, but I only caught the gist of it. Phil had to take the pups somewhere to hang around the old ones while everyone else went ahead with the harvest thing. Dune kept on after he left, rocking slightly and curled over me. I knew she was wiping her bloody nose on my shoulder, but that was fine. I probably did that to her while I was still in the dream.

"You okay, Duck?"

I didn't want to say, so instead, I turned my face away. I felt the weight of her skull against mine and she started singing. I really used to hate it when she sang, I thought she couldn't hold a key to save her sorry life. She sang about the sun coming, and the shakes slowly subsided. While she sang, I'd turned myself around so I could feel it on my face through her neck. The sensation was distracting but it soon dwindled to a hum. I don't think she could remember all the words.

"Ah, mate. An' you were sleepin' so good all week. It's a'right. Dune's got ya. You thirsty? Guts gurglin'?" Count on Dune to try fixing everything by facilitating physical needs, probably because her ability to dig deeper and locate other needs was as limited mine. She was right, though, I was thirsty.

I just shrugged, convinced that if I spoke she'd be able to hear how tore up I was over a dumb dream. Her canteen made its way into my hands, and she kept on talking.

"You used to do this all the time when I first brought you home. Never let Dune get close to you though. All she could do was watch..."

Yeah, the wounds both on my interior and exterior were still fresh when we met, could hardly move because the agony of what had slowly become thick scars was so terrible. Back then, I probably didn't have the strength to so much as bruise Dune if she'd been close enough, but the story is different now. How often had she been watching me sleep back at the start of this? The idea of her watching me used to be unnerving, nowadays it was just part of the daily rigmarole. When I moved back to peer up I could see that her nose didn't look broken, so there's that. Only a little red clung to her nostrils and upper lip now.

She looked back at me and sighed. I still hadn't said anything, and if she expected me to she would just have to live with the disappointment. The shakes from coming up out of a nightmare were gone but the sweat left behind made the chill of the morning that much worse.

"You smell,"

"So does your breath, Maniac."

She snorted at that, an amused noise which usually means she's about to crack a better insult. That's not what she did.

"You really did sweat through your trousers, the covers, all of it. Checked you twice to see if you were fevered up but you were cool as a cucumber."

"What's that?"

"They look like big green peckers, good in a salad. They give Dune a rotten arse, though."

"Some of that I didn't understand, the rest gave me really bad imagery."
"Hah."

It was quiet for a bit after that. She let me lay there with my thoughts, but nothing lasts. She slapped at my shoulder to get me off her arm, groaning and flexing her fingers.

"Ohh, how wondrous blood flow to the extremities can be... Let's go get washed up, Duck. Maybe somebody will let you borrow clean slacks."

"It's not like I pissed in um', they'll dry."

"*This* is why you always smell,"

"As if you've ever sniffed anything that didn't reek like shit, or rot, or burning tires, or wet socks."

"Roasting meat smells very nice."

"So, that's why you pulled me out of that wreck. You were just hungry, cannibal."

"Oof, so what. Pfft! That was the first and last time you ever smelled pleasant."

"Eat it."

We were supposed to be getting up, out of the car, and going inside to ask for the wash bucket. Dune hadn't moved, she just lay on her back looking at the roof with her fingers twisting at the fuzz on the side of her head, which is how her hair always seemed to form cords coiled tightly together. She did that when she was up in her head in a thinking way, not a hallucinating way.

"Was there anything that flowered where you came from? Blooms smell nice too."

She'd probably be pretty underwhelmed by what she would actually see if she was allowed. The few things that flowered at the Citadel were high restriction plants, things that we only got to touch when it was time to take very clean pieces of cotton scraps to touch the boy parts of the flowers and then dab the yellow stuff on the girl parts. The Imperator in charge of the growing operation on those three terraces called those flower parts Stamaroonis and Pistilronos. Really tedious work and the flowers were always tiny, stunted, and didn't smell like much of anything. No one but Joe's most trusted could go there after pollination and we were always told that the reason was that he didn't want to burden us with the sinful temptations which the plants produce. I was questioning everything, every order or wisdom bestowed on us by him. Were we all just property like Phil said?

"You'll just have to see when we get there," I said, unwilling to spoil her enthusiasm with premature disappointment.

"Okay," She replied with a smile, and that gave me a funny feeling.

We got up and went inside. Dune and the Wench only talked for a minute before the redheaded menace was coming my way. I tried to back out of her reach when she lifted a hand but that only got me slapped on the side of the head.

"I'm a mom, I know what I'm doing," she declared as she lay a hand on my forehead after grabbing me by the ear to pull me down to her level.

"He's fine." She said, and Dune seemed to relax at that. "Probably just a night terror. Phil has um all the time."

*So, it's not just me.*
Ardith began giving out orders as soon as Dune and I were finished washing our faces. Dune was to help her clean up the main room, I was to clean up Phil's mess in the garage while he was away dropping off the pups. I was still out there trying to make piles of scrap look organized when he pulled up, sans pups. The truck had been gotten into shape to drive yesterday, thankfully. I got sick of giving out rides very quickly.

"My wife has you putting away my toys for me, eh?"

"You gonna help? I dunno where any of this shit goes."

"Yir just being lazy, you know where everything goes, been helping me make this mess all the last two weeks. Hey, people are probably going to start showing up soon. Heads up, a few Buzzards might pop in and pop out. They're, uh, our choof suppliers. Don't lose your head and go to stabby town on um."

"You fraternize with those skid marks?"

He cringed. "Hell no, that's disgusting. We jus' get our guzz and smoke from um."

"What the hell do you trade to them that those spike suckers could want?"

"Medical supplies. They're all crusted up with skin rust. Ard and a couple others cut up old clothes and boil them to make rolls of bandages for um. Sometimes we distill wood alcohol for sterilizin' and they pay out big time for that. I figure they go through a lot of it, what with how much they've bought off us over the years."

No wonder the kids got so into that story I told them, they might have seen or heard about Buzzards before but weren't told much in specifics. The more Phil talked, the less I ever wanted to ponder what lay under those bandages. No wonder Morsov scurried his diggling self out of the sand and tried to pass himself off as a pureblood war boy. We all knew he wasn't from the wretched, no matter how much he tried to fit in. Dirt fucker.

"Slit?"

"What? I'm kinda... tch, stupid-" Got too close to a pile of crap and got something stuck in the shock coil around the metal leg. Just shaking it wasn't doing the trick, had to bend over and pry what appeared to be a twisted up tangle of serpentine belts out of it.

"Ya feelin' alright, now? You were lookin' pretty rough this mornin'."

I looked up at that, shrugged, and tossed the freed belts back into the rubbish.

"M'fine." I lied.

"Good, 'cause we're getting wrecked tonight, Boy. We deserve it, making these two lovely ladies shine again."

Looking over my shoulder at the pickup and the Impala, I had to admit, they both looked like completely different chariots. The pickup, a Ford model of all things, was almost something worth a little pride. It was equipped with long spines over the front glass which almost made it look like it had a thick unibrow, a few welded to the hood, too, and several down her flanks to keep boarders off. After showing Phil that bolt I had found sticking out of my car, we had to run around looking for anyone with a camper cover for the bed, being that this is where passengers were going to be seated, that included the pups. Doors and back gate were armored. We couldn't find much in the way of good metal to do it so we had to take apart a tool shed and use those brown and rusty sheets of
corrugated steel to cut to size and fasten on with rivets. Chicken wire over the windows was another trip around neighboring crow camps to find something to protect the passengers even if the glass got smashed. Phil wasn't taking chances. Turns out, the trade-off for this was that Phil was the one transporting all of the youngsters, not just his own. He still had to help get more vehicles running and up to snuff. But these two were a good start.

I didn't want to get sucked into this, but it was easy to be thrown back into this mindset and plan for what looks and sounds like preparing a Citadel convoy. The Impala was going to be the wayfinder and the spotter for the pickup. She had side rails now, a ram bar, a roof hatch, tire shredders on her rims, and finally a windshield. It wasn't a perfect fit because there's just no finding glass from the right model around here and no one to forge a new sheet with the correct dimensions. We had to seal up some parts around the edges with resin and tar.

I'd be driving and Dune would be my gunner. Phil argued that it would be better the other way around, with some thunder equipped for me to sling and Dune at the wheel, but that's just not happening. Phil even took a whack at teaching her to drive yesterday. His diagnosis: Her hands and her feet don't talk to each other because each wants the other's job. She's been riding her mum's old cycle and nothing else for too long, shifting gears with her foot and operating the clutch with her hand. He said it could be remedied, but after Dune almost sent his clutch into catastrophic failure, he called it quits for now. It wasn't all bad, he decided to check the pressure plate and do more tinkering after that.

"Sure, they look alright."

"They'll look better, once we get back to work at home."

Home still isn't a solid thing. It was a shot in the dark and we all knew it, but if it all works out, if we could go home and be accepted there again, we'd have access to everything we used to know. These chariots would get chrome paint, real steel mods. Thinking about this was nice but it also gave me a headache and it's not hard to figure why. Phil was picking stuff up and tossing everything into piles, he had this under control, I didn't want to keep talking about the Citadel.

"Hey, I'm gonna find Dune, see what she's doin'."

"Wait, wait. Got a question. How out of practice do you think you are in regards to tossing around thunder?"

"Ah, fuck man. I already told you, Dune can't drive the Impala and don't go around thinking you can teach her in time."

"Nah Nah! That's not what I'm gettin' at! Look, I lose every damn year at darts to a guy named Eyeball. Fantacular name, huh? I need a man with ace aim."

Darts, I know the game because we had a few dart boards -a ton of darts with bent tips- down in the sparring pits back home and sometimes we would play out of boredom. It's not a hard game.

"Darts is darts, why don't you just practice before a game? And what does that have to do with launching thunder?"

"Well eh, It's a matter if the dart board. Takes four dudes to get it out of the garage, and the darts are as long as Heta is in the tooth if you catch my drift."

A giant dartboard, that sounds like something Phil would come up with, alright.

"Huh, so you're asking me to throw lances."
"Bingo! Heh heh." He was grinning like a rat that just found an unattended block of mothers milk cheese.

"It's been a while..."

"But it'll come back to ya, right?"

"We'll see."

"Knew I could count on ya, Pup. I've got a heap o' scrap on you, ya know."

"Great." I hadn't thrown much of anything since I got blown up and roasted. Dune once tried to get me to show her how chrome I used to be at it to satisfy her curiosity, but I never felt like it. Phil might just lose that bet. Hope he didn't wager anything important.

I wound up helping the lot of them haul this dart board out of the garage shack. It had been dismantled and stuffed behind some shelving units. Other crow fishers arrived, ones I had seen at the meeting, and one of them brought the darts that went with this monstrous board leaning against the support struts on the side of the house. A few hours were spent dicking around with it all. The "darts" looked the part, just four feet long and without any kind of fletching to keep it steady in the air, not that you need it at that range or that size as long as it's weighted proper, and they were. The board was just warped layers of ply-wood all glued together and painted up with a target.

Dune and Ardith were stringing up lighties and fussing with an old generator to get everything up and running, I begrudgingly helped them with that. At some point, the nutter asked what they were celebrating the harvest of, and the answer was jack shit because nothing grows here except mildew. It was just an excuse to get wasted, and at this point, I was all for it. The last two weeks had been hell, not even the fun kind of hell where you could test your mettle.

-Dune-

Well, it turned out, Skinktail was still around. At first, you couldn't mop the smile off my happy face Glory to a scav who thought she was the last! Another friend lost and found! But then some of those memories came flooding back, Skink and I were not often in agreement about much of anything, our tastes were very different and so were our moral issues. She hadn't been at the meeting but here she was, arriving with a platter of what I believe where candied cockroaches. Now, I might be a maggot eater, but there was still something about roaches and their wriggly little antennae that got my guts reversing gears, she took full advantage of that, popping one into her mouth and holding another under my nose while I gagged at it. Some things never change, Skink was still as blunt as a spoon

"The one with the uh... Face. That one yours, Dune?"

That didn't sound like admiration or appreciation for the pain and the grit involved in making a face like my Ducky's. Took balls like boulders to get a mouth like that and come out of it still mostly sane like. I really did not like that tone of hers. Nope, nope, nope.

"Why do ya ask?"

She looked at Slit, held tilting slowly while he picked up another big long dart and took aim. Curious how he'd hold out that left arm while he lined up his shot, and the way he'd shout when he let loose and sent it flying at that board. Skinktail was looking at him like a cut of meat on a hook.
"Nice ass on that one, just wanted to see if he was available."

"I dunno, I've got a couple bullets that are available too if you're interested, Skinkbutt."

"Damn. I'm gonna die a spinster, ain't I?"

"Not for lack of available men," Ard put her elbow in my ribs about that, but I just smiled and so did Skink, but neither of us looked too friendly with each other. Back when we were young, we were always trying to one-up each other. Looked like the battle for the title of the baddest bitch was back on.

That's about the spot where things started going screwy. For a while, Arddie wasn't putting up with our ridiculousness, but get a few drinks into her and she's the one encouraging it. So, there we were, trying like mad to figure out who was the nastier cretin of the wastes. Skink always had a penchant for throwing knives, and I was a crack shot, so it was a trial of target practice with a makeshift slingshot made of old pantyhose and Ard's stilts loaded with her good plates. I'd have told her to spare the china, but I was full to the gills with rotgut too and she insisted we use proper targets that make a lovely shatter. 'Not like I'll need plates once we leave here in six weeks!' she'd said. I must admit, the shattering was music to a tipsy-turvy sand sifter's ears. Annoyingly, we always had to wait for Skink to retrieve her throwing knives, which gave me the opportunity to watch what Slit was doing while I berated her for the inconvenience.

"Dune thinks it's lovely not having to THROW AWAY her weapon every time she has to use it."

"And I think it's great having weapons that don't run out of ammo, Sand Hump."

Everyone had a drink in their hand, thanks to Skink too because her mother Theta, mine and Ard's initiate mother, had passed on to her the knowledge of how to brew up spirits for the bottle. I really wonder what the hell she was making it from, being that this place lacked the crops for proper sour mash and there were no potatoes growing here either. Ard, in slurs, assured me that no one would get sick off it, and that Skink didn't actually live around here anymore. She just comes by for the yearly big bash. I wondered if this competitiveness between us was why she never mentioned that Skink was still alive until now.

To our left across the yard, growing group of men and women had gathered around the humongous dart board. Phil was gathering betting tokens and trinkets in an oil pan. The side bets were getting more and more complex, and Slit, well, I suspect that he was either only now getting the hang of throwing the aluminum tipped spears, or he'd been hustling everyone on Phil's behalf. Ard told me that Phil was putting a hefty sum on Slit placing in this backyard tournament, which makes some sense because according to Slit, his old job used to be throwing live black magic on sticks. At some point, he had taken his shirt off. I didn't like the way Skink's eyes were burning holes in his ribs and across my favorite doodles while she walked out down the hill to fetch her blades. Got my skull real hot.

"Arddie, load me a teacup and pull."

The cup went flying and I had my leadslinger up and tight on my shoulder before it reached the peak of its great arc through the air. I waited for it to come down a bit, then took my shot to send an explosion of shattered dinnerware down onto the lizard cunt. Yeah, I was as salty as a goanna shitting tacks. Watching her startle under my scope's glare gave me such a delight.

"The fuck! THE FUCK! ARE YOU NUTS?"

"You bet! An' ya keep undressing that war boy with your greedy lil' eyes and the next shot ain't
gonna be for shits an' giggles!"

"You're not the boss of my eyeballs! And y'all ain't attached!"

"That's my business! Ain't yours! Stop makin' assumptions!" That was the moonshine talking. Mostly, the idea of Skink getting into Slit's pants and following us home made me want to shoot off both her feet so she couldn't follow anybody home.

"Hey, I'm startin' to think we're all taking this competition a little too far?" Arddie chided, sitting there and pouring herself yet another drink. "Also ya can't tell somebody to take back a correct assumption, Dune Buggy."

"Traitor."

"Hey, I'm friends with both of you arseholes! I ain't traitoring anybody!" Arddie was shouting now from her seat, trying to come to her own defense.

Ducky entered the argument from where he stood before the dart board, holding a javelin in one hand -it was his turn- while he tried to slap away Phil with the other. Ard's eldest husband was laughing till he was blue in the face, slapping a palm over his knee and leaning on Slit while he damn near killed himself with giggles until he could not breathe. One of the others with a tank of clean air shoved a breathing mask over his face to huff.

"HEY! Could all of ya shut it? You're screwing up my head for this! And stop calling me war boy!"

I had to laugh now too because his face was as red as a cherry, and for once that much more youthful than usual look didn't break my cold scav heart.

-Slit-

If you were a War Boy, you never got to drink much back home. We had a group whose job was to run a set of three massive stills and keep the hooch for trade flowing. They weren't like us, they were captured from some other faction sometime before Nux and I were fully initiated. We seldom got to taste that stuff, unless their Brew Master was off the wagon again and willing to trade for other illicit substances or contraband. I remember how you could get your canteen filled to the spout with the chrome stuff if Brew Master was good and loaded. All you had to do was find a real bar of soap, even lightly used was fine. Sometimes after a real wild raid, us boys would break out the bunk funk and get wasted on that. Feels different than sucking up paint or guzz fumes. The drink makes you run hot, makes you sweat all over. The pressure from Phil to make a decent shot and the fact that he kept refilling the tin can I was drinking out of wasn't helping. Off came a layer and I didn't even care that Phil would see what I didn't much care to routinely remove from myself.

"Hey! Slit, hey! You've got yourself an admirer."

That's what made me stop to look, to see some strange woman -and I don't mean Dune- pulling her little pig stickers from the dirt, looking at me all the while and waggling an eyebrow. Then I got to witness Dune flip her screwy lid. It might have been fun to watch some other sod get the brunt of her crazy if it weren't for the things they were shouting at each other from across the yard. Phil, he was just losing his ass laughing at them, at me, the whole thing.

You know, if I ever fantasized about two breeders fighting over me, it would probably have been
two of Joe's wives, soiling their linen whites by wrestling in used motor oil. I'm not saying it's something I've ever conjured into mind when I had the privacy, but I'm also not saying I haven't. This was not something that would or could become featured in a frustrated fantasy. When you're young and stupid you think a lot of your self-praising daydreams would be chrome if they could really happen, then you get older and things like that get less important and if you find yourself in one of those daydreams made real it's just uncomfortable or inconvenient.

I don't like to be touched. I think I've always been like that. Nux was an obvious exception, Dune had somehow bypassed my dislike for it with a chrome hand, and I'll tolerate a few other people once in a great while. Now, I like attention. I always had a craving for admiration and rightful recognition of my strength and skill, so normally I liked eyes on me and the way they would glitter with envy. There's no high like that. The way this woman, Skinktail, was looking at me made me feel like I was being touched all over and not in a shine way. Then there was Dune, practically marking territory around me like she had a claim, half flattering, half embarrassing.

I'm pretty sure I told her to clamp her yellow daggers shut, but that just got me laughed at some more. Dune, the harpy, the old bastard choking on his own amusement, and the two morons he replaced Ike and Dunny with. They were all laughing at something, my pulsing hot face I think. Humiliation breeds anger.

I wanted to put that javelin through something that bleeds, what a shame those buzzards weren't here yet because I might just be able to get away with corpsing one of them. It went sailing through the air with everything I had behind it, a roar left me as the length of wood and scrap found the red target in the center of the board. My throwing arm burned for something else to throw, but somebody was shouting because I narrowly missed their head and the rest had shut up. I was never gonna kill Bones. Scare him? Sure.

"Dayum! First Bullseye of the game! That went right through, too!" Bones, having already forgotten his terror, was jiggling the dart up and down to pry it out. He immediately shoved his finger in and around the hole in the warped wood. It almost struck me as lewd. "Yep, clean through. EY! GET ANGER ISSUES ANOTHER SHOT! Aim gets better the drunker it seems!"

Another shot, unless he meant a shot at his loud mouth, I thought I might pass on that. I was already feeling what I'd had and it was fast going right to my head all at once. You can think one thing and do another, a common problem you encounter after a few drinks is that you almost compulsively continue to consume whatever anyone places in front of you.

I think we won that dart tournament? At the very least Phil and I made it into the higher brackets and at some point also played against each other. I don't actually know who won, my memory started getting fuzzy here and there. Somebody, I think Ardith, pulled a switcheroo on my drink and filled my tin can with aqua cola. That was fine, my mouth tasted like shit and my guts were doing all manner of unpleasant stuff. The cola would help. Phil actually suggested that if I don't hork up what I've got in me now that I'll just continue to get worse off. I honestly have no idea if I took his advice or not. There were a few hours missing from memory and a vague impression that Dune had tried to teach me how to dance. What imagery from that which I managed to actually retain was her attempting to give me a visual demonstration of what I was supposed to be doing with my fee-foot and hips, trying to imitate her because she wouldn't give up on it, and then nothing. When things started getting clearer I could recall looking down into wicked ugly scuffs in the meaty parts of my palms. I was also wearing someone else's pants, still shirtless too but there was a drying layer of crust on me. It was mud.

"Don't fret, we all take a tumble down the hill into the muck at some point or another. Fitting you did so in the middle of a fistfight with a guy accusing you of stealing guzz. That buzzard looked
ridiculous when he sat on your back and tried to smother you in the yuck."

Dune was there, and she was the one fretting, not me. Fuck, when did any of that happen? Were the buzzards already here and gone? She had my left hand, grasping my middle finger like it was a handle and scrubbing the grit and filth out of the rawness that I'm assuming came from me trying to catch my fall on this tumble she was going on about. There as also the matter of a few knuckles torn open. I didn't feel a thing, probably still too liquored up.

"It's a lot worse if you take a wino's dive down the slopes when you're on stilts," Featherknife added. "Ask Phil how his drunk ass used to get around when we first got him walkin' tall. Practically rolled around more than he did walk."

Where was Phil? I felt like I hadn't seen him in a while. We were inside now. The music was much more obnoxious in here so when I located him across the room talking to Ardith, I couldn't hear what was being said. The redhead's back faced us so I only saw her hand gestures, she was jerking her thumb back at Dune and I. I could see Phil's face, he looked confused, then surprised, then confused again, and he was looking at me. Dune made herself the center of my attention again when she started tying torn strips of her own scarf around my hands.

"M'not a pup, Nutter."

"And Dune's not an organic mechanic."

"It's just scratches."

"Still, don't want an infection."

She's still paranoid about me getting a rotten body again, all this time later. Dune always scrubbed out any tiny knick on me, meanwhile, she did little more than lick clean any break in her own skin and wipe it off with a sleeve. I really shouldn't enjoy being cared for like this, but I do. Funny, it's easier to admit that to yourself when you're hammered.

"Thanks, Dune."

"You're a different person when you take to the bottle."

It was a joke because she was smiling and winking. Sarcasm, I guess she thought I'd catch rage fever after a few. Well, I could do that under the right circumstances. When Ardith came back she, Skinktail and Dune instantly started gossiping about what two other people whose names I failed to memorize were doing on the other side of the throng of bodies crowding the room.

"...I've never seen somebody chew off another person's face before."

“That's nothin' you should see Feathers and Bones when they're like that.”

For a moment I thought somebody was actually being mauled, so I leaned from where I sat around whoever's hind end was in my way to look. It was a couple older breeders having at each other, but not violently. All grabby hands and mouths. I was staring, too brain wasted to know it, when Phil reappeared.

"Put your eyes back in your head, Pup. Hey, follow me real quick?"

I got up, not sure what he wanted me following him for but too groggered to question it. I ambled along behind him as he took me through the back and out into his grease pit. When did it get dark outside? He clapped his hands together and created some friction between them.
"Good, we're alone. Hah, amazing how word gets around, right? Those crusty rust fuckers aren't
even from the same chapter as the ones you thieved fuel from... Ah. So, about you and Dune. That
thing the other day when Jackie caught you guys-"

"Why are you bringing this up??"

That must have been what he and his wife-boss were talking about. Fuck, how much did she know?
a better question might be: How much did Dune tell her?

"Look here, I'm asking the questions. Was that... Uh, the first time you two ever done anythin'?"

Holy chrome. I had a sudden urge to run, but also a dread that I'd roll down the hill again and
actually remember it this time.

"What's- No!"

"Oh thank V8, I thought you two were a couple of thirty-year-old children who just... Cuddle all the
time." The old bugger laughed, not at me, at himself like whatever he thought I said was a big load
off him.

"NO! Shit, I mean- We haven't done anyth- I meant I'm not having THIS kinda talk with you! And I
don't cuddle."

"Oh, so it was the first time you guys got a little friendly?"

"I'm too skunked to deal with this. Would you just, I dunno, stop talking?"

I had to lean back on the wall, a sudden wave of nausea made standing up with only one real leg a
royal pain. I really didn't want to chunder on the metal leg, that would be a real bitch to clean. Fuck
it, if I have to, I can angle it to the right. I'd rather throw away a good boot and use one of the
treadless spares Dune found in the shipping container than clean this damn leg.

"Oh, stop being milk drinker. We're both adults. It's not that big a deal to talk about it."

"Why does this matter to you, senile old bat-fuck?!"

He stooped, pulling down his respirator and pointing at his eyes. Wait, I'm taller than he is, why is he
stooping? I was sliding down the wall, thankfully there was a rusted tool chest to catch my ass.

"Look at me... Right here. Look. I want you to listen carefully. You, me, and all our brothers were
denied something, okay? Our right to grow up. When I got here I was a thirty-six year old boy. I
didn't know anything about the real world. I was still lugging around a mountain of shame over
something as normal as wanting to, ya know, sometimes have physical intimacy with another
human."

"I don't wanna hear where this is going." This was sobering, but that only made my guts angrier.
Something was bubbling up my chest and I couldn't tell if it was a belch or vomit.

He indeed kept going because he's all gas pedal and no breaks when it comes to his mouth. I was
phasing in and out. The sobering content of the conversation wasn't enough to keep me attentive
while the world tilted side to side. He said something about Joe, used his full name too which sounds
incredibly strange.

"...seems odd that while he had five women locked in a greenhouse behind a bank vault door, we
weren't even allowed to talk about the better half of humanity. Doesn't that sound pretty fucked up?"
"Pump the guzz on this, I'm really not following."

"Slit, have you ever had sex with anyone?"

"Aw, great Veeight! Fuck off! I'm not answering that."

"So, it's a no."

Still not answering that.

"Did your nosy wife send you after me? Is she in there bothering Dune with the same crap?"

He shrugged, hands turned up. "It's possible. I'm not saying we planned that or anything."

"Ah, shit. Why are you doing this? It's not like rootin' is even an important thing!"

"Wow... Um, okay. That's a very mature thing to say, but you're missing the point. I just don't want you to be afraid of it, that's all."

"Being afraid never stopped you from fooling around with the wretched folk."

"No, but I was afraid. Getting caught meant the beating of a lifetime. I'm a bad example, I didn't love her, but I cared that her an' her friends were starvin'. It was complicated. Sucked major arse being terrified like that all the time, carried that cargo all the way here too. Ardith helped fix that, made it so it doesn't feel shameful."

Shit, I wasn't ready for that. I leaned back, took a good look at his face. He wasn't just yanking my chain. He was really serious about this. Maybe Ardith wasn't all bad and annoying. If Phil ever felt anything like I did the other day when my own maniac decided to suck on my face, then Ardith must really be some kind of shrill-voiced saint if she could make that horror manageable.

"Phil, that's great for you but we're different. I'm not like you, I'm not. I'm just-"

"Jus' what?"

Just what? Just everything. There is nothing about me that any person could want. The dumb leg is a huge liability, I might have been a good chrome war boy but without the white power and the war paint, I'm just some ugly prick with a belt fetish. It didn't seem to matter how much Dune praises things like that, as if they were qualities. I was enjoying this moonshine and debauchery thing less and less, because the more Phil or anyone talked the more I hated myself.

"Just a one-legged, split faced, friggin' freak show... and an arsehole."

"Well, sure you're not a looker like me but you an' Dune aren't that different?"

Hooch unlocks weird spaces in your head. I heard him call Dune as hideous as I am, he might not have said that but that's what I heard. I was standing up before he could finish talking, fists tight and ready to start swingin'. The surge of rage over that slight on the nutter even gave me a shock. No, she wasn't a pretty little waif in white, her teeth were a complete mess, and she had some seriously disgusting habits, but she wasn't ugly. Years ago maybe she had looks going for her, things change and shit happens but she was supposed to be sold to a warlord! A great, famous one who made his younger brother Rictus look like a little pebble. No one here would approve of that type of union, I don't even think I would anymore, but that was in my head the proof that she wasn't ugly. Phil took a step back and had his hands up too, his apologetic grin did nothing for me, he knew he'd misspoken and I was meaning to knock his skull clean off his shoulders.
“Hey, whoa now, I think you misheard what I said.”

"Take that back! Don't insult her like that! She was supposed to get wifed off to Scrotus!"

I took my swing but hit nothing. My right pant leg snagged on the metal abomination and sent me face first into the floor instead of stepping into Phil's move to evade me. That should have hurt, the floor out here was concrete but I felt nothing. I'll never drink another drop. I knew I'd feel this in the morning. Somehow I could sense Phil leaning over me and I could hear the smartass smirk in his laugh.

"Oh, you're adorable."

"Piss off." On that note, I picked myself up off the ground and started stumbling off to find an escape route away from Phil.

"Hey, you DO know where pups come from, right?"

"Oh, shut your cola hole."

I almost got away but that guy, Eyeball, leaned out to say something that just couldn't be ignored.

"Hey, your wife is doing her impression of a flamethrower again."

"Shit!"

Phil had his mask back on and was on his way inside as swift as he could go. I tripped over the threshold and stumbled my way in just in time to watch Ardith spew rotgut over a lit road flare, sending a plume of flames up toward the hole in the plastic roof. Some parts were already singed and the room stank of melting plastic.

"Ah, this is why I fell in love with that woman. She leaves me in a constant state of scarousal." Phil declared, grin mostly obscured by his breathing apparatus, but you could see it in how his eyes squinted.

"What?"

"Scaroused. I mean scared and horny, Slit."

Another tower of flames, this time so large that you could feel the heat on your face from across the room. Phil seemed to go tense at that.

"Uhh, actually, this is how we lost the thatch roof a couple years back. Ard! Honey..."

He was off, pushing his way through the group of onlookers to put an end to that brand of fun. In the confusion, I spotted Dune inching toward the front door to slip away from the crowd with a dark red face and a look on it which told me she had something to escape from. Couldn't let her wander in the dark on her own and I was almost sober enough to keep an eye on her. I followed her out, watched her scurry off across the bridge and into the mist toward to her old home.

Phil's prying and invasion into my private life or lack thereof was still annoying me. Never once have I had a single perverse fantasy that featured Dune, but maybe that was because he was right in a roundabout way about our kind.

Before I wound up in the scavenger lands, any contact I've ever had with another person which wasn't innocuous co-sleeping or beating the snot out of another war boy in the sparing pits was
anonymous. If you do anything with anyone else, you do it in the half-flooded derelict tunnels deep below where we lived and worked. It was dark, you never saw faces, no one pays attention to who goes down and who comes up, and if you go at night, you're bound to bump into another warm body down there. I never once had to remember a face, feel any connection, or deal with the innuendo. It was easy, nothing to put any thought into. I never let them touch me beyond what I went down there for, and if they tried to feel their way around and discover the telling scars, I'd grab their greedy fingers and give um a good bend backward. No one wants broken fingers when all they came to do was the most unnecessary, worthless, useless thing imaginable. No one wants to explain how they got their fingers snapped if they were deep in the darkness there when it happened.

Now, I still can't put the shit that happened down in the ankle deep, three times used water trickling back into the dead rock next to what happened with Dune or even in the same category as what she does with her shine hand. It's not the same thing. I still caught the same feeling following her back to that shipping container that I used to back when I was crawling down into dark places for a quick one. Shame. Damn Phil for being right all the time.

-Dune-

She'll be fine. Apparently, she does this all the time. Thank the goddess on her throne of seeds that Arddie was bragging about her fire-breathing trick earlier in the night. I might not ever have gotten away from that conversation if I hadn't been able to talk her into showing off for us. All I had to do was tell her I thought she was full of it, that she couldn't really breathe fire. I still had the stench of the burnt tarp in my nose as I crossed the bridge and went back into my old house. At least here, I wouldn't have to be interrogated by Ard and Skink about... I'm not sure what.

Oh hell, the past week had gone so well. Ducky was sleeping through the night, I hadn't seen anything green since I lost it on Slit in out in the mud and beat up some poor unsuspecting dead car. Now? A sober Arddie didn't ask questions like that, drunk Ard wanted to know how and why I was living with some bloke and letting him curl up in my lap every night like a sad wee seedling, yet it was not a physical... Thing. I mean, I physically touch him, mostly his face, he likes it and passes right out like a little kid. Oh gods, I think I preferred thinking of him that way, like a small boy instead of a grown person who was technically older than I am. It made everything about why we were close simpler and less weird if I thought of him as a child, a child soldier who needs help and care.

"Aw gawd, you've been infantilizing a grown man, Dune. A large, dangerous, grown man who wanted to kill you at first. Are you fucking psychotic?"

"Oh, definitely,"

I spun, shrieked, chucked the first thing within reach. Too late, I became aware that I'd been followed by none other than the subject with which I was re-evaluating my tendencies toward. He yelped and then growled like a kicked dog. I'm not quite sure what I threw but it felt heavy.

"Slit?"

"Yeah, OW, it's me. I didn't catch everything you said. You talking to yourself?"

"Always talkin' to herself, what else is new?"
I sat, lighting up the oil lamp left in here many nights back so I could see. He sat too, leaning against the wall next to me.

"What's new?" He said. I could hear the annoyance in his voice, just a touch of fear too. "Phil is a big mouthed, big nosed, pain in the arse."

"He cornered you too, huh?"

We looked at each other which was all we had to do to know where this conversation would conclude. His lips thinned into a rigid line.

"Ardith put her nose in your business?" He grunted, so I grunted back.

"And Skinktail, too. Asked all kinds of dumb questions, like how you act at home, how I act at home. Shit, Arddie had the brass to ask if you were a eunuch... Uh, you ever heard of cunnalingo? Skink and Eyeball offered to show me so I could tell you to do it."

"Uh, no. I haven't heard of that... She picked up the guy with the scar on his forehead that looks like a third eye??"

"Yup, last I saw they were hanging all over each other and gettin' sloppy."

"Gross."

"Yeah."

We sat there, saying nothing more for a short time. We both probably just needed to get away from all the ruckus. Slit still looked way out of whack. He should try to sober up as much as he could before going to sleep tonight.

"Hey, uh, what's infantilizing mean?"

Uh oh, he must have heard more than I thought on his way in here. What should I tell him? That he's easier to live with if I look at him and see no adult there? That's unfair, and it's getting hard to see him as anything but the responsible party, I'm the one that needed constant supervision these days.

"Um, it means-" I sighed, maybe still too woozy from the boozy to hold my tongue. "...means I treat you like a baby because it's easier than treating you like a man."

"...Ouch."

"Oh, I didn't mean to bludgeon you, Slit. Just didn't hear you come in."

"That's not what hurt."

"Oh."

I needed to fix this or explain myself, or something. Everything was so simple before we came here, I could be captivated by his ferocity and awed by how sheltered he was, too. I never had to try looking at the world from his perspective.

"It's just... It's hard, imagining you knowing much outside being part of Joe's boy army. You're naive sometimes, and then you're quick as a whip about other things. It's just fewer considerations to make if you're not a man, if it's just me being the adult instead of both. Ya know we're, ah, not normal. We don't act normal, we act like- I don't know, like Arddie and her men do behind closed doors except no one is naked and we're fine that way. I don't even know what I'm talking about."
"Who said that? Ardith? The bimbo hanging out with you guys? To hell with their normal. Fuck normal. And I know enough."

I was pretty glad that he took offense to that too, but I still had to ask the obvious questions.

"What is, er, enough? H- how much do you know?" I asked.

Initially, he just shrugged the question away and looked at his boot, rotating his ankle with a wince. He probably banged all those joints around on his prosthesis pretty good when he took that tumble with the screaming Buzzard. He seemed to give up evading questions and offered up an answer which only raised a hundred more.

"Did some stuff. It was dark, no names, no faces, hands off the scars. Can't get caught or catch feelings if you never know who."

He must be talking about what went on at the Citadel and it was honestly terrifying to hear. My head came up with a hundred ways a situation like that could go horrifically wrong. I didn't want to let him onto how disturbing it was to imagine him in some dark place, groping in the black gloom and not knowing who was touching him, and he was skittish about touch anyway. I didn't want him to think it disgusted me, it kind of frightened me to picture it, but I wasn't repulsed. It did make me feel a bit dumb for assuming that all war boys were sexless, man-sized children. Eventually, with enough kids going through the teenage changes, somebody is bound to discover the joys below the belt. A new question, if nothing else just to get my head away from that bleak imagery.

"What about lady folk? You know about them?"

He glanced up then, looking a little sheepish. He shrugged again before answering with his shoulders hunched high and forked up lips twitching.

"...Just a little."

"What then? Tell Dune."

"Uh... They look different. Shaped different. They get kinda moody for a week outta every twenty-eight days and, uh, hurt too I think. Softer. Shorter. Better hands, more flexible I mean. They like taking home shiny things, or just smooth rocks or funny color things, whatever looks good to um I guess. Laugh at random shit. Good at knowin' how much of everything there is and what they need to get. They try to fix the broken things they find. Not that much different from men, though."

He didn't describe women, he described me, a person he knows who happens to be a woman. It was somehow sweet yet heartbreaking. I only nodded, I didn't want to let him know he was regurgitating only what he'd observed in our time in Scav country. I never gave him enough credit for being so astute, because usually, he seemed so lazy when we went patrolling the territory and watching for an opportunity. I suppose, if his eyes had been closed, then he was always listening.

"Yeah, I only know a tiny bit, too."

He was leaning forward now, elbows resting on his knees and expectant.

"Well, what is it? What do you know?"

I laughed. Oh, it was no surprise that he would want to know what I knew, probably to extract clarification and the hidden answers in whatever story I had in me. It was shocking to find talking about it so embarrassing.
"It was a long, looong time ago. Stupid kid stuff."

"So? You listened to my dumb war boy stuff."

Couldn't stop my chuckles or help but hide my red face here next to the lamp. I scrubbed my face with both hands, peeked at the war boy and for once just saw a man there, not this person I thought that I had a responsibility to repair.

"It happened back when Dune and Mumsy and the brothers were with the caravan. Sometimes people followed us because it seemed like we knew where we were going... He was... Ah... Fun. Made Dune laugh. We were the same age, fooled around some. If Flick and Rus ever found out, they'd have put him in the dirt like a seed. Nothing serious, honest. He just wasn't my type, ya know?"

"You have a type?"

I lifted my eyes from the floor and looked him over. Covered in dried mud with a shiner darkening around his wonky eye. Such a messy, unfriendly looking thing.

"Boy, do I ever have a type. I like um bad, mean, a mess like me."

I saw him smile a little. It wasn't that cocky grin or his cruel snarl. Somehow it made my heart happy, but that tiny smile faded quickly like a shooting star. The small boy had left and the uncertain man had returned.

"Dune, where are we going? What do we do now?"

Oh, that question killed me on the spot. He was looking down at his hands, turning them over and picking at the fresh scabs. I reached out and took one to spare the blood that would flow if he was allowed to keep worrying sore knuckles.

"I- I don't know, but I'm not ready. I don't think you are either. This trip, you took me home. Now you're going home too. We need to recover before we think about this."

He chewed both of his lips together as he nodded, but he wouldn't look at me.

"You're talking in the first person a lot more. I dunno if that's good or bad."

He needed to look at me, or I needed to see him. I took that lovey torn face in my hands and turned it so that our eyes met.

"I told you, ya make me less crazy."

He laughed at that, covering his face and shaking his head.

"Jesus, Dune. C'mon, be serious."

I had to get his attention, make him aware of just how serious I could be. For a second time, I turned his head in my hands and looked him in the eye. It wasn't impulse, it was a calculated move, but genuine. I kissed him. It was quick, topical contact with dry lips and nothing more. I could taste dirt when I pulled back to see that I'd caught him unawares and perhaps put him in a state of abject panic. At least I knew he'd listen to what I had to say now.

"I am being serious. This life is ours, we're gonna live it on our terms. Hey, whatever you decide to do about going home, I'm there. I'll be on your side. And after that, we'll decide what to do about
He didn't say a thing, he just turned his face into my hands and then pushed at me with his mass until he was dead weight across my lap. My poor war boy. It struck my intoxicated brain, this could be the last time I'd get to hold him like he was a broken little boy. I'd see him differently from now on. I think, after two years and more, this place forced us to finally, truly meet each other, and it's not like a handshake. It's like an explosion, violent and sudden.

He held on tight around my waist, I leaned over his shoulder and circled the brand upon the back of his neck with my finger until my back ached. We slept facing one another that night, and I suppose if we had thought to bind our hands, it wouldn't have been necessary. Our fingers were woven together when we fell asleep and had stayed that way until we woke again. We rose, with many complaints, to Featherknife at the door, muttering about breakfast and saying sorry because the plates died the night before and no one could remember how.

Chapter End Notes

So... I have a Tumblr now. It's new so you won't find much there but you'll find my Mad Max junk at https://burn-your-face-upon-the-chrome.tumblr.com/ I follow and like posts with Deepmemecollector

So, this chapter was incredibly hard, and I've been saying that about every chapter lately. They'll be ready to leave once their hangovers clear up. The next chapter will mark the end of this arc. I admit I'm kind of sad to leave the bog.
Chapter Summary

Metallica – The Unforgiven II

Chapter Notes

Nugget = Skull

Rager = Party

Beardie = Common Australian lizard of which there are some different variations, pogona vitticeps are a common variety found captive bred as exotic pets.

Big chapter. HOO BOY, big chapter.

MAY 30 2018 UPDATE: So, I wrote 5000 words in a bout of soul gripping anxiety last night. So y'all might see a chapter sooner than you thought. Wish us luck, spouse goes into surgery at 11.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-Slit-

*Oh yeah, she's an ugly sleeper.*

Dune liked to do this thing where she slowly slumped back off her side until she was belly up with her mouth open and both arms over her head. Then the loud breathing would start. Well, it was just one arm up at the moment because I still had her other hand. At least it wasn't as annoying as the thing Nux used to do with one knee bent. His leg would sway side to side for hours and bump me constantly if I didn't kick his leg straight again.

It was probably around noon, I'd been awake since dawn going back and forth to the outhouse. I gave up taking the leg back off after the third trip. Literally everything was coming out of me and what hadn't been violently ejected hurt. *Everything hurt,* but Dune was there, nothing life changing had happened the night before, everything was still the same. Or was it? I almost knocked Phil's teeth out the night before over her. She's not a wife, not perfect, not fit for white, but she's strong-willed and if I had a type it'd be *that.*
Once it seemed like the frequency of needing to get up and test the endurance of that bridge to get to the dunny waned off to merely feeling like death, I had nothing to do but lay there with the canteen in one hand and her shiny one in the other. I wasn't getting back to sleep, so I watched her sleep. How do you like it, Nutter? She really wouldn't give a shit, I know this. I watched her eyes dart left to right under their lids, sometimes her lips would pull up at the corners in what was almost a grin, or her eyebrows would come together and make that space between them wrinkle. Her trigger finger would twitch, too. She was probably dreaming about putting lead in somebody. When I thought about how she looked the many times I saw her use that rifle to defend her territory or put maggot food in the tubs, it was a vivid combination of memories. First, she'd shush me, dump the long lookers into my hands, drop down on her belly like a beardedie or sometimes to one knee, then she'd look down the scope and go somewhere else in her head. No matter how hot the sun scorched the world, all of her healthy skin would prickle as if she were cold. The hair on her left forearm would stand on end. A drop of sweat would roll down her temple, or maybe down her bicep. Finally, she'd take one breath and release it slow before she sent off her deadly greeting to the unwary target. When the body dropped, she'd come back to me, face all lit up and eager to get to looting the corpse. Those were probably the moments when she looked most chrome, sublime is a good word for it. I've heard this word, sublime, a few times but only ever when the War Rig, the Ripper, or the Gigahorse rolled through the garages for maintenance. Repair boys used to fight over who got to work on them. If Dune had been a War Boy instead of some random lunatic, teams would have fought to have a gunner like her just like they fought over Furiosa before she was an Imperator. I'd fight and I'd win.

She had flecks of dried mud on her nose and cheekbone, must have rubbed off of me and she wound up laying in it. Brushing the grime off was as good an excuse as any to touch her face. Watching her sleep when I'm stuck laying there awake wasn't a totally new thing. Before coming here, when I couldn't sleep I'd look at the little imp with blazing envy and then work on the car as loudly as possible. Lately, I'd watch what her face does, sometimes I'd chance following the shape of the tan lines from her goggles or get brave and see if I could run my fingertip over her eyelashes without waking her up. You know, what Wilson said when he described what she used to look like was still there, just beaten by sand, sun, and wind. There are times when weathering makes something better, puts a good patina on it. Her hair defiantly grew in dark although the sun would ultimately just roast the color from it. The many times I'd watched her wash both herself and her clothes in the nude I could tell that she had naturally darker skin than I did even in places that the burning eye never touches. Where the sun kissed her, it fucked me. Her scars, I don't try to imagine her without them, that's just the way we both are now. It's mediocre to fault someone for something you've got wrong with you too.

Thinking about it got me distracted, stopped me from being careful not to wake her. My middle finger explored the borders where thick scar fades to soft and supple flesh. Soft is never supposed to be good, but what Phil said about Joe the night before was sticking to the walls inside my skull, how Joe was trapping and indulging in soft things on the regular while his half-life War Boys lived like animals. Not even the shit paper was soft. I'm allowed to have this, enjoy a shine hand and play with the texture of skin on a this lead slinging nut-job's shoulder. *I'm not a disappointment for being soft about this one thing.* My hand looked white like sun bleached bones against her arm, I was still comparing the difference when I happened to see that her eyes were open and watching.

"Hey, Ducky."

"Hey, Maniac." I withdrew my fingers before it could become something with another, more complicated meaning.

"She feels like a murder of crows are squawkin' in her head." She groaned, hiding her eyes under the
crook of her arm. "An' light hurts."

"I feel like I got run down under a truck last night." I replied.

"Dune believes it," That said a lot coming from her. If Wilson's story wasn't half exaggeration then she had literally been run over right after the slavers set her on fire, or at the very least clipped by a side mirror. She laughed, groaned again and massaged at her brows. "You're filthy."

"About that, whose pants am I wearing?"

"Bones' pants."

"...whose pants is he wearing?"

"'Nother set of his own. Bones is closest to your size. You got covered when you swapped knuckles with that Buzzard down in the mud. All of your pockets were full of glop. So... You get the idea."

I really hoped that I hadn't pulled off my pants and slipped into a borrowed pair in front of everyone. Thankfully, she rolled to bury her head in me and the direction of my thoughts changed. This strange, dangerous scavenger, curled up against me because she felt like hell too. I felt an unearned sense of importance.

"You're getting it in your hair."

"Dune don't care if you're covered in yuck. She'll wash us both up later if she has to."

Not a bad idea. Not that I'd ever tell her, but I always liked it when she scrubbed me. For a long time, I couldn't reach everything when I washed and Dune had to help me while I healed. I now regret screaming at her or telling her how terrible she was when she would take the time to look after me. Lately I missed it. I was just afraid of how it made me feel when she was so gentle with my broken body. Maybe if I knew then what I do now, I'd have been thankful. She had the right idea, hiding herself from the light. I pulled at the closest thing to cover our heads. It was that jacket which belonged to her father. It was dark, but warm.

"Mmm. This old coat still smells like choof and guzz. Or, maybe we smell like choof and guzz and the coat is trapping our stink."

"Yeah, I think it's us." I said.

It was a pretty strong funk, not a bad smell but potent enough to be nauseating. I tried to toss the coat away but Dune caught it and stuffed it behind her. I was then certain that she meant to keep it. Yet another sentiment I didn't quite get, but I wasn't going to mention it, instead I pulled the woman a bit closer and tried curling an arm over our heads to keep the light off our eyes. It seemed to work, Dune shivered and pressed her cold fingers into the cut-ups which spanned from hip to ribs. It was a thinly veiled search for body heat wrapped in half-assed admiration of my scars with her clumsy, damaged hand, which I knew felt very little. I moved my arm, winced at the glaring light coming in through the door and window, then put her hands closer between our chests. Next, I grabbed the jacket again and pulled it around our shoulders in place of a blanket. The fumes of that rager clinging to us couldn't get trapped around our heads this way and my maniac might just stop trembling. Things had changed, now more than ever I felt like I had a claim on her too, or rather that I was willing for the first time to acknowledge that I did.
Her shine hand flexed and her fingers wiggled to escape mine so that she could flatten her palm over my blood pump. Could be the hangover and an incredibly fleshy urge from that to seek whatever could possibly bring comfort to a body that had simply had enough of its owner's bullshit, but having Dune there and sharing this kind of contact only made me want more of it. She didn't complain when I pulled her in tighter and hid from the light in her hair, all she did was prop up a leg around my hip so we weren't knocking kneecaps. I think if didn't feel like a stale fart at the time, my meat suit would have liked all of this tangling of limbs a little too much. We slept like that for a bit, but probably not for long. Featherknife was at the door the next time I forced my eyes to open. Ah, they wanted us to come eat with them. Dune seemed to verbalize my exact thought.

"Ugh, Dune don't even wanna think about grub." And then she rolled over and pulled the jacket back over her head.

Featherknife was still there, mumbling about broken dishes and something that sounded like sarcasm about how they got smashed. Dune only moaned guiltily at that. I knew what happened to the dishes and so did Feathers from the looks of it. If anyone truly couldn't remember how that happened, then they must have been totally blasted last night. Dune was curling herself up and refusing to move as Featherknife left. Couldn't blame her, but the pushy fire breathing dragon woman would surely come over here herself if we didn't get up and make our way to the crow house. Ugh, I felt like I was made of lead. I'd done enough running back and forth to the can for one problem and just beyond the doorway of her parent's steel scrap box reeked of what was shooting out my face hole. I didn't want to get up again just when it felt like I was done spewing the poison I'd guzzled down the night before. Dune might start chundering soon, or not, hard to say. I rolled off my back and rose slowly to sit. Oh, my leg ached, the good one. I pulled up the pant leg to see why and found a bruise as wide as my palm on the side of my knee. Must have banged the shit out of it on the metal leg. There were all sorts of smaller discolorations and scuffs everywhere else, right elbow was throbbing, but nothing pounded harder than my skull. Moving even a little seemed to make all of the flesh scream.

"What the fuck did I DO last night?"

"Fought a buzzard. Threw giant darts. Helped me make an ass of us dancing. Balanced a chair on your face, which then fell on your face. Not necessarily in that order. You were ripped."

"Uh..." I didn't remember much of that. How much of the sauce had Dune chugged? She seemed to recall a lot more than I did. Maybe she was making shit up, definitely felt like I fought something, though.

"Can we jus' blow off breakfast?" I was whining. She only grunted at me and pulled on my arm to have me laze around again. So we lay there, wanting to be left alone to sleep off the regrets, but it couldn't last. Phil was at the door next, speaking far too damn loud, thank V8 all the crap in here prevented an echo.

"I'm leaving to pick up the kiddies. If you wanna eat while it's quiet, do it now. Bones is cooking down his hangover cure. You'll want that."

I only lifted my head to look at him for one squeeze of the bloodpump before dropping it back to the mattress the nutter and I shared. I grunted at him, a dismissive sound, and he seemed to get the hint.

"Suit yourself." He said, then left us.

I was perfectly content to remain where I was and snore the whole day away with the lunatic under my arm, but she was stirring and pushing herself up on her elbows.
"Dune's going. That swill he makes *works.*" She announced and I felt obligated to go.

I should probably feel like some freakish accessory being forced to tag along with Dune everywhere she went, months back I totally felt like that, now I just wanted to be near her all the time in case something completely random happened and I should be there for it. I also hated the idea of being left behind. I still protested, trying to convince her that we could simply hibernate in this shipping container until we became almost human again. I didn't want to get up.

"Ugh. It's easier to just not move, though."

She snorted. "Well, Ducky, if you're that committed to your suffering then this scav is happy to partake of the blessed elixir without you."

"Fine! Nngh... Fuck." I snapped at her, but immediately regretted the noise. I tried again, far softer for the sake of my own skull. "Fine."

So, we got up, trudged across that rickety bridge and entered the crow hovel. It was a right mess. Featherknife was laying across the fold out with his head hanging off the edge over a bucket. Someone had the decency to tie back all of that dark hair he had into a tangled nest on the back of his head. The harpy, I almost sympathized with her. She was balled up under an sheet next to Feathers and moaning pathetically in between full body tremors. There was trash everywhere, a broken chair. A box full of shattered dishes, a few other inebriated bodies lazing in various corners. I saw boots sticking out from under the futon, someone had passed out there and stayed that way. Bones was more with it, seated on a low wooden stool by a cast iron pot sitting in the smoldering embers of a dying fire. He still belched a greeting to us and groaned as he waved us in.

"Cripes! Did anyone die last night?" Dune exclaimed, a chorus of unified grunts and whimpers came in reply.

"No, but some wish they did." Bones replied.

My pants, vest and long sleeve were hung on a drying rack next to the fire pit. They looked clean.

"Um. Nobody had to do that. I woulda done it," I had to amend that statement as I tested the canvas of my slacks between my fingers to see how dry it was. "later."

Ardith pulled her cocoon from her head and stained to see through what could only be a roaring headache. "Phil washed um. Felt bad for getting you so messed up. We heard ya running to the crapper all morning."

*Oh good, everyone heard that.* I might have replied with that level of sarcasm, but I was pretty eager to put my own pants back on and be done with the topic. One problem, my threads were clean but I wasn't. Every time I moved, bits of filth fell off me in dark crumbs.

"Wash bucket?" I asked as took a look at what he was putting together in that pot. It looked... disgusting. Smelled better than it looked but, blech. It was all grease and chunks of whatever was left over from the last few meals shared around the fire pit, definitely bird bones in there too.

Ardith answered my question. "Around back, bucket is under the spigot. ONLY fill it this much. Dump it when you're done. No one is gonna wanna bathe after you, Mudcrab."
She held up a hand to show exactly how little water with her thumb and forefinger. Three inches. That's fine. I looked back to Dune. She was sitting next to bones, too close for my liking, and being served some of this supposed "cure" in one of Ardith's surviving mugs. Bones was pouring it through a sieve to catch all the dreck flowing out with the amber colored fluid. She tucked right into the liquid breakfast while the ginger jerkhole waved me over. "Don't bother washing 'til you've had some. You'll have to share a mug."

"Also, what flaming dick-nozel broke my good china?" Ard demanded answers.

Dune, care free as usual, told her. "You did. You told me and Skinky Poo to use um as targets."

That got a tin can thrown at her, she scratched at the back of her head and chucked it back. While those two were bickering back and forth, I had the chance to take the mug from her hands and take a cautious taste. While distracted, she couldn't bitch at me for sticking my tongue into the cup to test it. It was better than it looked and it instantly woke up my guts so they could demand more than a taste.

"What is it?"

"Bone broth and a hair of the dog that bit you." He swiped his fingers over the bones stitched to his jacket. "And the boiling cleans up the bones for me."

So that's why he's always dressed like a crypt keeper for feathered pests.

Dune had to be jabbed a few times with an elbow before she would turn around and take the mug back. I was done with it. Everyone seemed to sigh with relief that those two were finished growling at each other. My guts weren't initially pleased to be bombarded with hot stuff sloshing around in there, but after a while it wasn't so bad. My headache wasn't so horrible either. Dune and I wound up seated, I laid there like a bloated body in the sun and dozed off again with the distant sensation of the maniac's fingers picking at the muck stuck on me. She was pulling out hairs with her plucking and preening, I swatted at her hand but it didn't do much. She kept slurping away at that mug and scratching off the layer of earth crusted to my skin.

That semi-comfortable snooze with my head on her lap ended abruptly with the squealing and hooting of the pups arriving with Phil. It wasn't just Ardith's brats, it was a whole pack of them swarming in through the front door to find their respective hungover parents and tell them what happened the night before. In between the pulsating in my good ear every time one shouted, I heard that they're pretty much up all night being told stories and dancing under the full moon or something to that effect.

Not that I ever had the urge to reproduce, so this was never a thought I had before, but I was extraordinarily grateful at that exact moment that I was not in any way responsible for any miniature humans that might kinda look like me. The mighty V8 has, shall we say, an interesting sense of humor. I was immediately punished for that thought when Ardith's daughter ran through the door, tripped over her own foot, flopped down face first and bounced her tiny little nugget off my metal leg. Instant screams, big fat tears, and I swear to the fabled heroes that my blood curdled at the sound of the absolute anguish. I had no bloody clue what to do.

Now, I've been around pups. They run amuck all through the war tower in groups, but they grow up knowing that everyone and everything they encounter has sharp edges and tools hidden in pockets which aren't fun at all to run full force into. So, War Pups know to run with grace and walk with caution by the time they leave Nanny's dens to be with the general populace. I've seen war pups hurt too and anyone will tell you that no matter how chrome you are, you're gonna pick up a screaming
pup, and I did. I sat up and gathered the kid under the arms, she just went limp and wailed at an even higher decibel with a hand clapped over her forehead, and that's when the horror took hold. No, I didn't see blood, but whatever I thought I was going to do for her clearly wasn't going to work. Couldn't tell her to nut up or shut up like any small boy coated in white at the Citadel.

"You don't look hurt?" I said, weakly.

Dune saved me for the hundredth time, swooping in to take the tiny shrieking human from me and taking it where it clearly needed to go.

"Aw, love let's get you to mum and see what happened." She said, and the cries seemed to quiet a bit.

Pups have a great talent in making you feel at fault for their accidents merely by being in their path. Ardith was up and ready to take her spawn as soon as Dune stood with her. The little hand was peeled away and revealed only a small red welt. I still felt like a bag of shit for laying in the middle of the floor like a tripping hazard.

"I'm sorry?" I tried, Ardith waved me off.

"She's a clutz like her father. You're fine." Now both she and Featherknife were fussing over the pup.

Dune and I weren't even necessary anymore, and the loon was getting fidgety and moving weird too. She came back and pulled on my arm.

"Let us wash." She said as she gathered my dried clothes over her arm, and I couldn't agree more.

It had suddenly gotten very loud in here and neither of us wanted any part of it. She didn't have to push me at all to get me up. My knuckle dusters, knife, and tools which lived pockets were sitting next to the now empty drying rack in a box. I guessed that Phil had washed the filth from those items too. I took that half soggy square of cardboard holding my crap before we left, but happened to notice something that didn't belong. It was the keys found on the day Dune told me, or screamed at me about how she got where she ended up. I could have tossed the keys into the fire pit where rubbish belongs or left it for Ardith's children to mess around with, but I dropped it back into the box and took it with me. There was just something about them. I was picking up Dune's bad habits and keeping worthless junk.

I followed Dune out without a qualm over leaving the girl pup to whimper in the company of her parents, but I couldn't really help but look back and see for sure that the she wasn't seriously damaged by falling into the cursed metal leg. She was fine, but it was interesting seeing Featherknife kissing her head and running fingers over the red spot on her bruised scalp. No one ever did that for me when I was a pup. I pushed the thought out of my head. Dune and I soon had a bucket under the spigot on the cola collection drum and we got our three inches of clean aqua to wash with. The loon emptied her pockets and dumped all of her rags in there to soak.

"It's cold today... What if we went back to mumsy's kip and started a fire. Plenty of rubbish there to burn."

Her suggestion was taken. It got us out of the way of both excited pups and Phil, who didn't seem at all hungover. He'd wagged his brows at me as we left to take our wash water to her parent's kip. I didn't even want to guess at what he was insinuating with that. All I wanted was to laze around until
I felt functional again, after that, we might leave for Dune's kip.

A fire was built, it was around back behind the shipping container and it was plenty warm enough to undress next to. We burned rubbish, Dune handed over my clothes. The last time we washed within arms reach, things got complicated. This time it couldn't get that way because we were too tired for that madness. Usually I'd be sure to face away from her, careful to keep the new scars a secret for fear that she'd disapprove. This time it just didn't matter. She's seen everything now, what was the point in hiding? We had no questions left for each other. She simply pulled off her clothes and knelt by her trash fire to wash her hair, and things were simple again. For once there was nowhere else I'd rather be.

The mad scavenger kept her word, she tried scrubbing at me with a torn square of soggy cloth and customarily I hissed and spat at her, yet leaned into every pass of the wet scrap of fabric. She cleansed the dirt and grit from the scarring on my left side, then insisted that we both slather up with Wilson's burn goo. We always had it, helped with the tight dryness which plagues the scars long after healing. When it was all finished, we finally had the peace to sleep off the fatigue left over from the night before. She was yawning and rubbing at her eyes long before we decided where we would drop for the afternoon. We chose the car, because it was familiar and we had the mats and something to cover up with in the back. Although we were close to the Crow Fisher dwelling it wasn't too noisy from where we were outside. Dune was dead to the world within minutes and I was only awake long enough to watch a few of their guests leave through the back window. I wound up rolling down the windows for ventilation but throwing the tarp over the back to block out light. We slept easy after that, and I dreamed.

> It was bound to happen, I was always going to end up back here. Nux just wouldn't shut his gob. He'd talk himself to death if it were possible. Strange, they were both here. Nux and Dune were here with me on top of the Skull Tower, pruning the weeds and planting the season's crop. Nux would poke his finger into the dirt and Dune would drop a seed in it.

"What are these gonna grow again?" Nux stopped to look over his shoulder and ask.

"Dune dunno. They're from home, should be good, but I won't know till they come up."

"Might have to move um once they're sprung up, if they're not the kind that like direct sun." I said, Nux just nodded and grinned till his face looked like it was going to crack.

"Glory, I wonder what'll come up?! Could be anythin'."

Dune smiled at his enthusiasm and continued dropping seeds. The scav wasn't a scav. She wore a layer of white clay like us and her eyes sockets were darkened with soot and ash. She'd prod at Nux with her trowel to keep at it instead of talking so we could get this done. What was I doing? I looked down at my hands and found no tools, no dirt in the creases of my palms, just car keys. The bauble hanging on the key ring said: "I love my idiots"

I woke before the woman and thought about that dream and all the things about it which made no sense yet should have been anticipated. All this thought and talk about the Citadel over the last two weeks, I should have known I'd start having dreams about being there. Dreaming that Nux was still there was just blind hope, and hope is dangerous. Dune all painted up in the War Boy uniform was now a reoccurring thing and I didn't know what I was supposed to do with that imagery. She was rolling and muttering in her sleep, so I pulled off the cord around her wrist and gave her shoulder a
"Hey, wake up, you're throwing a dream fit."

She groaned, rolled over, stretched and looked at me with the bloodshot eyes of someone who wasn't done slacking off.

"Had the weirdest dream, Slit... Dreamt my grandma told me that I had the best legs in the family but I squander it by not shaving um."

"Who the hell shaves their legs." That whole concept struck me as odd. I get shaving your head and excess hair above the belt, but nobody ever looks at you from the kneecaps down so who cares?

"Dunno... Dune's never even met her granny, where does she get off-" She was raising her voice now and getting a little too excited about it.

"It was just a dream. Don't go off yelling at me over it or I'll give you a reason to. I could probably top that dream of yours for weirdness, anyway."

"Well then, are you gonna tell Dune all about it or are ya just gonna sit there lookin' like you need a leak?"

"Actually, I do."

I half wanted to tell her about it, half wanted to forget it and hope that she would too because it was another one of those dreams that left me awake and disappointed. She agreed and we both got ourselves over the seat and out to find some relief. We weren't sure what time it was but we'd clearly slept all of the daylight away and it had grown dark out. I could still hear voices inside so I figured that it wasn't so late that everyone would have gone to their bunks. Dune went inside, I'm assuming to a place Ard called her 'powder room' which seemed to be a women only place. The name confused me, so I once made the mistake of asking and she made the mistake of answering honestly. She's said 'Have you ever tried to pot train a boy? Or lived with men?' She only caught herself in a stupid question on the last word and you could see it on her face. Phil had started laughing, no attempt to stifle it until the nag finally snapped and gave Phil's ear a pinch before making her final statement on the subject. 'I refuse to walk in piss every morning when all of you can take your willies and wee on or in almost anything else in the world besides my pot.' was what she said to me. I honestly agree, no one liked the stench of the shitters back home, or the pervasive slick of urine on the floor around them. No one ever cared enough to do anything about the filth either, I certainly had better things to do. Well, Ardith's rule was one I could obey, around the side of the garage and out of sight was where I typically dropped my stream and that's where I went.

I was tired. Something about expelling everything your guts could possibly have held sucks the half-life right out of you. I knew enough to understand that I had to drink a ton of cola after that or risk drying out. Well, I drank plenty after the worst was over, and what goes in must come back out. I knew how to spell my name and... err. I did. There was just a sliver of light left on a horizon I couldn't see, it lit up the mist with an eerie deep red. I hadn't seen that around here before. Usually in this place everything lost color and just got darker and darker until you're enveloped in a thick blanket of black. The scattered light even made my own skin look red today. If I had been wearing war paint, I might even have looked pink like sun burnt flesh. I was up in my head thinking all this wistful shit while I had my dong out, once I was done I tried putting my thoughts elsewhere, like the fact that Dune would be really hard up to get something going on in the maggot farm as soon as we got home, which meant going shooting. It was her favorite thing. I was looking forward to that, watching her get serious and put a body in the crosshairs. When I turned to walk back to the car the
image of Dune taking aim was heavy in my mind, what I damn near ran into was a far cry from that chrome thought. Phil's grinning face greeted me, much too close.

“Jesus-Fucking-Chrysler!!”

“Don't throw a wobbly! Nothing I ain't seen you do already. So, about last night...”

He paused. I paused. I realized I was still unzipped so I fixed that. Phil was smirking with his brows high on his head and creating wrinkles as he motioned with his hands as if there was some grand, ultimate answer I was supposed to give him. Maybe I looked as dumb as I felt. He rolled his eyes and made this pistoning motion with his fist.

“You and Dune... what happened with that? You guys vanished and we all thought-”

“Thought what exactly?!” I suddenly knew precisely what he was getting at.

He shrugged, made the motion with his hands again. I could lie, but that might make this conversation worse off, then Dune might spin a story that didn't corroborate my own, then it would be a mess.

“We talked. I still don't understand why this is so important to you.”

I didn't expect Phil to stop and think about that, yet he did. He didn't look at me, but he nodded.

“No, actually, that's good. I'm glad. She's being gentle with you.”

“Gentle!? I don't need that!”

“When you're a little older you'll get what I mean, Pup.”

“I'm not a pup, Phil.”

I didn't then understand what he meant, maybe I still don't understand, but I do know that she was indeed being cautious because she wasn't sure what I knew and what I didn't. Also probably because she very very wrongly thought she'd be taking advantage of me or something. All I could do in that moment was take offense to what Phil had said to me. I didn't think I needed a gentle hand. I thought I needed the fury of the world and to have a fist full of thunder to feel whole, even then as I doubted the world which made me. I was wrong, I'd never felt whole, but Phil wasn't the type to point that out to me. He only smiled at me and pretended he hadn't been watching me piss.

“Slit, me an' Ard have been talkin' an' that's really why I'm here. I want you to stay. I like having you around. I'm from the generation before you, but you still grew up the same way I did. I don't need your help, but I want it. I want you here while we figure out all the details, you see? We want you and Dune here, you are us. A part of the clan. We want you guys. You can stay for the next month. If you want. We'll feed and keep you. Also, it'll make my wife happy...”

Distantly, I could remember how it was Crank that brought cola, grub, and bandages to us when it was just me and Nux hiding in his crews spot, surviving the shit show of what had happened to us. I wonder now if he felt guilty for everything, for not being able to save us from where we ended up, separated and hateful. I think it was the part of me that never left the warrens that asked this, a question that needed to be asked because I still couldn't accept his new name when the old one had meant something which almost resembled trusted at one point.

“If I do, can I... Can I just call you Crank?”
“Slit, You c'n call me anythin' you fuckin' want.”

We kept talking. We sat in the sheltered part of his garage and I told him about the last few months before Nux went traitor and I got wrecked. Though nothing I had to say about the final days before the road war were at all pleasant, his face never changed or denoted blame, he only nodded. Dune must have gotten into talks with Crank's wife too, I didn't see her again till later when we were all made to sit and choke down real food. Dune needed no convincing when the idea of staying yet longer came up.

-Dune-

Ardith was looking better when I stepped inside to use her much friendlier variation of the can, alert and active. Ards youngest was attached to her hip, blissfully suckling his fingers and falling into a late snooze. She watched me from the front door to the closet which served as her personal restroom. I was pretty jealous of the way she had it done up in here. A nice wooden chair with the original seat cut out and a proper toilet seat nailed on in its place. Under it all was a real chamber pot with a lid to remove first.

When I was done I emerged into a fast emptying room where Skinktail sat in Ard's place while she was busy shooing out both the sprouts and Jacky. I had a suspicion about what was coming and tried to follow the kids out the door with great haste. I was stopped, much to my complete dismay, turned around with Arddie's arm hooked around my elbow and made to sit on the edge of the foldout between her and Skink.

“So, did he noodle your tuna?”

I choked on my own spittle at Skink's question. Ardith, in her sober wisdom, stopped Skink from further questioning with a lifted hand and simply shifted her wee lad from her side into her lap for his nap, then leaned over him a bit to pull out a bin from under a table. She squeezed a leather pouch from the bin in her hand and emptied some of the dry green bits into a smaller square of fabric, tying it off and grabbing my left hand to place the bundle into my palm.

“Don't ask how I got it, 'cause it's none of your business. It's catnip. Boil it down strong and drink it daily for a while if you think something might germinate. Should stop all but the most stubborn of seed.”

I could feel my expression phasing through concern, confusion, and embarrassment. Ardith rolled her eyes.

“Don't look at me like that. I know you and the war boy played nekid twister last night and I have three kids, so my hobbies include hanging laundry and not ever getting pregnant again. You don't want those hobbies, as a matter of fact we should throw some nip in a pot right now for both of you horny toads.”

“Do you still have those old board games?” Skink asked, completely ignoring the rest of the conversation.

“No one got 'nekid' last night, Arddie.” I clarified as I tried to give back the pouch. Ard looked skeptical as she pushed it back into my hands. I could feel my temper rising. “Just because you two keep talking about my sex life doesn't mean I have to have one!”
"Well, you almost had one and that could happen again. Keep it anyway, just in case. I won't bring it up again."

"I'll definitely bring it up again." Skink had to endure two sets of eyes burning holes in her face.

I guess I was keeping the damn thing. Surprisingly things didn't linchpin on this awkward conversation like they had the night before. Somehow, we got to talking about Ard's experience with child bearing, which would probably be the most effective deterrent away from irresponsible bedroom practices that I have ever heard.

"...I can't even share a wash rag without getting knocked up." She said, ending a string of confessions about just what kind of 'joy' children bring, both physical and mental.

I was more curious about how she ended up with three husbands, and I asked. "How did you get this posse of yours? Hm. Not to be overly traditional but you're the last person I think of when it comes to getting friendly with men."

"Oh, I s'pose it was just a matter of finding out our mothers probably had it wrong. Actually your mom was on point. Wasn't exactly easy at first, some of the women that stayed convinced themselves that we'd all be reduced to bed slaves or dish washers if we tried banding together with the men who stuck around too... We got thirsty, then desperate, then sick because there was shit in the water. Actually, I was blowing chunks all over the place when I met Phil and half delirious. He was helping the elder Fishermen take care of the dying. And uh, I was dying when we met. I guess he felt bad that I was gonna 'burn out a quarter through' as he'd say, so he tried harder to keep that from happening. I was young and we were just friends for a long time."

"Oh, mum would probably smile on that, lovey. And now, I should put together my thanks speech for Phil... but I meant how'd you get three of um?"

She smiled and answered the best she could. "He was taking care of them too, 'cause they saved him an' Jacky once. They all love each other. They're thicker than thieves and tighter knit than a hacky sack. How could I love one without loving the other two?"

It was sweet. I couldn't help my smile and the warmth crawling through my veins, but it could be the hot tea we were soon passing around too. Only one mug had survived our riotous rampage under the harvest moon. She told me more about how she got closer to Phil first a few years after the big merge between the remaining Many Mothers and the Sky Fishermen. He was funny and she laughed at his jokes, then the other two were always with him, and she cared for them too, then they all sort of fell into a routine and a way of life that stuck. Skink seemed to think this Eyeball man might stick around for a while, but even she said that she didn't count on it being permanent. Skink was fast and she preferred a man who would keep up with her. It would take a special kinda guy to keep the pace. From what I learned, Skinky was a peddler, taking wares she or her associates grew or gathered and moving the product to other locations. When I asked what she moved and where, she gave a wink and said that she never jeopardizes the anonymity of her clients. Ard continued her story. Oh everyone in the room knew the ins and outs of how sprouts come into the world so the stories made perfect sense to us, but as soon as Slit entered the room there were new questions. Phil was too busy digging around in a crate of junk to answer any of these questions himself. Part of the problem was that Slit seemed to begin listening just as Arddie was regaling us with the tale of her youngest's birth.

"Well, Red was a hard one. We were all thinking he was gonna come out sideways and then-"

"Come sideways out of where?" Slit interrupted, all he could really be blamed for was his curiosity.

"Out of my baby cannon. That's where." She answered tersely, the very child she spoke of in her
arms and curled in her lap, resting sweetly before he'd wake up to terrorize everyone later in the evening.

“Define baby cannon.” He demanded. To spare him the trauma, I tried explaining more gently than my old dear friend would.

“Ducky, It's not a cannon. It's the lady bits. Eh... The place yir supposed to stick it for fun, but sometimes fun turns into a sprout.”

“They come out the same way they go in?!” He blurted, an expression of terror on his face. All I could do for him was offer a sympathetic cringe and nod as I pulled him down to the floor by the sleeve.

“Where did you think they came from, War Boy? Cabbages?” Skink laughed out and Ard smirked. He shrugged and lifted his hands, palms turned up, but halfheartedly defended himself with a low grumble of uncertain words. “I know WHERE they come from just didn't think- ngh, whatever.”

He probably didn't know what he thought because why would he even have to think about that? Certainly he wouldn't know how little ones arrive. He might know how they are made but why would a War Boy know anything about birth? The story continued on, in spite of how Slit's exclamation stirred the sleeping seedling.

“Anyway, he was up in me sideways and we weren't sure he was gonna turn on his own, decided to go ask Heta what to do. She got him turned around. Day comes, finally, I pop. By then he got himself turned wrong, again...

Slit appeared morbid but engrossed in the retelling of a tale I had heard many times as a child myself from many different mothers about different children I was raised up with in our green hills. Birth stories were common and favorites of many, but my personal favorite was a story about long before birth. That's a yarn for another time. I couldn't read Slit. He just sat cross legged on the floor next to me, leaning forward and listening. Sometimes his jaw would clench, or his brows would twitch but that was about it. Arddie was telling us how this one in her arms popped out two weeks late, feet first and gripping his own cord in his hands. There was a great deal of flourish, pride and theatrics to these discussions and that's customary. Slit looked a bit green by the end, and not the pretty kind of green. Poor Duck.

“We practically had to lure that kid out with a fried lizard sandwich.” Featherknife added as he stepped inside, Bones, Jackie, and the kids following along as they gathered around the fire pit.

Ardith might have gone a bit to heavy on the details to twist a reaction out of Slit. He appeared to awaken from a state of quiet, perhaps trying to absorb the imagery Ardith had instilled. He stood and left the fire to help Phil with what ever he was turning the room upside down for. Sump and Trellis darted around him to reach the fire, Trellis tiptoeing a little more carefully around Slit's left side to avoid his replacement leg, and each child dumped what they held into the pit. They'd brought dried brush and twigs and garbage, Bones had what looked to be a scavenged mail box post. Phil was still digging in his scrap piles with Slit's help, muttering under his breath and pulling his mask over his mouth as the others started the fire. The younger men and Jacky all had felled birds hanging from their belts. Time to help pluck! There's something morbidly satisfying in pulling out feathers and cleaning a carcass. Ard had a box for collecting the feathers and mentioned that she was considering the idea of working on a cloak which incorporated them for Furiosa, but not in reverence. A gift to grease up a ruler is never unwise. Ever shrewd, Arddie surely realized that no one here truly knew the situation at the Citadel, or the deeper reasons for Furiosa's betrayal. She might have simply wanted to have her laugh at Joe, although it seemed like she had meant to bring his ex wives to what
this place once was, if she did indeed pass through looking for green as the elders speculated. All we could hope for was generosity on the basis that we came from the same place, and that to a pair of our own, the Citadel was home. Truly, we'd be asking a great deal.

My initiate sister's youngest boy was waking and getting fairly irritable about being jostled lightly while his mother tore feathers from birds. He hadn't wanted to wake. He was passed to Bones, who he resembled. The boy then slapped his captor about the face and neck before uttering quite the ferocious wail. Some toddling children certainly do not appreciate being woken up, and this trouble was a near nightly event as he rose from his afternoon nap. Tonight's routine was running later than usual, what with everyone using today to recover from the events of the night before, and this kid just wasn't having any of this nonsense. He was passed to Phil next, who seemed to have the best luck getting the little one to calm down by carrying the child on a hip while he continued his mysterious search of the home for something. There was only peace for a minute before another shriek broke loose and the seedling went off like a broken horn with a red face.

“‘Ard, he wants you, honey.” Phil said as he took a moment to bring the child back to his mother.

“I wanted to wait and see if he'd do without till tomorrow morning.” Her words came in a defeated breath as she took him back, pulled down the loose collar of her blouse and put him right on for a drink while we continued on washing and plucking.

This was no novelty to me, little Red liked his morning and evening time with his mum and I had seen it all before throughout my youth. As it so happened, this was the first time Slit had been in the room when Ard fed her sprout in the most motherly fashion. I looked across the room to see what he thought. The former War Boy seemed interested in what was going on and I caught him stealing a glance or two in Arddie's general direction. Phil put a stop to that quick, just about knocked the eyeballs out of his head with a palm swiping across the back of his skull.

“Those ain't fir you, Pup. Get those eyeballs lookin' under furniture. I'm looking for a red bag. RED. How the hell did I lose a bright red bag in here? Ah, fuck it. Help me check outside.”

Timing was off today, and I supposed all the fuss could be that Ard may have held off this morning to let the booze work its way out of her body. No one likes milk with that kind of kick. Being made to wait might have been what had the little thing all steamed. Ard had also been trying to start weening him off, she told Skink and I as we worked, but he was very willful about what he wanted and when he wanted it. All the birds were plucked and being handed off to Featherknife and Bones for gutting and cooking. No one else came to join us, probably all off nursing their hangovers. Phil reentered the room laughing and lifted that red duffel bag he'd been looking for over his head.

“Knew I hid it somewhere good!”

“It was behind the outhouse under a stick.” Slit deadpanned, apparently taking no joy from the joke inherent in Phil's lie. The older man simply seemed pleased to have found what he was looking for.

“Alright, Sunshine, it's time to split the booty... Heh... Don't think too hard about that.”

“Did... I win last night?” Slit inquired as the bag was sat on the floor and unzipped.

“Pfft! Nope, you were way too shit-canned by the time we were four matches in. Couldn't hit sand if you fell off a boarding wagon, but, Eyeball kept trying to out drink you and you whipped his skinny ass so either way I got what I wanted and won my bet. Ahh, got ya this little beaut!”

He lifted from the sack a prosthesis, an old world one! Crazy! The thing had an almost real looking foot on it, scuffed up a bit but real ultra green!
“... Is that a-”

“Yup!”

“...Phil, I can't use that. I'm gone from the knee down, this thing is just a foot and ankle.”

“You don't get it mate, we could take off this foot part and put on in your leg and then you could wear an entire pair of boots again! Eh? Oh, c'mon! It'd be chrome.”

Slit looked over at me then, waving me over to look at something I thought, but nah. He had something to ask of me.

“Hey, I think we should stay a while.”

Honestly, not much of me missed the caverns anymore.

-Slit-

In the thirty odd days we stayed, I helped Crank mod few more chariots fit to traverse that mountain pass. Dune helped Ardith scavenge supplies and food. Most nights we were too tired to talk or do much of anything, but when darkness surrounded us we always piled up in the back of the Impala and slept tangled even though there was enough room in the back to spread out just a bit.

Sticking around had helped us. Dune and I didn't have to worry about the maggot farm while we were here. All we had to do was help Crank and Ardith with their chores and we would be fed and watered at the end of every day. For a month we didn't worry, but that thirty-one days passed quickly. I know Dune hadn't slept much around the end of our stay, she'd tried to milk every day for everything it was worth to avoid leaving this place without a lifetime worth of memories with Ardith and Skink. The three were always together. I almost didn't want to leave either, but we needed time to gather the supplies we had promised the caravan. When it was finally time to pack up the shit we brought, Crank had a look on his face like I had pulled a part of him off his corpus.

It was like the first day, Dune and Ard embraced like it was the first and last time. I thought that they might meld together like molten metal. Skinktail too, even though they seemed as apt to harass each other as I had once been with Morsov. They touched and their brows came together so they could breathe each others breath. No one here wanted to separate. Crank and I had taught Bones and Featherknife as much as they could absorb, and I felt as if it was a crew being split up between Imperators. There was nothing else I could compare it to on the day Dune and I left that place. When she climbed into the car, I pulled her across the seat by the collar of her vest and into my side where I held her tight against the scars she had helped to heal. She sniffed, I know she'd been wasting cola from the eyes, but she said nothing of it and only instructed me on directions so we could go home. But there was one stop before we could leave. She wanted me to take her to her old home one last time. It was there that she pulled her knife from its sheath, the same one she had once considered slitting my throat with at the very beginning, and carved my name into the tree with the names of her family on it.

“There. See? You're part of the clan now. One of us.”

I know I've said this a lot, but I didn't know what to feel. It was like belonging to something again,
like being a War Boy but not. Lastly, she looked over the graves and took a cord of her carefully
collected trinkets from around her neck to hang on a knot in the trunk of the tree before returning to
the car. I drove, she didn't need to direct this time because I remembered the way, but listening to her
talk was fine. She seemed to be lost in her skull for a little while, but once we escaped the mist of her
homeland, she escaped the fog in her head too. Dune stood on the seat and poked her head out
through the roof hatch to watch the sun crawl toward the west horizon. The windscreen had been
doing its job so the moment that hatch was open, I felt it the cool air sweep through. Dune was
wearing that denim jacket to keep warm. I was wearing an extra layer too, thanks mostly to the junk
heap of her old home.

“Dune missed these skies, Ducky. She almost forgot what color there was to be seen in the rest of the
world.” She sighed.

Dune had looked as chuffed as a driver forced to walk home a pedestrian up until this point. It was a
flaming sky, it made everything look red as apposed to the usual tones of blue and purple which
painted the parched earth as the sun set on summer days. Now was a time when winter was taking
hold, every night would be cold and unbearable. We had spent so long in Dune's Green Place that
we forgot time and underestimated the wrath of the winter desert. The sky did look fierce, though,
even I was impressed with it. Going over the sand dunes meant that we were losing sight of it and
finding that the intensity was greater every time it came back into view with each climb up the
shifting mounds. I let Shirley slow to a stop once we reached the apex of the next hill, I knew Dune
wanted to watch the light die on the day and I sort of did too.

"Hey, we should eat now and walk around so we don't get food lazy tonight. It's gonna get too cold
to sleep without a fire, I think."

"Yeah, alright." She still seemed fairly depressed about leaving, or maybe tired now that the whole
thing was over. Dune was noticeably subdued. "You already hurtin'?"

"Yep." Was all I needed to answer with. Usually when the temp was dropping like a rock,
everywhere I've sprained, snapped, or broken the worst through my half-life got tense. That was
definitely something I only noticed out in scav country with Dune. It could either be the fact that I'm
almost old for a War Boy and I'm starting to fall apart or that the mad scavenger and I were always at
the mercy of the elements. Dune is only two or three years younger than me and she thought it was
nuts that I could tell how cold it was gonna get by how much my flesh complained. Good nuts, not
nutso nuts. The reason she didn't get stiff and crunchy like this was probably her full-life, or she did
but wasn't as aware of what her meat and bones were doing as I was of my own.

Night in the winter wastes is a frosted hellscape and it's not wise to let your guard down. Winter
means danger everywhere, even if there's no one for miles around. Having a wander around the car
might keep us from getting grub tired or road hypnotized later, give our guts time to digest what we
were feeding through them too. Food always makes me want to sleep. It's just less to worry about if
we drive through the night awake. Nux and I never had to do it. War Boys didn't go raiding through
winter and when my driver and I did patrol we were always on day watch, but the night patrol had
their stories of lancers and gunners crammed into tight cabs with their drivers where it was almost
warm. As long as you're not leaking coolant and the heater core works, you shouldn't have too much
trouble heating up the cab, so long as you still had your glass on all sides, but you can't leave an
engine idling all night to keep heat on. Better to just drive and sleep in the day when its warmer.

We had bird jerky and the dried up plant junk Ardith seemed to enjoy torturing everyone with. Dune
liked the stuff, or I thought she had. When we were eating with the others she'd stuff those vile things
down first. Dune was just scowling at the burlap bag and pushing it away. We had the cola to soak it
if she wanted it. Water probably wouldn't boil in a tin can on the hood but if I used the usual old trick, tuck the can of cola inside near the radiator to get it reasonably hot, it could get warm enough to soften up that tripe.

"We c'n manage cookin' that if you want it."

"I ate it in front of her 'cause it's polite, Ducky."

"Knew it. How does she have so much of that poison?"

"It ain't poison Slit, it just tastes shitty. Dune thought that could be something else they trade for, maybe some smarty with a grow operation. This scav knows the plant, bitter roots, tasty yellow flowers, seeds that fly. Didn't see any of that around her place. Hmm. Maybe one of the others in their clan found a way to do it. Could work if they had old potting soil that didn't get radiation sick like the rest of the dirt. They'd need lots of good happy dirt."

"Huh," I got stuck on the concept of flying seeds and didn't hear the rest. "How'd they fly?"

"They had little white puffs attached to them. The flower closes up, then when it opens again it's time for their seeds to fly away on the wind." She motioned with her hands to show me. Wouldn't mind seeing something like that.

We got out, sat on the hood while it was still warm, and gnawed on the dry bird. It was tougher than Dune's lizard jerky, maybe too much salt on it too. We drank an entire canteen between us to wash down the taste and dry mouth. She was right about the sun being something to miss, but it wasn't just that, seeing a fair distance was something I didn't know I needed before that mind numbing fog. The smoldering eye turned the sky around it every type of hot color before sinking behind the distant mountains in the West, which we could not yet see but knew lay out there.

"The view is better from the Citadel. It's like from up top you see everything, you're above all of it."

I hoped to see some renewed excitement about that prospect but she only turned her eyes my way and cocked her head as she pulled her knees up toward her chest.

"Seems like that's what was wrong with the Citadel."

I had wanted her back at a hundred percent, minus the idiotic smiles and painfully sunny disposition, she was just about there and saying confusing crap again. Damn trip, couldn't even ignore the ridiculous mysticism anymore. She probably meant something by that. It shut me up, maybe that's what she meant to do.

We kept on, I drove and Dune stayed quiet for a long while. She might have dozed off for a bit but I couldn't really tell, she could just as likely be watching out the window while everything got swallowed up in darkness. At least both headlights worked now and I could see any obstacle ahead fairly clearly, but staying awake on a long drive through roadless nowhere is easier said than done. Dune, as it turns out, had been wide awake and begun to push at my side and shake me by the collar of my shirt to wake me.

"Hey, you were veering an the chainsaw was runnin'."

"Wha- Chainsaw?" I was pretty confused and disoriented, as far as I was concerned I had just taken a long blink.
"You were snoring. Like a chainsaw. You're mouth was open and everything."

I could definitely sense that my jaw had been hanging wide open and inviting the flies after a good feel around with my tongue. I stopped and pulled the parking break so I could find the canteen and maybe wake up some. I also put the compass up on the dash to see the needle in the moonlight. That was more than veering, we were facing North now.

"Ah shit. How long?"

"Dunno. Dune was all zoned out. Only noticed when you started snoring."

Great, now all we could do was head West until we saw a familiar land mark. Nothing out here ever looks familiar because it's always just more of the same. Sand, rubble, more sand, still more sand.

"Wouldn't be firing off Zs at the wheel if you weren't being so damn quiet."

"How's this Dune's fault?!" She huffed and snorted indignantly. "Kiss my char broiled arse!"

"I'll pass on that. For now. Weird thought, had to ignore it.

Every time I blinked I wanted to melt into the seat and give in to the strong urge to just let my eyes stay closed. I needed something else to do. I made a snap decision, cut the engine, then leaned to my left to feel my way around Dune's torso to find her vest pockets. I caught a hand across the mouth for that, hissed and threw an arm across her shoulders to keep her pinned to the door and unable to get her teeth around any flesh while I searched out the spark torch.

"You coulda asked, dick." The moment I let her go, she tried kicking her heel at me and caught nothing but the metal leg. Still sent a lovely jolt of ugly sensation from my stump up into my hip.

"Rrrgg! Shut it, yir gonna learn somethin' tonight even if it kills me."

That got her reasonably curious, asking all possible questions about what I was doing while I held the torch with my teeth so I could see down around the pedals. Crank and I had worked out a better method for using the clutch with the metal leg. A little engineering and a few odd parts to create a mechanism that sat on the floor boards between the pedals to allow me to throw out the hook foot of the metal leg that I used to use to keep it on the clutch. The old way I had to do it involved holding the leg's weight off the pedal for hours to avoid riding the clutch and screwing the the flywheel. Without a flesh knee, I didn't have much control over what the metal foot was doing and almost no sensory perception to know if it was on the pedal or not. With the mechanism Crank and I fixed up, all I had to was slide the metal foot into a slot, let the leg rest, and lift it for a moment to trigger a pulley that engaged the pedal. Wished I had thought of it myself and much sooner. The only problem with the setup, if anyone with two good legs wanted to drive, it would take a few precious minutes to get my crap out of the way. Had to detach the cable and spin a few wingnuts to free it from the floor boards.

"What're ya doin'? Don'tcha need that to drive?"

"Jus' keep your pants on and wait."

"Pfft, With that attitude of yours, they're most certainly staying on."
Another weird thought followed her words. Just ignored it. I put my driving crap in the back behind the seat and tossed the spark torch back into Dune's lap.

"Alright, now we switch." I instructed, there was no response so I started scooting over and trying to pull her over me to physically put her in the driver seat. She just failed and clawed at the dash to stay in her spot.

"Hold on now! Have ya gone to loony town? Dune can't drive!"

"Ow! Get your elbow outta my neck!"

She was just about throwing a fit over the mere suggestion that she was going to be behind the wheel. It was probably my fault she didn't want to. The last time I tried to teach her to drive hundreds of days back, I ended up throwing open the driver side and kicking her out of the car. She was aggravating to try teaching and sitting in a chariot that was jerking around and grinding gears was absolutely nauseating. I'm not insane, I know the result will probably be the same this time, but it might wake my happy ass up.

This became a really strange test of wills and flexibility, not quite an ass chewing match, but pretty close. Dune could wiggle and twist herself out of my grip so long as I didn't grab her around the wrist, and even then she could sometimes turn her hands and reverse the hold to push back. Grappling with her without the joy of exchanging real blows was something like fighting with a hundred and twenty pound bag of sand which wants to flow right out of your arms any chance it gets. Once I got my right foot between us, pushing her into the driver side by sheer force was easy. She shoved my boot away with a pout and a deadly glare.

"Dune don't feel like the shouting and carrying on that always accompanies this silliness, Slit."

"Well, I don't feel like wrecking and killing the both of us, so you're drivin'."

"Hhhhhnnngghh."

"Quit moaning, step on the clutch and turn the key."

She did as I told her to, but once the engine turned over that defiant streak reared its head and she just sat there with her hands in her lap and looking at me as if she was incredibly bored. No amount of eye rolling would convince her to make this any less difficult.

"Put your hands on the wheel, Dune. On ten and two, don't be a smartass. Put it in first."

She was still glaring. She almost got it into second gear, but I'm pretty sure she stalled out on purpose. Hard not to think it was intentional when she was making hard eye contact the entire time.

"Again. Start over."

Now it looked like she understood that she wasn't getting out of this. We started, stalled, and parked Shirley probably a dozen times a piece. Her failure rate was still higher than any success she had getting the car moving without lurching and grinding gears horrifically. This is why the thing needed so much work when she brought it home, she'd probably almost murdered it. The final time she stalled it, I had already lost count and had begun to feel like my head as going to explode.

"Do I have to put you in my lap and teach you like some pup?! How are you THIS bad at stick? It
works the same as the bike but reverse limbs! It's not that fucking hard!"

"Gah!"

She squawked at me like a pissed off crow and chucked a hand full of something from her belt at me. It didn't hurt, but it startled me and I threw out a hand to grab her wrist to stop her from throwing something else. I grabbed some of what she threw from where it rolled down into my lap to see what it was.

"Did you throw bullets at me?!"

"Better than shooting you! And yes, if you're gonna get Dune driving manual then that's likely what you're gonna have to do! So spare us the embarrassment!"

Either she was legitimately trying to weasel her way out of this or it truly was that damn frustrating for everyone involved. I was awake, goal achieved, but now I felt somewhat determined to remedy this problem. We just sat there doing war with our eyes for a few long seconds. I decided that she really should know how to drive properly.

"Pull the parking break an' c'mere."

"Huh? Just what do you think you're- HEY!"

It was easier this time to grab her and put her where I wanted her to go, she only failed and slapped at my arms for a moment before going stiff as a corpse on top of me with her hands floating in the air as if she didn't know what she was supposed to be doing with them. Setting her straight would have to wait until after I adjusted the seat and got comfortable. She was certainly longer and heavier than any pup. I never did much teaching in this department, just scathing commentary while Nux helped out Tank and Notch by showing a few of their crew's rising pups how it's done. I was sure I could manage this. First, I grabbed her hands and put them where they needed to go. Right on the wheel, left on the gear shift.

"Put your guzz foot over mine, Nutter. Get your left foot on the clutch."

Honestly, it was already easier to figure out how to show her what she was supposed to be doing like this, with her hands under mine so I knew for sure that they were where they were supposed to be. Yeah, it was beyond personal and I hated it but fucking delighted in it too. I couldn't tell why on the latter part. Could be that Dune was clearly not comfortable and that might just do for the revenge I owed her. Could be the way body parts and heat were getting mixed up too.

"This is humiliating." She admitted as if she'd heard my thoughts.

"No worse than being helped to the piss pot every morning and being stripped naked and scrubbed twice a day."

"Ugh, will you just let that go? Would you have been happier if I let you whizz on yourself constantly?"

I pretended I didn't hear that. I definitely would not have been happier to lie in a pool of cooling piss any more often than I already had to endure while the burns were healing.

"Alright. Whoever had this before converted it from left to right hand drive. Which is why the dash
doesn't match the rest of the interior. They didn't do too bad a job but the lights on the dash don't work so you aren't gonna be seein' your RPMs right now, no problem. Just have to listen to her and feel it out."

Everything that just ejected itself from my mouth stopped me for a second. All of that made me sound like Nux. Soft and rusted for a psycho. This was ridiculous but, going better than just trying to talk her through all the steps. Still had to explain everything while I led her hands around but I had a reasonable level of control to stop her from fucking up the transmission or stalling. Start, move, park. Start, move, park. We managed to move up through every gear and then back down to neutral to shut it off and start it up again. Buff, polish, and repeat.

She still asked constantly before doing anything but after a while she relaxed on top of me, moving on her own to shift gears and experimenting with the guzz. Felt safe enough to give up the pedal to her. She didn't have to be told too often to mind the clutch either. I could show her how to adjust the mirrors the right way tomorrow. I was just about ready to quit this and let her have the seat before she started thinking I was going mediocre on her, but she swerved and her hands locked up on the wheel and stick. I swore that the whole car bounced twice, we just ran over something and it didn't feel like a rock.

"The hell was that?" I kicked Dune's foot off the gas because she'd floored it and shoved her hand out of the way of the gear shift to get control back.

"I THINK I RAN OVER A GUY!"

I didn't hear anything slap the bonnet before going under. I didn't see whatever she claimed because I didn't exactly have a great view around her shoulder, she was frantic and just about trying to claw her way over me to see behind us. I didn't hear any engines and I didn't see any fire light.

"I didn't know what it was until we were already rolling over it! He was just laying there." She was still shouting at me as if my ear wasn't six inches from her friggin' mouth.

"Clutch... CLUTCH."

Might have been a sand drift that sort of looked like a person. I didn't want to stop, if we had just run over a man, he could be from any faction and there could be others around. It could have been bait. It could have been anything, but Dune was getting hysterical and this lesson was very over. I needed to put my shit back together so I could drive. Fuck, was I ever awake after that.

Parked and prone, I shoved her off my lap and checked that the colt on my belt was loaded, it never wasn't but you should always check, I then threw open the roof hatch to have a look around. I didn't see any camp fires, no headlights, didn't hear any engines either. Dune had her lead slinger in her hands by the time I slid back down to the seat.

"I didn't see anyone, but load the rifle anyway."

First thing, I put my pedal setup back the way it should be, then made a u-turn with the high beams on to see what exactly she had gone over without having to get out and walk. This could easily be an elaborate trick to steal a car and corpse the occupants, fitting seeing as Dune acquired it under similar conditions. The headlamps revealed what I'd hoped not to see. There was indeed a body, lying face down only a few yards from a rat-rod of a dirt bike, also laying there as if the rider had fallen off it and crawled a short distance.
"Oh gods! I hit a pedestrian! This is just like the time Russel tried to show me how to run the tractor and I ran over a wombat."

*Here we go, talking in the first person and freaking out really loudly when anything could be out here trying to bait us.*

"You shoot people all the time, It's not that big a difference. Keep it down." The more I ignored Dune's hysteries and thought about the scene before us, the less I thought this was a trap, could be worse than that. I wanted to see what direction the tire tracks from the bike had come from. "I'm getting out, stay in the car, but get your lead spitter up and cover me."

With my own pistol in hand and ready, I stepped out to have a closer look. I gave the body a swift kick to make sure it was dead. It didn't take long at all to figure out where this one came from. A leather kutte covered in bottle caps and frayed rockers sewn to the back, nearby was a rider's helmet adorned in long cords of twine and wire like a mane of garbage, two demon horns glued to the top.

"I think this was a rock rider."

"Everyone said I killed what coulda been the last wombat. What if I flattened the last Rock Rider?"

"Oh, veeeight, Dune. Rock Riders are like junk rust, they're never really gonna go away. And could you please be quiet?!"

"Eh, why would you say that? Do you got rust on your junk?"

"What- no!" There was a definite smell rising up from the body, that kind of funk you only find on rotten flesh. I locked the metal leg straight and used it to push the corpse over. Its face wasn't there, just sloughing gore and maggots pouring out from the mouth and eye sockets. I took a step back and shook off the wrigglers that had hitched a ride on my peg leg. "This bloke was dead before you ran over him, Dune... Let's get the he'll out of here."

"What do you think a Rock Rider would be doing this far out away from the mountains, Duck? Doesn't seem right, does it?"

"Yeah, that's why I wanna get the fuck away from here."

I really hoped that this sod was just a wandering nomad, that he wasn't this far East to avoid something going on in the West. When dawn broke, lighting the world from behind us and casting long shadows on the empty land, we sought cover and found it under the very same stone formation we had sheltered by for a day nap on the way to her green place more than a month and a half ago. That Rock Rider was stuck in my head, Dune had long forgotten the ordeal and slept like a rock under my arm. I couldn't fathom a reason for a Rock Rider to be alone, out here, so far from where they camped and did their daredevil stunts in the crumbling mountains. I didn't want to take my leg off, just in case someone else besides the corpse was out here and stupid enough to approach the car. I needed to be able to hop over the seat quick and have all my limbs. I didn't get any sleep until I rolled the maniac over to face me so that I could hang onto the pistol and the woman at the same time without worrying about accidentally blowing her face off if something spooked me. I still fought sleep until Dune shifted about like she was going to try getting up for a sleep wander, but instead her arm wormed its way between us til it got to my face, something I can't fight.
Oh, the wreck again. The Razor Cola was still on fire this time, though. You start realizing that you're in a dream when things repeat, but there's usually small differences and inconsistencies that keep you from losing interest in whatever your brain is doing to you. I could never seem to wake up from dreams on my own, even if I knew I was dreaming. The hole was back too, so was the blood. Fucking miserable, mediocre, rusted bucket of busted flaming scrap. That was me, that was the Razor Cola, that was this whole fucking day that kept replaying in my skull no matter how much I tried to forget it.

I watched the car fire from too close, there could be another leaking pool of guzz or a gas can which didn't quite ignite when the primary tank blew me to pieces. It could blow again, but I didn't care. The heat didn't even bother me anymore. I looked away from the fire because I thought I heard someone laughing, the high pitched chirping and hiccups of a pup no more than hip high. It was just standing there, next to the twisted remains of what had once been the right fender, looking at me and grinning. It took a moment, but I saw that it wasn't a pup, it was just a ghost.

"Nux?"

For whatever reason it didn't strike me as at all odd that Nux's ghost would appear as he'd been thousands of days ago. I tried to come around the nose of the dead chariot and grab him, pups shouldn't be allowed to run around outside under the noon heat and where wrecks would attract scavengers. He ducked out of my reach with supernatural speed and danced his way around the vehicular corpse. The climbing flames obscured him from me as I limped my way around the other way to catch him, but when I reached the other side there was nothing, just a trail of my own red leading me back to the other side.

"I could polish you up. Make you sparkle again. All you have to do is keep breathing..."

I swear, I've heard someone say that to me before. When I turned around, Dune was there with a matching wound through her chest and her hand held out to me, just like how the last dream had left off. Again, there were differences. She still wore a charred and ash stained linen frock that billowed loosely in the wind and left no aspect of her shape to imagination, she was still sending constellations of hot embers racing through the air, flames still crawled up her back and sent up a pillar of smoke, but now, Nux was standing beside her. He was still little, fragile, vulnerable, but who in their right fucking mind would hurt him now, while he stood next to what any sane person might interpret as a deity of flame and punishment. And she does punish, strangles down chrome fury with shine touch to render you soft and obedient. I was insane to try to touch her, knowing I'd get burned for grasping the shine hand. Nux spoke, and his words stopped me.

"Keys. She needs the keys to make it work, Slit. She can fix it."

"Fix what?"

"It."

"That's real helpful, Nux."

I still dug around in my pockets anyway to pull up the keys for Shirley on their carabiner. Nux shook his head and buried his face in the Scavenger's side, smearing himself in her ashes. What wasn't I doing right? When I tried to hand over the keys, they fell right through her fingers. That was when she turned her hand over and extended a finger to point into the hole carved through me. I looked down at it and all I saw was the blood, but she kept pointing and Nux nodded against her hip. I didn't want to touch it, I didn't want to reach into the wound, but my fingers searched and found metal inside me. Out came the useless keys I found in the bog with it's worthless charms and gibberish words on a plastic trinket. I don't read well, but you can do whatever you want in your
dreams. It said “I want to go home” this time. She tilted her head and turned her finger inward toward herself, to the wound and the metal embedded in her, too. Keys. Ignition cylinder. Makes sense, but every time I tried to isolate a key and bring it to the keyhole, her flames raged higher and hot air blew me back.

I could hear Nux screaming, I could hear Wrecker commanding him to shut up, and I could see the fire turning Dune into nothing but ash flying away in the hot air. I couldn't get close, my hands were already burned black and I couldn't feel my fingers anymore.

“Slit, it's alright. Wake up.”

“Slit! Aw, shh, it's just a dream.”

My eyes stung because they were full of sweat, but I could see her and she was solid, she wasn't on fire and she didn't fall apart like ash when I pulled down the collar of her shirt to make sure there was no hole. She looked at me like I'd gone mad, which felt something like being expected to drive somewhere backwards. No hole, no ignition cylinder, no smoldering bits of her flying off, but there was hot air, and she was soaked in sweat too. Fuck, I left the windows rolled up. Never had to think about this much before getting the front glass. Dune was trying to do her usual coddling, but I was flat out roasting. I didn't know how she was tolerating the heat in here. No wonder I dreamt of fire and ash. I lifted myself off the floorboards, peeled the mat from my back and dove over the seat to get at the passenger window and roll it down. The handle in the back was snapped off on one side and the glass was stuck on the other. Dew from our breath gathered at the foot of the glass as it slid down into the door. It was either midday or close to it. The air outside the Impala wasn't too bad, but I simply couldn't cool off enough. I was sprawled over the back of the seat with my head hanging out of the window and a hand braced on the dashboard.

“Cola, where is it?” I wheezed.

She handed up the canteen. It was piss warm, so it was foul to drink, tasted of the canteen it sat in getting hot for hours, and helped exactly not at all. I had no choice but to waste some. I crawled the rest of the way into the front of the cab, wet my hands and drenched my face with them. Leaning out the window again, I dumped the last sip over my head and stayed there, just letting it evaporate while I blindly undid straps to take off the metal leg. I could feel the sweat squelching in the socket and saturated into the sock. My aching stub felt instantly cold and tingled as it was left naked and damp on the seat under me. Dune joined me in the front, opening the other door and not quite closing it over and over to pump out the stale, humid air.

“How the shitting hell can you sleep like that? Coulda choked to death in here.”

“You woke me. I guess I was too far gone to care.” She muttered, but not crass like she might've been if I'd woken her on purpose. “You were saying his name again... and just about crushing a scav to death.”

When I picked up my head to look over, she was pushing at her ribs with the heel of her hand. Either I'd been laying on her or grasping her too tightly. One look in the back and I could see that the pistol that had been in my hands before I slept was pushed to the far left against the outer wall of the trunk, forgotten.

“Sorry.”

“Don't say that. Not to me. Never Dune. Don't need to.”
She was already in the driver seat. She wound up taking my pedal shit and getting it out of the way to move the car into the shadow of the stones which had moved with the rising sun. Only the overhanging part of the rock had any shade for us. No stalls, but I wasn't awake enough to tease praise at that. With half of the car still sitting in the sun, we decided to throw the mats out between the rock and the car to sit out there to wait for the cab to air out and my leg to dry. After that, we'd have to keep moving. A good sleep would have to wait for her kip. Out there, where we could breathe and laze around somewhere questionably more comfortable, I thought about the dream and how Nux had instructions for me I couldn't carry out. I try not to give dreams too many meanings or thought, because all of them are completely whackadoo anyway, but this time? I pushed my hand into my pocket, it was twisted up on its contents and stuck to my leg from sweating myself soggy, and found what I was looking for. Out came the useless Pontiac keys to hang on my middle finger. Dune was laying on her back, arms over her head, knees bent and slacks rolled up over her knees to cool off. I dropped the keys on her chest to get her attention, then used her trunk to prop up my head while I joined her on the ground.

“Do you... Uh... Still want to know about what Nux and I were like before we were grown War boys?”

I couldn't see it, but I felt her core tighten as she lifted her head to look at me.

“O’ course, Ducky. Anything you wanna tell Dune, she'll hear it.”

Chapter End Notes

On the 30th my partner is undergoing surgery. I'm not sure how much writing I'll do between now and then due to my nerves, and immediately after they'll need care and support. By the 5th of June, I SHOULD be active again so long as everything goes smoothly. I'll probably take that time when I won't be writing much and using it to catch up on reading fics and new ones I want to explore, to keep myself distracted from the anxiety. Thank you for your patience.

Other stuff below...

Strong catnip tea has an anecdotal history as a “contraceptive” which more or less initiates menstruation. There's little reliable information on the uses of catnip in humans on the internet and you'll mostly find first hand reports of it's usage, dosage, and side effects by those who use it, which means you'll be reading something different from every individual's personal experience. In my own experience growing up, it was more like a family myth that catnip could prevent pregnancy by initiating menstruation, but my grandmother drank it to reduce anxiety and as an herbal sleep aid. I've personally used it in a weak tea as a mild sedative to combat anxiety symptoms early in the morning, usually as a last resort when no other calming mechanisms work. I do not advise its use as a replacement for anti-anxiety medication or as a sleep aid. I am not a doctor and I do not fully understand its uses or long term effects. Please do not use catnip alone OR alongside any other medication without asking your doctor and doing as much research as you possibly can to avoid potentially dangerous side effects or
interactions with your currently prescribed medications.

The reason I chose to use catnip instead of far more effective and documented herbal contraceptives is because catnip is a member of the mint family and mints have a reputation of growing in almost ANYTHING. I've seen mint growing out of an old hat in a shed that hadn't been opened in ten years. If any plant will survive the apocalypse in someone's basement, it's fucking mint. Shout out to anybody that has ever had to battle a mint invasion in their yard!

Trivia: Twister the game hit the market in 1966.
Hex and Nux

Chapter Summary

History is STILL a shit show.

Chapter Notes

So, my partner's surgery went well. They're recovering pretty okay. Not too much pain, everything just looks kinda rough but everyone says they're doing great. I have a wicked sunburn because I forgot to put on sunscreen while I was outside quietly panicking on a bench, but we're both fine. Nothing bad happened. We're just very, very tired.

I'm not doing a proper proofread, I'm tired and Grammarly keeps shitting every time I try to zoom through and catch problems so you guys are getting it as is. Thank you for your patience.

June/18/2018 UPDATE: So, chapter 30 is done. It just needs editing and for me to write out notes. Keep an eye out for it in the next 24 hours. Thank you for sticking with it.

JUNE/19/2018 UPDATE: Editing is not happening tonight. I have made a terrible mistake in sleeping on the sofa last night and wrecked my back. I don't think I could stand to sit in front of a laptop for even a few minutes at a time. So, I think I'll be on the inversion table and possibly making an appointment with my chiropractor to figure out what the Heck I did to ruin myself so bad last night. Don't worry, the thing should be up in a few days.

"Hey! Scrawn! Come look!"

That's not a name, it's one of many curses they used in place of one. Hexcut was calling me over, not that I gave a shit so I ignored him. He got his own name from getting nailed in the side of the head by a fist decorated in dusters with hexnuts glued to it. The blow left him shivering and drooling on the floor with his eyeballs rolled back into his skull. When he came to with a bloody and swollen face, we all knew it would leave a scar. Shaft and Spanner weren't soft caretakers, and they didn't raise up soft pups. Hexcut had gotten mouthy, had the audacity to ask for more cola, then pissed on Spanner's boot out of spite when he was told there wouldn't be more wet stuff until the next morning. When us others, younger pups, cried out at the sight of our eldest litter mate bleeding on the floor we were only slapped and taught the harsh lesson that if he died, he died. Only strong pups survive. If he couldn't take a few knocks to the head then he'd make a mediocre War Boy.

I was busying myself sharpening a well used razor blade discarded from a box cutter against a chunk of rock jutting from the wall near the big cogs. Most other pups in our litter had been picked to work in the garages and pits for the day. Hexcut was a drum boy during the hours of light. I hung close to him, since no one had picked me today.

"HEY, SKINNY! C'mere! You gotta see this! And grab that stupid Buzzard too!" Hexcut was still
calling.

Whatever it was, I could hear the wretched below howling at it too. Maybe it was worth a look. I tucked the blade between my teeth and turned to bless Morsov with a slap across the back of his neck, waking up the sting of the freshly scabbed brand. He spun, shrieking his filthy Buzzard tongues at me and trying to scratch out my eyes. That only got him a swelling lip and another slap across his blade burned scalp. He didn't speak, not our words anyway, so you had to talk to him with your fist.

"Hurry the fuck up! You're missing it!"

Hexcut had abandoned his drum and leaned out over the edge of the platform precariously, grasping at a rail that tried to lean with him. Hex was fearless, I sometimes wanted to be him instead of me.

Just as soon as I was through dragging Morsov to the edge, our elder brothers, fully fledged boys were gathering. There was some wretch's crotch fruit hanging from the lift. Couldn't be more than eight hundred days old with whipping wisps of blond hair on its abnormally round head.

"What a nut job." I said.

The lift moved slow, and the voices around us and over us rose fast.

"Hey, look'it this little fella!"

Hexcut, Morsov and I were being pushed closer to the edge as more War Boys jostled for a position to see what was happening, I moved to get better footing, but my heel caught air instead of patterned steel. My arms swung wild to find anything or anyone to grab. I found nothing, instead something found me. The thick, feverishly hot hand of a grown brother gripped me around the back of the neck and hauled me back from the oblivion of nothingness too much of me hovered over.

"Damn, Pup! Gonna die real mediocre if you don't watch it!"

I looked up to see who it was. The one with thick scars cut through his brows and around the back of his head, exhaust stacks carefully etched into his broad chest. I now know his name, it was Notch. Back then him and Tank terrified me. They were big, they went on patrol every morning and walked by where I sat by Hexcut's drum, but they never so much as glared in my direction. I was invisible until now. First time anyone besides Spanner, Shaft, or Hexcut gave me the time of day without being forced to by lack of other available pup hands for tight spaces under hoods, and it was to be promised a mediocre death if I don't watch out for shit I can't control... Fuck Notch.

"Mediocre, Scrawn! Mediocre!" That was Morsov, for once using a word we could make out. His half toothless grin said that he knew what he just said, and there was vindictive glee in his eyes. He just had to pick up that word first and spit it back out at me.

A rage found me, poured itself into me like cola into a canteen. I leaped upon him with snarling teeth and a roar. We crashed into a wall of legs that merely lifted and kicked us back to the narrow space we'd been allotted to watch a wretched pup kill himself. I pounded Morsov's face till it was more smears of red than white clay. He wailed, balled his fists and tried to pound me back at first, but in no time he was trying to protect his face instead.

Knuckles rapped against the back of my head and Hex was shouting over us. "Lay off, Twig-arms! The pup on the lift is about to fall off! You gonna watch him splat or not?!"

While the Buzzard shit rolled around on the floor, holding his gushing nose, I was being pulled back to the edge to watch the show. Our elders cried out in delight and laughed. Even the guards on the
lift seemed impressed, one went so far as to kneel by him and watch to see if he could hold on.

"This boy's got iron in his blood!" A brother called out.

"He's slipping!"

"Witness?"

The pup kept hanging on, the little idiot was even smiling up at us. He laughed. He thought this was fun! I laughed back, this kid was fangin' mental. Everyone shouted witness, he was inevitably going to fall once the lift rattled to a stop. We were all waiting for it but...

The guard snatched him by the wrist just as his fingers lost grip. New War Pup. New brother.

-0-

Duck spoke through yawns and with often closed eyes. He didn't sound bored, only well familiar with the story and how it was to be told. I was surprised at the detail he was able to summon forth from distant memory, he'd only been a child then. The brutality of these youngsters, that was worth a few worrisome thoughts but it was not much of a surprise. I would have assumed anyway that War Pups have no choice but to play by using their fists so that they may learn, survive long enough to go to war. Slit and I often played in the same manner, so really the only reason I was bothered by it was because the mental image of two babes under seven years beating the ever loving shit out of each other was disturbing.

Slit had quit talking, now rolling over to lay himself over my middle and lazily draw little spirals in the sand with his finger. Oof, I could hardly breathe like this with him squashing down the lower half of my ribs. I gave him a push at the shoulder and side, when he ignored me he got a palm slapped over his good ear. He hissed and spat and lifted himself on his elbows to glare before turning himself so he could lay on his back between my legs and use my guts as his pillow. He dropped his head harshly to pay me back for boxing his ear.

"Oof! Gah! You're lucky I already took my morning constitutional, or else I'd shit right on your neck for that."

He mocked my words and tone in sing song. He got kicked in the side with the heel of my bare foot. I got fist in the meat of my calf. It was only halfhearted tomfoolery. He sucked up a huge breath and growled it back up. It wasn't his furious rumble, it was his disconsolate hum. It reminded me of the sound of sandstorms approaching. Something wrong?

I pushed myself up to sit, which bent his neck so he squirmed and tried reaching back to shove me down again. I persisted and tried to slide out from under him whilst bat ting his grabby hands away. Now his chest vibrated with true irritation. He flipped himself to his hands and knee to hook his fingers around my belts and drag me under him once again. Something with him wasn't right, if it weren't for my concern I'd have re-broken his nose for this. I knew what was coming and tried to brace myself for it, but I always got the air knocked out of my lungs when he'd drop his dead weight on me and lay there like a basking lizard. I had only wanted to be able to look at him when I asked what was up with him, and for what happened to the sprout hanging on the lift.

Now it was my turn to growl and squirm to try finding something close to comfort. Fuckin' heavy forker, even his head felt like bricks sitting on my sternum. Pushing and kicking at him with a knee
did nothing but antagonize him into grabbing at hands to restrain them. As I should have expected, he was trying to get my left grasper to his face. Demanding bastard, yet it was not at all hard to tell that his story telling had stopped because something about it was doing a number on him, so I let him have the hand. It was only after my fingers traced the curve of his lip and followed the shape of his jaw that I could sense how tense he had been. He seemed to melt on top of me while I did everything in my power just to fill up my lungs completely under the weight. I don't like having to think about it every time I take a breath. All I could do was take my annoyance and sigh it out while he finagled me into doling out a reward for spitting history into my ears. He still had my wrist in his shackle of a hand and directed my touch around his head until I was scratching through four inches of hair. Head roll his head against my fingertips and moan at it. When I pulled my hand back, there were dark bands of grit under my nails.

"What happened after that? What'd they do with the sprout?"

He grunted at my inquiry, then shrugged.

"Shaved him down, put a coat of white on, named him. Tough nut to crack, Nux."

"Ooooh! Dune sees now. What a little ripper."

Realization took hold, I was wondering why there was no mention of him in this story, I only assumed that it was before his time. No, this was the story of when Slit first saw Nux. He snorted before going on.

"Smiled like a little idiot the whole time the bloodshed boys were buzzing the hair off. Can't blame him, they were chanting his new name. Musta felt like real chrome. Caretakers were fightin' over who got the pup. Shaft busted someone's arm for him... He lost that grin as soon as the branding iron touched him, though." He paused for a moment, pulled in a breath and held it back for a moment. My pinky finger gliding over his staples forced him to let that air out. "While Nux got another laugh outta everyone with the cola-works shooting outta his face, Hex turned and said 'Now that's how you get noticed, that's how you get the name you're after'... Anyway, we got a new brother."

My heart sank a bit at the end of the story.

"You really didn't have a name, did you? Not until," On instinct my fingers slid down the split in his cheek to the corner of his lip. He closed his hand around mine with a wince and moved it away.

"I don't wanna talk about that shit. You wanted to hear about Nux, remember?"

"Nux and you," I corrected him. He only grunted in affirmative, but said no more. Time, he needed time and distraction. I picked up the hair laying over his temple and lifted it between my fingers to feel the length. "You need a trim. Startin' to look raggedy."

"You've never given a rust-fuck how we look." He posited. "The only reason it stays short is because every time I try to hack it down short enough to run a razor over it, you stop me."

I thought about that. Typically I did this, it's true, but my reasoning might not be as sound as I once thought. I was trying to yank him out of his War Boy way, excusing it by telling him that he needed hair to keep his head from getting cooked when I could just as easily have fashioned a bandana for him to tie over that pale scalp. We were going to pay the Citadel a visit anyway, might be pertinent to the goal of having him recognized by shaving him down.

"Hm. Want her to shave it for you?"

He lifted himself and looked at me, jaw hanging slightly and right eyebrow raised up to wrinkle his
forehead. He looked like he wasn't sure I was being serious or not. He tested it by answering honest and blunt.

"Yes."

"Fine," I willing able to do it, with one reservation. "But Dune's leavin' yir scav tassel."

He snorted at that, looking very much like he had won some sort of long term dispute, which wasn't entirely untrue. "I'll hold you do it when we get to your rust-hole, Nutter."

He was, for the most part, up off me, so I took the chance to slide my knees up and plant my feet in his chest to shove him back. He landed on his ass and cursed me.

"Dune meant now, Ducky."

He rolled his eyes and reached into Shirley's seats for his leg, checking out how the leather socket was drying. "Nothin' to shave with, Bat-shit. You ever try dry shavin'? Think razor burn feels too shine?"

A debate ensued. Sure, we could wait till we reached the caverns for a sharp knife and the grease he used on his face, but my knife was freshly sharpened and Wilson's burn goop might just lubricate his head enough to get that hair off. Normally, I'd agree that it was better to wait and just let him do it himself, but he needed the aggravation to help him forget whatever was eating at him inside. To prove me wrong, he rolled up his pant leg and tested both the gloop and my knife on his calf. A minute later he was glaring down at the bald patch while he wiped the shorn hair and goo from the blade with his sleeve.

"...You cut my head, I'll shave you bald and do a piss job of it too."

So, it began, first pulling up sweat grimed locks to saw through with a different knife, so that we may save the razor edge of my own for his scalp. It came away in chunks which clung together with his natural oiliness. A pile of discarded hair formed between my boot and his right knee, we considered keeping it to spin twine from it, but felt that it was too straight and greasy to work with. Had to cut real close and careful, as not to take bits of head with the man fur whilst making certain that what was leftover would not overwhelm the blade.

"Hexcut, I was supposed to be his driver, ya know. He told me I was gonna get a name and drive him arround while he flung thunder. Nux was gonna be our repair boy..."

I stalled mid cut, took a moment to think through my next words before slicing through the hair of his crown. Today was the first day I'd ever heard the name Hexcut, Slit had never cried that name in his sleep, and his words told a scav plain that something prevented this boy's prophecy from coming true.

"Tell me, Slit. What happened to this boy?"

The Slit's hands clenched tight over his flesh and false knees, he was holding something at bay, unwilling to let me see the effect of the memory on his face when I dropped to my knees to look at him. Slowly, his fists relaxed to open hands in his lap.

"Rash fever..." He whispered.
Nux didn't smile much for a while, not till the brand healed up. Hex used to like keeping him close, liked being near to the pup getting all the praise for being the stubborn shit who didn't fall, but as days went by and the soft skulled bastard got more talkative, Hexcut would shove the new and youngest of our litter at me and say "Let the annoying turd hang on your belt a'while. Can't beat mah drum with him chewin' the ears off m'head."

So, Nux was attached to me twenty four hours and seven days. I didn't understand half the shit he'd squeak out his cola hole, so it only made it more frustrating. Sometimes I'd shove him away just because it was a hot day and I didn't feel like having his sweaty face on me. V8 he liked to cling.

The daily drop off of white grit and hard tack into a metal basin on the floor of Spanner and Shaft's kip meant grabbing handfuls and slapping others out of your way for your share. Took Nux too long to get used to the feedin' frenzy, he got skinnier than me before he got to looking a bit better fed than when he'd initially come up. I fought harder for my mouthfuls, I was always hungry. I was always grinding gears inside. I was always looking for something to grab and shove down my throat hole to quiet the ache in my middle. I always had two bruised handfuls of tack and a mess of grit stuffed into my pocket for later. So, naturally, Nux would drop on his ass next to me and beg with those giant, wet, eyeballs. If I didn't push some into his face, he'd just whimper all night with hunger. I often fed him half my share to save myself the hassle of a shitty sleep. Eventually, he got the idea, learned to shove, throw hands, and grab fast. He grew a round face, felt like I had a fat, smiling tumor on my side.

He started growing taller, Hex gained a couple inches too, I stayed right where I was and started getting slow to move. I was tired. Everyone is tired from heat and the looming of their Half-Life but by the time Nux got a little better at talking, I looked like a walking bag of bones. I got wicked sick, couldn't fight for my own grub, or hold it down for that matter.

Hex started doing my fightin' for me, my grit grabbing too. Everyone, including Shaft and Spanner, thought it was just the curse of an eighth-life. Cancer, maybe gut rot, but likely something wrong with my blueprints. There was no point in wasting blood and grit to prolong the inevitable for a pup too young to lift a lance or reach the pedals. They left me in their kip to rot when I couldn't get up anymore. Hex would come, shirking duty at the drum and accumulating welts from being scorned for it, to force feed me. He came with spiders and cola, food he stole, sometimes bits of well chewed leather, anything eatable. He couldn't sneak food to me passed Spanner, who slapped it out of my mouth if he caught me chewing. He'd say "Stop feedin' what's already dead!" Then deal Hex a mighty whipping with his boot strap.

Nux would be attached to Hexcut's belt when he'd come, whimpering.

"Can't let mah future driver cark it soft. Eh? Eat fucker." He'd demand each day when he's sneak back to the dens, like he believed I was going to live. Hex would eventually pass his relentless optimism to Nux. Even I believed it.

One morning, when I felt like all of Hex's hope was just a cruel lie, I coughed something up into the spot Hex, Nux, and I shared. I was too dead already to know what it was, but it moved. The bile and sickness wroth like it was alive. The hot splatter on his arm woke my older litter mate, he picked through it with his face twisted in anger. I was terrified that he'd finally given up on me, that no food would come anymore to soothe the stabbing in my middle.

Hex left the den, and I was too weak to weep at the loss. I was soft back then, soft and not too bright. Hex came back, a tall, thick form following after him. I couldn't understand what all the noise was about, he pointed frantically at the sickness pooled under by face and stuck around my mouth. The
"Go get Spanner and Shaft. Tell em to meet me up at the Blood Shed." Commanded the old voice. It boomed in my head and rattled with authority. I thought I was destined for a whipping, so I tried to cover my face. No, I was scooped up out of my own filth, and I felt the jolt of every step in my frail bones as he carried me. In no time, the old organic hovered over me, his decrepit face made what I thought was an aging War Boy look young.

"Worms. Belly noodles, he's got. Woulda been an easy fix if they brought him to me months ago. Treatment might make him cark it, now." Organic lamented with his hairy assistant leaning around him to gawk at me.

The old boy, Ace, his lips sagged down at the corners but his eyes remained furious. Stupidly, I still thought I was in for a beating.

Hex sprinted through the Blood Shed and passed us before realizing he had run too far and turning back. Spanner and Shaft were there. I'd never seen fear on their faces before. Two more grown boys appeared. Ace raged so loudly that even the boys who looked like breathing death all shifted and found the strength to put distance between themselves and group of men which had formed around where I lay. I tried to crawl away from the sounds of impending rage fever, but Hex stopped me by hopping up on the slab of stone and propping me forward to watch.

To this day, I can't remember what Ace roared at our caretakers, all I can recall are the frenzied howls and the sound of a belt whizzing through the air, cracking like streaks of lightning over their backs. They fought and struggled and sometimes the boys holding our caretakers down got the belt too. There's something that inspires terror when you realize that the ones who punish you for your shit deeds can be punished too. It made the world feel bigger, more dangerous. The gratification of watching Spanner whipped bloody could wait, I was busy being horrified of ever pissing off Ace.

When it was all over and only the ancient organic mechanic and the sick ones were left around Hexcult and I, I got a needle stuck in me. I thought I was getting blood, sure sign you're about to die soft, instead they dripped poison into me. It was a matter of either kill the worms and shitting um out dead, or kill me and burn my corpse so it didn't spread. Either way, the poison would cure the infestation living inside me.

I suffered, but I didn't cark it. I never quite caught up to Hex as we grew upward, but I stopped being so damn skinny. I got picked more often to learn engines, learned to drive a little too while boys from various crews were testing us to see who they wanted to train up personally. Morsov got picked in place of Hex when our eldest litter mate refused to let us three be separated. He said 'package deal or nothing', got his share of whippings for making anyone's half-life that much more difficult if they tried to force him on crew training without us. Nux was just too young and I just wasn't too great at anything. I'd been picked so few times for basic pup training that I knew practically nothing. No one had wanted a skinny pup back then, now no one wanted an empty headed one. I stayed nameless, but I earned the black around my eyes, if nothing else then for staying alive this long.

Then, it happened, the thing that almost killed the Citadel.

War came because bottles were being found down among the wretched. Pure, clear, rotgut. It always came with a white hand print painted upon it. I saw an Imperator bring one up once. The glass was green and a few barnacles were crusted to the bottom, a telling sign that the bottle had been scavenged from the Great White in the far away South.

This was the first time I ever saw the Immortan from so close. He was always something you strained to see across the space between the War Tower and the Skull Face of the North butte. He
came across the bridges with his entourage of faithful high Imperators to see what was being found in great quantity very suddenly.

He was enormous. A towering monolith in white. That's what struck me, white. White skin, white hair, white wrappings and armor that was clear like glass. He was indeed godly, and we felt the weight of his presence even from behind Hex's drum where the three of us watched. Salute we did, kept to our knees we did, but we listened too, hanging by every word. Nux, his eyes glistened with wild, near fevered reverence. It was as if he'd been raised up in darkness and that moment was the first time he'd ever seen the sky above.

"That's our dada?" He asked, voice quivering.

"Believe it, mate." Hex assured.

As the great Immortal spoke with his Imperators and the eldest War Boys who ducked their heads and saluted each time they were so much as looked at, us pups overheard the story behind the bottles. Someone, beyond the canyon, had a set up shop. They had a distillery and had made deals to get through the canyon to trade with the western settlements. Bottles would trickle here from those distant camps. Having tasted the sweet burn of the clear liquid sloshing in the bottles, Immortan Joe had become determined to locate and raid this clan of hooch peddlers. They had something he wanted, knowledge, the ability to produce something the world craves. Luxury. Good hooch is luxury, places like Bartertown and Dump City pay through the nose for luxury. It was the Immortan's V8 given mission to find and preserve the fine things left in this world, so we may one day rise from the ashes. We are the hands and arms of his will, it was his mission that would open the gates to us. I knew then that I needed to be better, needed to get through those gates because its all real, not just something to put up with for your meal ticket.

Our look at our deity was brief. Next, a war party was passing through our small world. Massive rigs lowered by cranes, dozens of war chariots lowered on the lift. The sweat of the hard working cog fodder made the air sickly and humid. The rank of exhaust fumes choked us pups. This was the first time I had ever seen a full war party, the first time I saw the Gigahorse roll by with tires so enormous that they could flatten an entire litter of pups without even jostling the double glassed car. Both Nux and I clung to Hexcut's belts. Excitement and inexplicable fear blended with awe. We felt, smelled, and tasted everything that passed us by. Total sensory overload. Our older brothers roared for blood and chanted their war haka, and then it was over as quickly as it began. We could only wait for their no doubt triumphant return. Even Spanner and Shaft were gone. Older war pups who spent their days training directly with crews looked after us. We got the rare treat of mothers milk, a taste we hadn't known in my litter for many days. I was glad that I was a War Pup, happy that I would become one of them in just five or six more seasons. I was so looking forward to it.

The world would crash soon enough. When they returned, they brought captives who spoke different, they talked our words, but it sounded off. Hex told Nux and I that they were from another land. I remember the creature, a monster bound across the hood of Notch and Tank's Pontiac. The judge, the jury, the executioner. Their rig had a reputation, so did they. In the time it took for their leftover thunder and munitions to be collected for return to the armory, I had stepped too close to the parked chariot, peering at their live trophy. It was wearing a mask, human fingernails adorned it like teeth. Arms were covered in black scars. How could scars be black? I didn't know then that you could make ink from soot and piss for that. The designs etched into its skin sent a chill up my spine. There was a kill count, carved into its hide in black triangles. Spirals and skulls and strange shapes I had never seen before. Nux, as always clutching to my side, was crazy enough to prod the creature at the forehead and utter a quick "hello". Its eyes opened and they were black. You couldn't tell iris from pupil, they were so dark, and the whites so thick with veins that they appeared ringed with blood.
"You shouldn't look death in the eye, boy."

That was when I met the Brew Master for the first time. Dozens of other men were brought up, chained, some gagged. There were pups too, many of them full life or at the very least, reasonably healthy. All younger than 3000 days got white clay and assigned a litter. The old, uneducated, or weak were thrown to the Wretched.

It wasn't until a week later that the murmurs of sickness started, then coughs, then fevers so hot that you could burn up overnight. The old organic talked about something called inoculation and vaccines which were a thing of the old world. That anyone under 13,000 days was likely at risk. We all got it. Even a wife caught it, got thrown out of the vault to obey something called 'quarantine'.

Nux and I, we shivered together in our sleep spot. Hex looked after us even after the red welts started appearing on his skin, even after he started coughing his lungs up till his throat was bloody, he still looked after his future driver and repair boy. Shaft died first. The sound of Spanner's mourning roars is still etched deep into memory. There was always the smell of smoke, of roasting meat. It made us hungry, but Hex begged us not to get up, not to look for the smell of sizzling flesh. I now know that it was the smell of burning bodies. Our litter quickly shrank from two dozen to just nine. The ones we gained from the brewer clan appeared to be immune. They still shunned us in our sickness.

I would later learn, Joe, our father god, had made a frivolous mistake. People from far away lands bring sickness. They always do. It was the first time it came to my attention that a god can make mistakes.

Nux wept into me, we had to cover his hands in cloth and tie them tight to stop him from scratching. He cried so hard and for so long that it would exhaust him into sleep, but it could never last long. He'd be awake and crying again after only an hour or two. He was covered in scabs and red blisters and couldn't be consoled. He just cried all the time, it became my lullaby.

Finally, as the fevers broke and the dark brown crust of our rashes fell away, life became almost normal, but Hex wasn't at his drum anymore, he lay in the blood shed. He was one of the last to suffer. We stayed with him when we could, sometimes I had to leave Nux there to work with our elders piling the fast bloating bodies high for the pyres. Looking back, I'm glad that Hex was pushing me to take Nux with me when I'd leave the Blood Shed. The last thing he said was: "M'fine mate. I'll be right here, go get the smiley thing fed an' bring me back some mothers milk. A'right?"

When Nux and I returned, there was only empty space on the stone slab where Hexcut had been, and the smell of cooking flesh drifting through the stone corridors. If I had left the pup there, he'd have seen Hex burn up, then he'd have been forcibly removed from the body. Hexcut was supposed to be my lancer.

-Slits sagged at the shoulders. I had not even begun to shave his head. It felt as if I had been there, listening to him tell me the story. My skin itched and guts ground up as he told me the life he lived as a tiny boy. They were only the same age as Arddie's little ones, and it was terribly hard to imagine those wee sprouts in the same situation. I was fast becoming aware of just how much he had glossed over the last time we spoke about his early history. He looked away from me, hair all a badly cut mess, salty drops in his eyes that he wiped away quickly. He just glared into the void while his fingers scratched a scar in his arm, carved in the shape of a hexnut. He had many hexnuts scarified into himself in various spots. I now knew what they meant. His brother, a brother to both him and
Nux. Another departed soul to thank for keeping my shiny treasure alive long enough for me to find in a wreck. I know that he felt the warm drips of my mourning for a boy I had never met on his naked head while I did my best to sheer away the last of his hair, for he reached back and grasped my knee tight in his right hand. I let loose not a sniff, not a whimper, he simply made no sound to indicate any discontent, but you learn to see these things in a person's posture. I could feel it in his hand on my leg and the way he grips.

I had cut his scalp once, it was a tiny knick, I don't even think he noticed because he was up in his head. I pulled out the cord of hair I left on the back of his skull and combed through it with my fingers before twisting it up and braiding it once more. Nice and tidy, he was. I found a reason to wipe my wet face and laugh, just a little.

“You got yirself a tan line from your hair, Duck.” Couldn't help myself to trace the shape of his hair line, how pale skin became even more like sun bleached bone under my dark hand.

He rolled his shoulders to stop me leaning over him and got up on his flesh and metal legs. “Ah, leave it, Dune. We should move before we get corpsed and scaved.”

So, we drove. He still had that hard look on his face, shaking his head slowly every once in a while like he couldn't believe his own memory of it all. All places have their hell, times of great death. He made it sound like half the Citadel fell ill and most had perished in that outbreak of illness. I swore that I heard Phil mention rash fevers once, at the crow fisher meeting I think. I kept watching him, though what had then been raw, new burns had hardened to tight red and pink aberrations of the flesh. My diseased brain was tempting me with the idea of smearing ashes in his eye sockets to remember the far away memory more clearly. I think he saw it too. He peered at himself in the rear view glass a few times, scratching over his scalp with blunt finger tips. Not even a thank you, forker. No matter, he rarely thanked anyone anyway, unless he was being sarcastic. That pissy look on his face is never what it seems. Well, sometimes it is but in this instance, I knew better.

When I lifted my hand to touch, bring a little good to that ugly-gorgeous mouth, he flinched and turned his head quick to look at me and then back to the path ahead of us. His hands had gripped the steering wheel till I thought his bones might pop through the scars over his knuckles, they loosened over the leather he and Phil had braided over it. They made the wheel detachable, made it real ultra green and pretty too. It had a dog's skull in its center, grinning like mad with an eight-ball held between jaws lined with steel fangs they'd glued in where the old teeth had fallen out. I had helped, I cut up an old pop can to make tin flowers to adorn the eye sockets. Phil liked that. My Ducky seemed off, he winced at the touch and I very nearly dropped my hand away, but he leaned over to follow it, turning his face into my palm.

“After Hex kicked it, Nux was afraid all the time. I didn't get it. I was stupid, wasn't watching... Too fangin' busy trying to learn something, anything fast enough to get on a crew before I wound up a floater.”

“Floater?” I was uncertain what the term meant to him. To me it was was gunk that drifts around in the wet stuff of your eye.

“Someone useless, get shit jobs like feedin' pups that c't walk yet. Or shoveling shit outta the dunny. Gates stay closed for um...”

“Oh,”

He looked at me while I tried to comprehend his words to explain his battle fodder slang to me. Nux
was afraid, of what? And how did that make Slit stupid? Slit, he looked like that small, lost boy again, just for a second. He looked back to the horizon. “Hex used to sleep with a shiv in his hand. Gave it to me when he was burnin' out. Still got it, sort of. Melted down the metal for this, later down the road.”

He lifted his left hand from the gear shifter and turned his arm up for me to see a blade on his wrist that I knew all too well. I looked down at it, ran my fingers from the tip of the metal against his arm to the handle which ran over his palm and each side of the gauntlet. When I looked back to him, he had a far away look that I hadn't seen since he lay at my kip, roasted awful and mostly dead.

“There was this Imperator, Wrecker,” He spat the name out like it was toxic, not the same way he used to curse Nux. It was different. “He- Anyway, found out why Hex slept with a friggin' shiv in his hand...”

The story continued, once more, he wouldn't let me caress away the disgust and shame from his face. He took my hand and held it tight to restrain it. I was too absorbed in his words to noticed that we had stopped. For whatever reason, I remembered the way he wouldn't let me touch his face that night we arrived at my old home. Had he talked about this with Phil that night? Was that why he looked to be in pain any time I touched his lips then? Had they recounted the tale of a little brother hiding his face from an evil lurking among them, about my Ducky being carved like a roadkill ready for eatin'? The blood, the way he talked about blood pouring out of him and trying to flow backwards down into his throat, I could very nearly feel it too. It made me gag. He just about crushed my hand in his grip, and then, he let go so suddenly that the blood rushing back into my fingers stung terribly. My guts had gone very, very sour. He gripped that wheel again as if it was the only thing binding him to our plain of existence. I could not speak although he seemed to wait for me to, but I choked. I had no words. His head hung for a moment, then the growl of the engine revving up told me that he wanted to just go. Moving was better than staying still and dwelling. I agreed wholeheartedly, but felt distinctly as if he was hurt somehow by my silence. I just... Needed to take it in and put away the pain of empathy long enough to be present again, instead of involuntarily imagining this.

“You weren't stupid, Slit. You were just a sprout. An' ya did good, the right thing.”

“..Mmph. No one ever said that before.”

“I woulda killed the pig-devil too.”

He slammed his palm against the steering wheel and snarled, it startled me away from him. He was downshifting and then gliding right up into sixth gear. Maybe he needed the speed to get the taste of his own past out of his mouth.

“I feel... Arrgh! Soft. No more fucking stories.”

I've never seen somebody wipe their nose so angrily that I feared they might scrape the feature right off their face. He scrubbed his eyes till they were red too. No, a Slit isn't soft, but sometimes he needs to be set straight. I had to fix this, and fix it his way.
Rising Smoke

Chapter Summary

Sting - Burn for you

Yeah, I'm gonna be corny and suggest THIS song for this chapter. As a matter of fact, here is a specific link https://youtu.be/u1FOLcGo9Ns

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

-Slit-

She said 'pull over, gotta piss'. So I did. Thought I could use a stop anyway. We got out on our respective sides to wet the thirsty dirt.

I felt raw. Dune just sat there with a blank stare when I told her how I got the face she praises so damn much. When she had finally opened her mouth, she said exactly what I expected her to. Something about that just rubbed me wrong. I think I told her because I wanted somebody to fucking hear it and tell me he deserved it, even though I already knew it. Ace knew it. Notch knew it. Tank knew it. Phil knew it for sure and he still said nothing beyond reminding me of it simply to compare Joe to that wad of runny shit. Everyone fucking knew it and said nothing but don't talk about it.

They made Nux shut up about it, hoped he was too young to remember it, and sometimes I wondered if he did or didn't recall what happened. I think he did. He was nearly ready to join me as a fully fledged War Boy, excited too. He started hanging around the pits, sizing up others, deciding how he was going to acquire a rig. He could fight for one which had belonged to a fallen brother, or scavenge a wreck and fight for parts to mend it. For a whole and already fierce war chariot, new drivers fought with everything they had. He had shown the promise, so Tank and Notch wanted him to start figuring out how to get behind a wheel. Their instruction on the matter was a few words and verbal permission to go to the fury pits with me for the first time. 'Figure it out' they said, and then gave me a pass on morning patrol to go with him. 'Figure it out' they said, and then gave me a pass on morning patrol to go with him. All went fine, at first. Nux decided he wanted to scavenge a wreck and then fight for the parts because that seemed to be the better bet. He said to me 'I don't wanna spend months undoing some other sod's shite mods when I can do it right in the first place'. I couldn't take him out to the ruins, I didn't have a chariot of my own. We talked Shock and Lug nugget into taking us on a drive to find something to hitch to the back of their boarding wagon.

At the time, I was working with them on the crew's patrol and during hunting trips.

Nux came down to the pits any chance he got, just to observe, find out who he could probably take on and who he wanted to avoid battling if he could. Some parts he'd simply need to fight for. The engine, for example. The one time he went without me, he came back with a black eye and bloody knuckles. When I came back from the morning wander with the crew, he didn't talk for hours. I thought he fought in the pit for the first time and lost. I was pissed, thinking he tried fighting without me there to watch. When I put him on the ground and threatened to give him another black eye for it, he shouted that it didn't happen in the pit. Somebody had offered him a trip down to the deep warrens to, 'put those pretty lips to work'. Nux dealt the bastard a beating, once I got his name, he got another beating in the grease pits where I found him. Choked him with his own socket wrench.

Next morning, Nux said 'I want my mouth to look like skull teeth'. Still groggy, I replied 'Just grin
then, wanker.'

He clarified what he wanted, pulling his lips around and slurring his words as he explained with his lower lip pinched between his fingers. He ended up pestering me all day to show him how to do it. By then I had a fine collection of self-made cut-ups. There are a dozen ways to do shine skin decals. A thin metal stencil and battery acid. You could put together a custom branding iron if you're fair at forging steel. You could just keep scraping off the first few layers of skin over and over in the same shape too. Back then, the old organic was the go-to guy for that sort of thing, but he used a soldering iron for extensive scarification. Burning wouldn't really work on a mouth, the burns on the mouth would spread to sloppy masses of sloughing skin and blisters. For detail, you needed a blade and lips heal fast from cuts so you had to carve deep to get them to scar right. Nux already had the cuts in his cheeks to accentuate the shape of his skull, a right of passage among many crews although all had their own variations of the ritual. I never had room for mine on the right. Tank said I didn't need the cuts, because there was no need to test my threshold for superficial pain. 'Your grit is already proven.' he gruffed at me when I asked once, which was as close as anyone ever got to mentioning the indecent which marred my right cheek. At the time, seemed to me like Nux was hungry for more scarification.

Nux pushed and prodded and even begged once which got him a swift set of knuckles to the gut but he got up and returned it. He tried to knock me on my ass too but I caught his fist and pushed him back, glared death into him, snarled till I felt feral. It was a warning, fight me and you will lose, but he didn't back down. He came back at me like thunder after the flash of lightning, he was like a storm you didn't know was there until the sand was already biting your flesh. 'I don't want pretty lips, Slit! I want to look kami-fuckin-crazy!' That's why I think he remembered, and somewhere deep he didn't want anyone trying to get their shifter polished by him. I'd tell Dune about that too, but every time I said anything about Nux and the place we were raised, I knew she only pitied me. What drove me nuts was that I revelled in her pity. I wanted a shine hand and to be told I was right to cut that cancer from the Citadel. That's what made me soft, wanting her praise this way. I was going to get chewed up and belched out dead at the Citadel if I kept this up, so I stopped myself before she could reward me with her hand for killing him. No more stories. Maybe no more shine hand for a while.

You can think your way through a lot in the time it takes to piss. I zipped up and turned to get back into the driver side. I was steel hard in my resolve to keep her hands off me but when I turned, the thudding of boots stomping over the hood of the Impala and Dune's body casting a shadow over me stopped me in my tracks. I still had my reflexes, there was that. I caught her weight, turned into her attack and flung her to the ground. It knocked the air out of her chest cage when her back met the packed earth. She'd just tried to maul me.

"What the fuck?! Loony bitch!"

She didn't cough and gulp air for long. She was soon up on her feet, shine and scarred fists up.

"Softy, ya coulda knocked my jaw around the back of m'neck. Aw, don't wanna bust up a scav? Sweet thing!"

Hundreds of days ago, I'd have pounded anyone who dared insult me. Pound um so hard they begged me to take everything from their pockets just to lay off and find something else to do. I didn't always carry out my battles in the pits, unless I needed something you can't get from pockets, like the rush of pure victory. I didn't know what the hell had gotten up in Dune's head, but she was just begging to lose a few of her fangs. Wouldn't be a loss to the world, one less tooth to break through my skin when she was in a mood and decided to get nippy. It came to me then that if she were a War Boy, I'd definitely reduce her face to a shameful, bloody mess but she's not a War Boy. Whatever the hell she was to me, didn't feel right to break her down and make her beg. I could though. I could do
"Shut your ugly teeth and get in the car, we don't have time for you to be actin' mental!"

When I moved to slide back into the driver side, she kicked the door closed and stood in front of it.

"Nah Nah! Dune ain't through with you." She declared and gave me a shove with her fist.

When I only glowered down at her, her hand shot out again like a pissed off snake to pinch at my right nipple through my shirt. Reflexes kicked again. My hand covered her face and I pushed her back with enough force to send her into a stumble. Her head knocked the frame of the door and for a split second, she was dazed. That big fucked up grin reappeared though.

"Yeah! That's the way Dune likes it!" The nutter crowed.

"Veeight! What the fuck are you doing? Knock it the fuck off, Dune! You ain't gonna like it in a minute! I'll tie your screwy arse to the bonnet and make you into a hood ornament!"

She shrugged, held out her open hands and laughed as she sauntered my way, looking every bit too sure of herself. "All Dune hears is talk."

I felt the scar tissue inside my cheek pinched by my grinding teeth, I growled through them, anger rising. I was going to give her a much uglier smile if she didn't can it. I was that damn close to grabbing her and stuffing her into the trunk for a while, maybe I'd find some rough terrain to bounce her around in there for a bit. Didn't care for the idea of damaging that shine hand, though. I didn't want her to touch me with the cursed thing for a while, but I didn't want it useless.

"Get. In. The. Car."

I was just about to grab her and drag her into the cab, kicking and screaming. Her lips only pulled into a snarl at the underlying threat, she didn't want to obey. Wouldn't be Dune if she did what I told her to when she really should.

"C'mon War Boy, where's yir balls? In my pocket? Come 'n get 'em!"

If she was looking for a fight, she just found one. I had just wanted to get back into the car, drive, and get through the next two weeks, maybe remind myself with my razor that I could take whatever the brothers back home could throw at me. I'd tear their heads off and shit down their necks for the very words Dune just shot out of her loud mouth. In a blinding rush of kamicrazy adrenaline, she was flattened against the flank of Shirley. The bump rails I installed at Phil's grease pit could have broken her back and made those scarred up legs useless if I hadn't lifted her by the belt before I slammed her. She tried getting her arms up. They were easy to grab and pin back, her ass dropped onto the bar of the rail as I let go to stop her rapping fists. She was a ruthless sniper, decently dangerous in a fight if she was pissed off first but without the fire in her gut, she was ineffective against me. Complete shit because no one taught her to fight proper. She relied on rage and survival instinct. She could throw a fair punch, but not with her hands held over her head. She growled from deep in her chest, tried to get her legs up between us but only succeeded in helping me get between them so she couldn't kick me in the guts. She tried pushing back with her knees in my sides, bucking around and snapping her teeth but it couldn't help her now. She'd jammed her finger at the wrong button on me. I brought my head forward hard enough to knock hers into the roof but kept it there to grind her much smaller skull between mine and the steel of the Impala. Her breath was like hot exhaust polluting the air, so was mine.

"You still think my sack's in your pocket?" I couldn't take her shine hand and shove it down my
pants to prove I still had um right where they should be. It'd provoke some real anger if I did that and she'd probably try to rip them out of their comfortable wrapper. So, I ground my zipper and everything behind it against her lower belly. "I'll whoop your mediocre arse all night and you'll never even get close to gettin' um."

Her face screwed up when I pulled back, looking almost like she was repulsed. I laughed, spite coming on to join my fury, but she exploded into laughter too. It shut me up. She struggled to speak through her cackling, throwing her head back after every false start to yowl and yip some more. She sounded like a wild dog.

"Ha! Heh HAH! Haven't gotten jolly nasty and done a good tumble with mah Ducky in months! Can't keep a straight face! Ha! What joy, she missed this fun!"

Was that what she wanted? Fun? What's fun? I couldn't remember. We used to roll around socking the crap out of each other for shade, for the last sip of cola in the canteen, for the hell of it, and that was fun. We hadn't had a good scrap, not without real intent to maim out of rage since the day lightning screwed up the whole system I lived by with the scaly sand witch for so long. Almost three months. Long enough for the scars on her head and feet to heal, maybe long enough for her to miss this and for me to forget I enjoyed it. It was like it had been before everything gotucky too, back when we could be vulgar without it being weird or meaning something. For just a minute, it felt like that again for the first time in what felt like a V8 damned age. Dune just kept on laughing, even swung her legs like some cheery pup. Provoked near to pummeling a psychotic, now infected by her inane glee, I couldn't and didn't care enough to contain a reckless urge. I wanted to bite the little demon, bite her back for every time she sank her vicious teeth into me. I wanted to bite where she was soft and would hurt even if I didn't break the skin, which I might anyway. If she wanted to play this old game, I wasn't going to play it nice and domestic just because it got all cozy and civilized at the not-so-green place.

She didn't flatter herself with the high pitched noise coming out of her when I pulled her away from the flank of the car by the collar of the denim jacket and threw her onto the bonnet with a suppressed grunt. I could sense my lips pulling into a mad snarl of wicked joy. She kicked at my face, ribs, could've shattered a collarbone if I hadn't turned quick enough to shoulder the blow. She caught me in the chin once with the toe of her boot, so I bit my own tongue long before I got a good hold on her ankles and pulled her in close enough to throw up her shirt and take a mouthful of her just over the left hip bone. My jaw clenched, hard. Her voice was shrill, it echoed over the vast emptiness around us, so did the cracking of knuckles over my skull. She was striking harder now, might have a few knots on my head later. Looks like I flipped the right switch to get her nitro flowing. Next, she gripped my ears to pry me off, her flesh came up with my mouth for a moment before I let go and the nature of healthy skin had it snapping back into place. She wasn't bleeding, that was my own blood on her, but she'd bruise in the shape of my bite.

Her furious maul of razors opened and clicked shut on air, she wanted more than a nibble now, and it was my delight to antagonize her even though she still held my ears hostage. Blood pinkened spittle flew past my lips and landed in a splatter right between her beady green eyes.

That got her blood hot. She dug her heels into my guts and kicked. Thankfully she let go of my ears first, but I could feel the sting of cuts her nails carved through the thin skin over cartilage. I always suspected she was half feral, the way she got up on her hands, pulled her legs in and planted them under her with a hiss confirmed it. She sprung like a starving rat at a scrap of meat, brought us both to the dirt and the only thing stopping her from getting her teeth around me was my palm thrown forward to slap against her windpipe. She fell backward between my flesh and metal legs, gagging. When I rolled forward to get the upper hand again she swung her leg out in a wide arc. The sole of her boot met my face from jaw to temple. I was dazed just long enough for her to shove me back
and... With my wits returning, I still couldn't move. She had a hold on me where I did not want to be bruised or bloody.

"What was that about never even gettin' close to yir boys? Who's got yir balls now?"

That blows the hot air right out of you, it's not fair either. Like a moron, I hoped the humor of honesty might get her to let go.

"Actually, jus' my thunderstick, they're lower."

My words did nothing to help me, she merely leaned closer, crouched over me and showed me her teeth up close up. Freaking reptile. Couldn't do much with her merciless scar hand full of canvas and my gear but with the realization that she didn't care what she had so long as she was winning the game, I threw out caution, mashing my palm into what I know would hurt if I gripped and twisted. That got her to let go alright, so she could parry my hand off her left tit.

Cheap moves, though seizing my junk was never in her repertoire of shitty tactics before, tit grabbing was definitely in mine. It pissed her off, but it also usually signaled that the game was coming to a close. It would break down into pup level vindictive dirt struggling, yanking out clumps of hair, jamming thumbs into armpits, twisting back fingers until somebody got sick of it and called quits, or somebody would get a really foul blow that knocked the stupid out of them. This time was different. Neither felt compelled to end it. I can't speak for the whacko, but I had forgotten how much I needed this. Struggling and rolling in the dirt for no reason in particular, because I liked it, because she liked it too. Me snarling, her laughing, sometimes both screaming obscenities. It was like we were purging three months of rust from our combined system, a much-needed tune-up. We fought till muscle cramped and burned, till bones ached, till knees and elbows were scuffed open. Her teeth were stained red from having her justified taste of me, the harsh color spilled down her chin with a line of drool as we grappled. Her right eye was trying to swell closed, didn't mean to do that though, she caught an elbow once while I was trying to keep her from biting down on anything important. Both of us had wrists rubbed raw from friction burn as each reversed the hold of the other countless times. My left pinky was swollen thick, maybe broken. We writhed and moved sluggish on the ground next to one of the front tires. I had her legs pinned under me, my arms coiled tight around both her own arms and her middle to keep her from putting another lump on my skull. She kept wiggling, squirming, it made her shirt ride up, her pants down, and the jacket bunched under her shoulders. We were like a camp's fire that hadn't been extinguished under a boot, we'd been left to burn ourselves out and only smoldering cinders remained.

She was moaning hoarse, having shrieked her battle cry at me a few too many times. Her legs wrapped around me, heels digging into my spine and catching on both scars and belts as she tried to arch and twist herself out of my grasp. With my chin prodding her in the bare navel, I watched her struggle. Half of me was self-satisfied that I was winning, the other half held a bizarre desire to have her figure out how to free herself and keep our game going. She gave one last defiant scream, thrashed her head side to side, bucked with all her waning strength, then lay on the filthy ground under me. She was limp and shook from the exertion, flesh not yet accepting that it was done fighting. We both panted, heaving in chestfuls of air. The gusts of breath felt chrome on the sweat of my brow. After a long minute, I let her arms go free. She simply let them flop away from her body and lay, needing to cool herself. I needed that too but to untangle myself from her legs, I didn't want that. I had no desire to leave their embrace.

I could see her pulse, the thudding of her blood pump in the soft spot just under her sternum. I'd seen it before, wanted to feel it before, but had been rudely interrupted. My head was cloudy and wasn't thinking straight. I dragged myself forward on my elbows, up the length of her prone body, then felt the rhythmic surging of her blood pusher under my tongue through her skin. Maybe she thought the
game was still being played and maybe it was. Her hands slapped over my shoulders and her fingers formed fists around bunches of leather and sweat dampened polyester. She tasted like salt and dirt, made my gut clench and stomach flip-flop in that gratifying way. I was throwing a different kind of guzz on our still warm embers, and I couldn't locate my senses to stop myself. Hands roaming my bruised scalp stoked rising flames. We were going to get burned.

She would go still, then shift and her legs would tighten around me. I froze, too, whenever she moved. The bite, I had to put my mouth on that. The indents from my teeth had turned into fat welts and the way they felt under my lips was strangely appealing. She was marked mine, not that anyone else would be around to look, but if anyone happened to see her midriff they'd find what I left there. She went rigid and trembled. I thought she approved, but her thumb hooking around my windpipe to push me back said otherwise.

"Mmfph... Slit? What're ya doin'?"

When I turned my eyes up to see her, she wore a confused grimace. Good question, what was I doing? Self-awareness returned with a vengeance. My ramrod was awake and raging in my trousers and Dune was painted in senseless streaks of red from the blood running out of my tongue where I bit it earlier. The fuck was I thinking?

"You're jus'... Licking."

-Dune-

"Mmfph... Slit? What're ya doin'?"

The switch in the temper of our struggle was not swift, not like last time. Ragged breath flowing over my ribs in ebbing waves had transformed to a lapping tongue. It was sloppy like the way Slit licked his bowl clean after he ate. He even grunted and grumbled the same as when he chowed down on something he liked. Potatoes and bush tucker boiled tender would have him making that sound. The feel of it was so peculiar that I shuddered at it. I felt like he was tasting me as if I was a morsel of grub. I didn't dislike it, it tickled and added to the slick left upon the skin after a hard tussle, but it felt so... funky. I pushed my thumb into his throat to get him to back off. He glared at me, frustrated, perhaps still a little revved up from the fight too. Or so I thought.

"You're jus'... Licking."

He rose to his hands and knees, then I saw what was the matter. Oh, he had himself an angry one-eyed trouser snake and I was assuming that it wanted to bite me. Now, I'd said sometime back that poor Duck needed to figure out how he really felt about returning to the Citadel, we both needed to recover from the events which led to and took place at the once glorious location of my birth, but that past conversation was the last thing on my tired mind. I felt the aches and the warmth in muscle and bone that had grown unaccustomed to our snarly rolls in the sand over the time spent with Arddie's clan. I wasn't thinking about the words we had in Mama's shipping container house, nor the lost look in the War Boy's eyes when he wasn't sure what to do. All this scav could think about was how long it had been since anyone touched her like this.

I hadn't thought about it in a long time, maybe deep down, I didn't see myself that way any longer. I'm a mean, mean scavenger but to feel the flesh be praised just for existing? Not something I'd known since a boy named Hippie tried to teach a girl named Dune how to hold a rhythm on a drum made from an old coffee tin. A long, long, long time ago. I haven't known this since before fire burned up my world. It felt like it was all from some other lifetime.

I'd been reliving a memory, it was faded around the edges and I couldn't remember where I was
when it took place. Hippie had short strawberry blond hair, dimples in his cheeks, soft brown eyes, tan lines from his shirt and gloves. We had giggled like the children we’d truly been without knowing it and lay in the shade out of sight, exploring each other all over. And then we found secluded shade away from the caravan any chance we got. Maybe I’d lied to my Ducky, maybe Hippie had certainly been that girl's type but that girl was gone, wasn't she? In her place was me, the nasty longshot.

When I returned to the place where I had left myself, I was looking through Slit, not at him. I had sat myself up on a bruised elbow, chewing the back of my knuckles and my eyes were wet. The failed War Boy was looking at me, head cocked and wondrously mangled face twisting up in his special brand of vexed concern. The furious meat arrow he'd had was gone too. How long was I lost inside my soiled brains?

He was getting up. Slit never took his eyes off me, like he was afraid I might bolt for cover if he looked away, and reached for the driver side door handle as he sat on his knees. Maybe being licked like a dirty plate wasn't what I had been expecting, or particularly wanted, but it made me feel shiny. I felt a true loss in his retreat from me. He looked like he’d been caught tampering with someone's wheels, not guilty, but anticipating a shit-storm. I wanted his rough hands, and his hot breath, and his roaming tongue. I wanted it all back.

"Wait!" I had cried out and taken his wrist to stop him from opening the door.

He froze, a tendon of his neck jumped as his jaw flexed. I could tell him everything, explain how long it's been and that I couldn't even promise that I remembered enough to make this easy and lead the way, but what would those words do for either of us? Nothing but sow the seeds of doubt.

"Not here, too open. Exposed."

He swallowed hard at my words, I watched the apple of his throat bob up and down. Made me want to bite it.

"Where?" He grumbled so low and deep that it took me right back in time to when every word he spoke tore up his throat in growls.

Had to think, it was hard to do when all the will to use my skull stuff with reason and purpose was fast leaving me. What was close by but secluded? We were too close now to occupied territories to linger anywhere too long with that kind of thing to distract us. It came to me after a moment and a look around to make sense of our position on my mental map.

"The Lookout." I offered and he rose to stand. The door was opened and we just about dove back into the safety of Lady Shirley.

He drove, he knew where he was going but seemed different. The way he urged Shirley to accelerate was more aggressive, his fingers tapped against the wheel in broken rhythms, his shoulders were hunched. He was anxious, I wondered if this was how he looked before being called to war during his time as Joe's boy soldier. A hand sought to soothe him, his breath hitched at it, yet lips parted to accept my fingers between them. He sucked for but a moment before turning away from my touch to see ahead. I left a shining trail of his slick from the corner of his lip to his earlobe. What a handsome forked up face. The red in his skin could have been from the wrath of the sun, but I swore that I watched the flesh under his stubble grow darker before my very eyes. Temptation, I wanted him ready the moment we arrived upon the lookout, so dare to tease him I did. A hand gripped my knee tight enough to leave bruises the size of fingerprints as his left ear was made wet with curious lips.

My whole and feeling hand ventured under the rat-holed cloth of his shirt, rediscovering the doodles
in his flesh which had beckoned the first caresses nearly eight hundred days ago. He pawed at my hand through the fabric, grasping it once he found it and pressing it over himself where he now wanted it. A groan erupted from him and for a moment his skull fell back against the headrest. His thick fingers could not remain pressed over mine, showing them how he liked them to move over excited flesh and coarse canvas. He had to drive, navigate. I was afraid he might bite open his own lip. This scav was feeling something new but familiar. Terror, purpose, and anticipation were as one, like when I had my finger on the trigger. I had to mind the wind while controlling my racing pulse so that I could see down the scope and aim true. Strange, strange, strange. This moment felt more real than any other had in many months. I hid my face in the crook of his neck, trying to calm myself by counting the movement of his jugular under my lips. It didn't work, his blood was moving just as hot and fast as my own.

Shirley stopped short, I was thrown against the dash. Ducky momentarily let a hand hover by my head. He hadn't meant for that to happen. One look around through the windows and I knew we'd arrived. The speed of the journey must have been some kind of record. The revolver was pulled from his holster and checked. He always compulsively checked, nudging the cylinder out to give it a ritual spin with his thumb before slipping it back into place and depressing upon the hammer. He remembered my teachings, it filled me up with a pride that was hard to contain as he exiled himself from the cab and circled the familiar stone formation where I played the siren in the lean times. My hands roamed over myself, impatient, desperate even. I wanted him to hurry. He disappeared where I could not see.

POP!

That was a shot! He'd discharged his weapon, why? Was there someone else here? Gut instinct overrode the silliness of physical wants. I snatched my long-lookers from the seat and tore back the roof hatch to have a look around. We'd been stupid, we'd been too hasty. I saw no other sets of wheels and heard nothing, not even the stamping of boots, although my blood rushed and whooshed in my damaged ears so ferocious that I could scarcely hear a thing anyway so what point was there in straining to hear? No, had something happened to my Ducky? I dropped back to the seat, gathering Mama's dutiful rifle and my ammunition to load her up. I could hear Mama, demanding blood. Felt like ages since I heard her secret words.

Eye for an eye, tooth for tooth, and blood for blood, my girl.

Was just about ready to leap from Shirley and unleash scav madness, but a horrendous slap and thud rocked the whole Chevy. I shouted, aimed up through the hatch I'd neglected to close. It was Slit, had to point my deadly barrel away.

"A scav almost SHOT you!" The words poured out like a spurned mother's chiding. He grinned down at me, the cruel but pleased smile I hated to love.

"In or out?" He said as he leaned down through the hatch. At first, I was confused but once my frazzled and busy brain figured out what he meant, I might as well have tossed Mama's lead spitter over the dash so I could reach up and drag Slit down through the opening in the roof by the collar of his vest and shirts.

"You foolish, foolish boy. Dune thought you found someone unfriendly! What the hell did you shoot?!!"

He bitched and whined about how his metal leg was leaving gouges in the paint as he was forced to crawl up the flank and in through the roof but as he landed, practically in my lap, he answered me without really answering.
"Don't worry 'bout it."

Couldn't argue, if he told me not to worry I believed him. Dangerous Duck was a fighter and quick upstairs. I trusted him. It was almost another tussle with renewed energy, in place of giggles and gasps were bared teeth and hisses. I liked the way his bottom lip pulled down when he was pleased. He pushed and pulled, we wrestled our way over the backrest of the front seat. First, he put me on his lap, then he put me under himself so that he could lick and taste again. This time, it wasn't so funky. I rewarded him with hands either side of his scarred face. I clutched and wrapped him up with every limb to keep him close. He nosed his way under my shirt and bliss. I became suddenly aware that he had a fixation with what could feed the young if I ever had the desire to create a progeny. Where I grew up, I never imagined a grown man latched on there, but he pulled and slurped as if some form of sustaining nourishment could come from me. It was then that I considered reminding him that I was no milk mother, yet I didn't want what he was doing to stop. It was both painful and terribly wonderful. Once, long ago, he asked why I don't make cheese which spurred a long talk both explaining to me how cheese is made and explaining to him that I neither produced milk nor knew of how to make the cheese he asked for. That was way at the beginning. He knew I had nothing to give him but still, he sucked and licked. Inevitably I grew bored of this, I wanted to taste him now so I took him by the ears and pulled him up so that I may feel his ruined lips with my own. Beautiful boy, lovely battle fodder, why had it taken this long to try this? Maybe because we both had room to grow first, had old hurt which needed to heal.

Another struggle took place. Teeth, both his and my own, threatened flesh but never broke it. I was smashed near flat between his scorching hot skin and the glass of the side window. It was getting dark out, that was when I noted the time of day. Strange how much your senses take in even when they were occupied with the flesh and intentions of another body. I sucked the hair studded flesh of his neck against my tongue, it was rough and stung my mouth. Now it was his turn to ask...

"What are you doing?"

"Marking you up? 'cause you're my Ducky."

He'd never had himself a hickey before. You could tell. He squirmed and wriggled the whole time, and when it was done he had to see for himself the red splotch which would soon form a bruise as he looked into a side mirror. Sweet Duck, a part of me wished he'd had the chance to learn these things with me long ago so that not every little thing was an all-new journey. When he returned to me, scratching at the bruise on his neck, he asked me a question which broke me into a million pieces, each almost too sharp to touch.

"What am I supposed to be doing?" He asked.

His hands hovered and clenched to fists, uncertain where to put them. It could be my fault, showing him in the Green Place that so much as a kiss is rewarded with a vengeful backhand. We had to stop, and I had to explain. I knew the order things had to happen. He may or may not have. I took his hands and brought them to where they had been before he left to inspect what I had done to him. He'd had his fingertips tickling their way around the waistband of my trousers. I put them back.

"You undress Dune, and she undresses you," I told him.

We were clumsy, I gouged myself under the fingernail on something I removed from his person. He noticed the blood before I did, he made a quiet fuss over it and cleaned the red away with his tongue. He pulled up my long sleeve and tossed it over the seat. Shy boy. Slit pressed his face to my collarbone while I pulled up his shirts and leathers. I slung his things aside, then acquainted myself with his shape. Piles of clothes had formed. I opened his fly, he dragged my slacks down my legs, and in the waning day, we let each other explore. I felt that there was a longing for it not to be the
work of fate, for it to be because we chose it. I led his hands and showed them how to move. For but
a second, it was enrapturing. Joy! Glory! His fingers were just rough enough to feel incredible,
instead of like sandpaper.

"It's so wet," He said, pulling away. I had to reassure him.

He said it felt like an open wound, he even examined his fingers as if to be certain that there was no
blood. He needed more than just my word, I placed his fingers back where they had been, pressed
my lips to his good ear, and I told him the truth.

"It's like that because I want you, Slit."

-Slit-

Undress, that's simple enough. My gauntlet and blade came away from my arm into her hands. She
cut her finger on it. She only lost a drop and she shouldn't be careless with a blade that sharp, but I
took her hand anyway and slipped the finger between my teeth to suck the digit clean. It got exciting
again. Dune damn near tore the collar of my shirt to get it off and she had to wriggle her hands
between us to get my belt off. I had her crushed to me, I needed to feel the pressure of her flesh, the
way her muscle and sinew moved against mine. Then there was the shine of how the bone of her
pelvis felt digging into my gear shift. The chill creeping in through roof hatch made naked skin
prickle all along the front half of her once I got her out of the denim jacket and her layers of clothes
worn thin with constant wear. I felt the loathing of the cold on her flesh under my hands but couldn't
seem to look at her to witness it with my own eyes. It still felt like a crime to be seen getting soft on
someone. She opened my trousers and curled her shiny hand around me when I came free. I had no
choice but to move into it, flesh and bone definitely knew the difference between her chrome fingers
and the ridges and calluses of my own palm. If she kept me in her grip, I would not endure for long.
She showed mercy, let me finish doing what I'd been tasked with. I had to pull off at least one of her
boots first, I ignored the other, too impatient to bother when I could just as easily let her pants hang
around her other ankle.

Sometime after we both sat there with near nothing on us, she guided my fingers to herself and
pressed her shiny digits between my own. It felt precisely the same as the time I was torn open on
Buzzard spikes, slick and hot. It wasn't what I expected. I expected to be slurping my fingers for ages
to get her slippery enough to make it all work without it feeling like fucking sand for the both of us. I
exclaimed at it, pointing out the obvious and pulling back on reflex to check for red. Nothing amiss,
clear as cola.

"...I want you..." She told me in more words that I didn't really hear, yet understood. She wanted me,
the sodden feel of her on my fingers was the proof of that. Why? Because I'm still fuckin' chrome,
that's why. I tried desperately to believe that. Just that day I thought I might be too soft to go back to
the Citadel and survive it. Dune might have decided to try whooping me much earlier just to prove
me wrong on that front.

Scars and skin mingled. It smelled different than an aggravated ass kicking match. It was heady,
thick, it stuffed my sense of smell with nothing else but the funk of our nude filth. We wouldn't have
enough cola to bathe till we returned to her homestead, so the aroma would have to linger. She
lapped a swath of hot slick from the heel of her palm to her fingertips when she touched me the same
as I touched her. 'Look at me' the nutter said in the fading light and told me that it was okay to see
what I was doing and see what she was doing too. Heads knocked a few times, it was only needy
nudging to get at lips and urge one another to give access or move. She looked black as soot where
veiled in shadow and silver where the rising moon glistened upon her. She was well muscled, though
less defined than even a weak man because of the layer of softness between her strength and her
surface. All her shapes were rounded next to mine, smooth curves, like classical automobiles from a
time before the before. Her scent, she smelled like the biting perfume of sweating in the sun and gun
pease.

Boundaries were crammed into the back of our heads. Dune snatched my hand and suckled my
middle and index fingers, tasting her own flavor. It's easy to imagine that mouth wrapped around
something else and if it weren't for the knives she had for teeth I might have asked for it. I got bold,
put her on her back once again and tried sliding my gear stick through the warmth of her self-
lubricated glory. She showed those teeth, tried to pull me closer with her legs. With a gust of breath,
she sheathed me as if I were a blade and her the scabbard. I wasn't worried that she'd bite, I begged
her to clamp her jaw down like a vice just so that my ghost and my meat suit weren't pulled apart
from each other, even had a fistful of her hair to pull her in and keep her chewing on me.

I felt her from the inside and her teeth were in my skin again. Shirley rocked with us and something
squeaked harshly again and again. I came up from the stupor just long enough for a thought to arrive
and remind me that the Impala probably needed better struts and shocks, then the six inches of space
between my ears was empty again. Once or twice, our combined noise was so raucous that I had to
lift my head and check the windows to see that no buzzard headlights were approaching. If anyone
out there was hearing this, maybe they were being smart and avoiding what could be mistaken for
the sound of a slow murder. She'd drag me down again with arms around the back of my neck.

The end was abrupt and for a time I felt separated from myself, on the outside looking in. For a
second, I thought we might've traded souls, just pulled them out of ourselves and put them inside
each other. Recovering from that was a slow fall, physical awareness slithered back to me like the
purposeful undulation of a snake. Her mouth had left the scars over my face cool and moist. Why do
we always end up with blood in our mouths? I could taste my own red from one or all of the dozen
times when we swapped spit and I definitely felt the sting of a few new bites. We might have slept
for a short time, it was the most comfortable rest I've had in years, maybe ever, even though I felt
every twitch of the maniac's knees and elbows. I couldn't sleep forever, there was still the goanna I'd
blown the head off of, something fresh to eat. As we rose from the comfortable tangle, clothes got
mixed up. She had my shirt, I had her father's denim jacket.

-Dune-

Slit was the first to leave the Impala. The cold of the night rushed in and swept about the car faster
than I could ever hope to be prepared for it. Slit pulled the jacket tighter around himself and tried to
shake off the chill. I bet his head felt mighty frosty that night, what with being freshly sheered. There
was very little light left, I could barely make out his shape in the soft glow of moonlight against the
sand as I clambered over the seat and stepped out. He had stopped, I could hear this fact more than
see it.

"We haven't been here since the day of the storm."

His words were flat, the textures of inflection absent from the baritone of his voice. The sound of air
leaving him slowly indicated a sigh, and I wondered if he was remembering. I could only remember
parts of that day myself. Wrecks, a full jerry-can, a War Boy all painted in white with a hole through
his melon, how young the boy looked. So, so young. The rest was nothing but blurs and images that
flicker in my mind as if shown to me by the light of a single candle flame.

"You a'right, Duck?"

"M'fine just feels spooky." He admitted to me.

I thought about it for a moment. We hadn't been out here roaming the familiar territories since then,
not in a purposeful way. In the morning, it would be a good idea to keep an eye out for something to fire off lead into for the maggot farm. What we were given to eat on the way home would not last long at all, not the slightly less than two weeks we had to gather our crap and go to the place we agreed to meet the others for the long journey to the Citadel. We needed maggots for home and for the trip. We came to this spot months ago to end a debate about Citadel convoy routes, our world got turned inside out, now we had returned to this place to, for lack of better analogy, scald away the confusion of it all with bodies that burn so furious.

"Full circle," I replied

"Yeah," The War Boy-turned-scav grunted back. "There still shit hidden here to burn?"

He wanted a fire for his cold bones, and although I knew the light could attract the desperate long before I'd be ready to make easy work of them, I could not say no. I had indeed hidden away brush and some old garbage which burns up easily here. It was buried at the foot of the stone. It is best not to hide things like that in the crevices where it could become a home for critters which sting and bite. The cool sands had kept it dry and safe. Ducky disappeared and returned quickly to pester me about sparking up some flames. We dug a depression into the sour earth with our hands and my flint lit up our small slice of the world.

When his form was illuminated in dancing flame light and striking shadows, I could see that he had a meal fit for two hungry sets of gutty works. It hung from his hand by a thick tail. Oh my! What had this goanna been eating?! What a robust thing, I might have been wary of a ravenous mouth and many needle-sharp fangs had it not been missing most of its head. This must be what Slit had shot at just after we arrived. Bright man, a true scavenger now who lets no opportunity be passed up. His lovely ugly-gorgeous lips pulled up at the corners as I unsheathed my blade and passed it to him. He had plenty of sharps on his person but this was a mock trade of ritual. Take my knife and let us share a feast. He knew well, after all this time, that if I hand him my blade it meant he was truly being sung praises in the silence of the work we had then to do. It took only a few cuts to create a ring around the neck of the scaly beast, then a split down the belly, and then Slit peeled the tough skin from the lizard like rolling off a sock. He let me gut it, I was better at not slicing into the things which make a righteous stink and spoil the meat. Some of the innards are good for eating. The heart is good, but chewy. The waste was dumped as far as I was willing to step away from the fire. A little wire the tire iron makes a good stick with which to hold it over the flames. Slit handled the business of getting the lizard crispy enough to eat while I had something I needed to do. I scrubbed my hands as clean as they could get in the sand and grit, then fetched my canteen and the jug of water.

The catnip, a necessary torture now. Awful stuff which tastes nothing like the kinder members of its green family. Ducky cocked his head curiously at the canteen when I dropped several generous pinches of the finely ground leaves into the spout and shucked away the cloth cover. The naked canteen was a watertight shell of stainless steel. I could boil water in it simply by dangling it over the flames on another thread of wire. I didn't bother telling Slit why I had chosen to flavor the clear life-sustaining fluid. He looked so damn pleased with himself that I wouldn't dare point out what I'd need such a brew for. I wasn't particularly worried because if I counted the days like Arddie told me to do, the window for consequences had passed several days before we left The Green Place and I'd soon be a mean ol' thing for a week anyway. It's best to err on the side of caution.

He stole the first sip of it a while after I'd pulled it from the flames to cool, he cringed but swallowed before passing it back and drinking awkwardly from the much heavier jug of untainted water.

"Tea is disgusting." He grumbled as he inspected the lizard to see if it as cooked through enough to gnaw up.
He liked his food well done, and I suppose that could have something to do with one of the stories he’d told me that afternoon. Well cooked grub isn't so likely to give you worms or the liquid laughs. I once had to show him how I prepared maggots, just so that he'd keep eating, oh that was so long ago. I had to drag him up from the interior to the place where wind-worn holes in the rock gave the flies access to the tubs, pull him along where the crawls and squeezes got difficult for his healing flesh to navigate. He had cursed me and scratched at my arms the entire way until I propped him up on a sloping wall of stone. He had gagged at the smell I had long grown accustomed to while I washed freshly gathered crawlies in a fine wired flour sieve, pouring what he calls cola over them to rinse away the filth. Then I'd stun them with salt and give them a little touch of fire before another rinse. They would still writhe slowly, but they would be tastier this way and you wouldn't have to chew them up diligently to make certain they didn't make a meal of you instead. Oh, how time had changed things.

The smug look on the former cannon fodder's bruised face was positively endearing. Sometimes it seemed that he'd smile at nothing, or perhaps a thought up in his head would inspire the smirk. He scratched at the deep red bruises I'd kissed into his neck and his stained teeth showed at that. He kept close too, I always felt the heat of his side against my shoulder while we picked the flesh from the bones of the lizard. The charred ribs would crunch between our gnashing teeth. An unbecoming calm had swept over us. You should never be so at ease, no no no. But with the warmth of his presence, the fire, and the hot tea heating me from within it became sinfully easy to forget how to be vigilant. I started to hum a tune, a little something of a wordless ear-worm at first but soon I could hear Mumsy's lovely voice and you just cannot refuse the urge to sing along with her, in your head or not.

"I know you've been hurt by this ugly world... I can tell by the way ya carry yourself, But if you let me... oh-whoa! Here's what I'll do. I'll take care of you. Nah nah nuh nah."

Ah! And the rhythm of a drum came to join the melody, it was merely the patting of my own hands against my knees. I was happy, radiant as the gleam of nicely polished chrome bumpers in the noon sun. Ducky turned his head to glance down at me, a brow lifted as he worked a bit of bone and gristle between his incisors to strip every last corpuscle of nutritious material from the inedible bits. It gave me a pause, how can a man manage to look stoic and unimpressed even with a bit of food hanging out of his face? Only Slit could seem to do it. He spat the splintered bone into the fire and leaned to bump me with his weight.

"Go on, then." He rumbled.

Encouragement to perform now? Perhaps I should have ridden him long ago if it got him so apt to be my one-man audience. Well, I certainly couldn't disappoint him, could I? A singin' longshot had a reputation to keep.

"I, I've fought and lost, the same as you. So you see, I know just what you've been through but if you'll let me, here's what I'll do. Oh! I just gotta take care o' you..."

How lovely. He let me sing my way through an entire song without interrupting or rolling his eyes, and it was wondrous to lean into someone and feel the lyrics possess me for a little while. Mama used to talk about another place in time where people would sing around fires, laughing and playing like children, trying mind-expanding treats, and experimenting with their own limitations. She would say 'I was a child of the sixties, Sweet-thing. I had all my fun before you came along to bring it back.' It's easy to forget that my mum was not a young parent and that I was a pleasant surprise, according to her. Oh, my sore flesh and bone sang sick and ugly for him. We're such an incredible, nonsensical, unlikely mess. I sang around mouthfuls of lizard, and he'd just lean back into me and grumble around his food with half-lidded eyes. I know I had mixed up words, butchered lyrics and made a grand
mess of a once beautiful sound. Maybe I sang it twice, can't be sure, my voice box hurt already from all the whooping and hollering of the day we'd had, and what a day. I was sipping my long cooled catnip swill and humming the tune again when he spoke to me, leaning his heavy upper body into me until he lay across my lap. There was something very ultra-green and chrome too about doing this old ritual in total privacy. We hadn't had the chance in so long.

"Who was that?" He asked me, almost sweetly.

"eh?"

"The singer." Ducky seemed to have figured out during our time in my old home that songs come from specific performers. Clever man. He was rewarded with a hand on his freshly bald head. I already felt the slightest resistance of the hair growing back. He winced because the sun had burned him through the day.

"Oh, first time Dune heard it, Mumsy sang it. Heard it later on one o' her records. Don't remember who, lots of before folk sang it and changed words around, but she likes Mum's version best. Mum used to sing it to Pa, usually when us young'uns were just getting home at dusk. Ma would be wearing pa's shirt and singin'. He'd just smile and smile and smile. Come to think of it, Dune suspects Mum used to sing at pa after ballin' him."

Slit snorted, almost choking on a bit of lizard and talking around his next bite.

"And now you're wearin' my stuff and singin' it at me? Corny."

"Jus' popped into my head, Duck. Ya even know what corn is?"

"Nope...You never told me what he was like, by the way."

Hmm, such an auspicious thing for him to say while he was wearing the jacket Pa had worn every day in all the years I knew him. My fingers found the places where Ma had repaired it, even the much older stitches that Rus and Flick's Ma had repaired before her untimely death. Pa told me about her once. Told me it was a simpler, easier time, that she was a good mother and a lovely woman who passed on her height and generosity to Flick, even though the boy could barely remember her. I thought about Pa, watching him early in the morning. I could still remember his shadow, how others feared it but I only smiled up at the way he made shade for me while I played. The way he smiled in return, pushed back his hair and plucked me up from the ground to carry me around, just so proud. These were things I couldn't burden Slit with, the way I felt safe when Pa held me. I was sure he'd never felt the same thing. Goddess, I wished my failed War Boy had been grown up from a seedling in The Green Place. Maybe he'd have had a Ma and Pa like me, maybe he'd have known those comforts. But he'd have been a different person, would he not? I tried focusing on the sensory things, what I had long ago seen and touched. It's easier to absorb that way.

"Mmm. He was pale, so his face was always a lil burnt red from the sun. Him an' mum, couldn't have made two more different people even if you had clay in every color an' texture. His hair was like straw, the color and how dry it would get. He'd just buzz it off when it started touching his ears and let it grow in again. He shaved his face every morning, then spit-shined his boots. Useless, those old things, he must've walked a thousand miles in them. T'was like putting lipstick on a pig to try an' clean um up. S'pose it was just part of his routine. Too hard ingrained to break... He'd have hated you, Slit. He'd say Dune had no business anywhere near someone like you. Maybe he'd have warmed up, just not as fast as Mumsy."

"Well, he'd have had to deal with it. I'm not going anywhere."
He was so self-assured, so absolute in his words. That in itself might just have caught Pa's attention, might have helped him take Slit seriously. I felt proud for no reason, caressed his face and kissed it even. He squirmed but rolled over to look at me. What a lovely thing.

"Good. You know, the only reason he'd hate you is that you're kind of similar to what he was."

"Please don't tell me I remind you of your old man. I was just starting to be okay with being within reach of you naked."

"What? Heheh, would callin' ya daddy ruin the mood?"

He shifted and scratched at himself under the jacket as if he had ants chewing at his skin.

"Everyone back home called Joe Daddy and I've been having a lot of doubts about home lately, so yeah, it might bother me."

"Dune was joking, Slit. He was some kind of soldier. He had dog tags, scars inside and out, pretty much had no faith in people. Hell, he had bags ready just in case bridges got burnt and we had to leave the Many Mothers in a hurry."

"Fuck, people there used to burn your bridges if you pissed them off?"

"What? No. Actually, maybe, but it's mostly just an old metaphor."

I wasn't sure. I was so young when we left. In truth, I knew nothing by the time Mumsy and I absconded from our home, searching for a greener pasture. A newborn silence stalked us. We could hear the world breathe, and the poor creature Joe had led to his own oblivion was nearly asleep in my lap. We needed to move. Scorpions and snakes lived in these sands, things Mum had constantly reminded me to watch for during her years in the realm of the living. I couldn't be bothered, I was so content to stay and watch the fire die even as the icy grip of night closed in around us. In the quiet that followed my lack of will to move, Slit's brows slowly dropped and his eyes narrowed.

"Great flaming balls of Veeight!"

"WHAT? What?" I was so shaken by his explosion of noise that I wroth out from under him, prepared to lift Mum's lead slinger and crack off a shot at whatever made the man shout like that. He sat up, turning to look me in the eye with a kind of glint I had never seen before.

"I get the joke."

"How- are ya mad? Dune ain't told a joke." I had said nothing since recounting the memory of Pa to him. What was he on about?

"Clean fingers!" He spat, lips pulling into a tight smile against his darkly stained teeth while he rolled in the sand just roaring away in laughter, close enough to the dying fire that I launched a hand to stop him from burning himself. "Naughty mechanic!"

Took a second for me to get it too. He was talking about the joke I had told his fellow former War Boy, Phil, months ago. I laughed so hard I snorted, thankfully the tea was long drunk completely, or else I'd be shooting it from my nose.

We kicked sand over the last embers after he was through laughing so late from a joke I told and forgot at the start of our stay with old friends. Into Shirley, we crawled like pitiful creatures of the earth. Lately, he'd been hesitant to take his leg off, I noticed that and did what it took to get him comfortable. He had blisters. Goddess, he needed a better fitting socket. Sometimes, even after a year
and more, that thing still gave his skin fits. It could easily have been the strain of our fun today, the
tussle and the other crazy thing we indulged in, but I still felt he shouldn't have to suffer from this
thing he had to wear just to walk. Maybe I wanted too much out of life. I wanted him to never feel
pain again, something you can only hope for in an afterlife with her highness upon her throne of
seeds. I simply wanted everything for him.

That night, he let me touch his less than half a leg, he praised a shine hand and fought sleep just so
that he could tie our wrists together. I wondered if this was how Ma and Pa, two extremes, fell so
hard.
"Would you like to hear more?" He said unto me, knowing the answer I'm certain. "About Nux," He
clarified, How could I say no? He told me of a battle in a ring made of barbed chicken wire, how he
and his best friend won a more comfortable place to sleep. I could hardly believe that these War
Boys fought for as little as a place to close their eyes. It opened my own eyes. I fell asleep to his story
and I dreamt of Ma and Pa behind bars, fighting each other. I'll never understand that strange dream,
but my Ducky curled against me and his lips pressed to mine, that was easy to feel and easier to
understand early in the morning.

"You need to scrub your reeking teeth, Duck." I tried to ward him off with a pinch and by pulling
my head away. That only gave him my neck to slobber on.

"You stink too, Psycho."

Oh, he's handsy now. Give him something and goddess forbid he actually likes it, then he'll want it
all the time. This is how I wound up a part of a nightly ritual, touching his face until he falls asleep.
You can't complain too much when it's good for you too. Perhaps I could have accepted more of the
catnip from Arddie. We never got that far this morning, too sore, the both of us. Never had pain been
so pleasant. The world was turned on its head, I couldn't make heads or tails of it. He was all red
from the crown of his head to the collar of where his shirt had hung around his neck. I was right, his
hair had protected him.

"Want you in the shade today, Ducky. You're already burned."

"M'fine," he said, trying to get under my shirt again in this lazy way with his face. I pulled down my
shirt, no, I was wearing his shirt. Anyway, I blocked him with a wall of tattered fabric.

"Duck, the sun doesn't like you. You're burned. Dune wants you to stay in the shade. We need to
find a way to protect your melon from the cruel glare."

He huffed and puffed, scrubbing his already rough scalp into my neck and ignoring me so that he
could enjoy himself against my legs. A Slit can be gentle when he's sore and tired, I've long known
this but never applied it to the idea of this realm of bodies which mingle.

"Slit,"

"Huh?" He didn't give me a chance to continue from the place I started. I was pulled to him so close,
and he licked at me. I didn't know what to think, what to feel.

"Thank you?" I said, unable to shape the words in any other way than a question. This made him
stop, look at me with low slung brows and a slack jaw. "For... I don't know. Being with me.
Touching me."

I felt more than heard him pull in a breath. "It freaks me out when you talk in first... S'not right. An'
you touched me first."
I don't know how it wasn't his words but the tone in them which made everything alright. I swear, Mummy said 'I told you so' and then I wanted his lips. It was never a lovely body that he wanted, it was the rest, just to be and receive. It made sense, we're not pretty things, just living things. The older people used to talk about rain, feeling it fall all over their bodies. I think I know how it felt, just by having the War Boy all around me, like warm summer water. We couldn't stay that way, I had to escape the car and the gravity within it, I needed Mum's rifle and my long-lookers. He followed me, climbing up the stone and taking his usual place where the sun gave shade until the ruthless noon but this time, I joined him in the shadows and chose this life of mediocrity for the sake of comfort and joy. Oh, it was such a dangerous game, to lose sight of the road ahead. He clung so hard I could hardly hold up the long lookers to see the world around us. Finally, I got him apart from me long enough to try and have a good gander around while he got the mirror tree I kept here propped up and glimmering in the rising light.

Twice I had to look to the north-west, twice to be sure it wasn't an illusion manufactured by my sick skull meat, and I was certain that I saw a tower of darkness. Wilson had been hit, but by who? Smoke was rising from the dead worlds to greet us on this day, the date of a welcome rebirth for grown people with selfish desires and aspirations. I saw smoke rising in the West.

"That's coming from Wilson's," I said and all I can remember after that is bodies in motion.

An Eden was set afame to show us that there was no time for frivolous things. Whether we thought Wilson was a friend or not, I loaded Mum's rifle and Ducky stepped on the gas to get there to see what had happened to cause smoke to rise from his near sacred territories. We had no time to watch for maggot food that day.

I wasn't great friends with Wilson, but I didn't deny his value. He can mend the things no one else could, why not see if he was still alive? Wilson was a man with no apprentice, a craft would die with him if he was left to fight a battle on his own. Who would be insane enough to bother him? Not me, that says something about whoever would. I only remember bits of that morning. The closer we came to the other territories, the more darkness we saw rising from the sands.

"Ducky," I cried. "Everyone... Everyone is burning."

I saw billows of black ascending from every settlement we knew and I saw Slit grow cold, tense, alien.

"It's a carpet bombing," He said, and I didn't understand the metaphor. Pa described carpet bombing to me once, on one of his bad days, this wasn't how he defined it. Slit was still speaking, he spoke of raids and how to attack from many sides to wipe out everything in an entire region, and I just could not retain the information as we neared Wilson's place. So much smoke.

So much smoke.

Chapter End Notes

And... The end????? On a cliff hanger????????? Yes, this is the last chapter of this installment. Don't worry, I have close to sixty more chapters summarized. There will be sequels, I promise. This just means it's the end of book one in a fan series I guess? Yeah,
that sounds about right.

I want to give you a heads up. I'm editing this WHOLE fic so that I can get a copy privately printed for myself (I mean, if you want a copy, you can msg me on tumblr at Burn-your-face-upon-the-chrome and I will find a way to get you a copy of it.) BUT I want a physical copy of the longest fic I have ever written for myself.

I'm going to be doing tons of editing and adding to this story, and also possibly a crossover with ImRobin which features both Dune and their lovely character Rush so I may be busy for a bit.

In the editing process I want to fill in a lot of blanks that exist in this story, particularly between the chapter “Worth” and “Two Scavengers”, eventually, those edited chapters may (almost certainly) trickle their way here to AO3. I might also hack out some unnecessary info dumpery and rambling that I tend to do in order to get the thing to read butter smooth. Thank you for sticking with this. The sequel fic will be titled “The Road To Nowhere” and begin with the duo checking out what's left of Wilson's place to determine his fate. Keep an eye out for it.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!