**Hyperborean**

by **Amethystina**

**Summary**

Over eighty years have passed since the Disaster that ended civilization and covered the world in a permanent layer of snow and ice. Humanity survived, if only barely, and have since then managed to recover a little of what it lost, building settlements and rediscovering technology to help them in their struggle. Every settlement relies on technology for their survival and the Engineers are the ones tasked with maintaining and building it, but despite their importance the Engineers are a dying breed.

Jake and his sister live under constant threat of being kidnapped or enslaved for the skills they possess, so he has learned to be wary of strangers — Raiders in particular, who murder and steal without remorse. But that changes when he meets a Raider he can't quite bring himself to hate. Cougar is different, and causes a myriad of conflicting emotions that Jake would rather not feel to being with.

But when it turns out that Cougar might be able to lead Jake to the key to humanity's continued survival he decides to embark on the biggest adventure of his life, trust issues be damned. It soon becomes obvious that it won't be an easy journey, for more than one reason.

EDIT: 2016/06/01 - Added second bonus chapter
I've been meaning to write this story for a while and when the Big Bang came up I figured that it was a good time as any to do it. I come from a very cold, snowy place myself so writing this meant that I could use a lot of my own experiences and knowledge. It was a blast to create this world and I had so much fun exploring it! I didn't quite intend for it to become as epic as it did though but I just can't seem to help myself. I really hope you'll enjoy it anyway :)

I want to give a big thank you to my Big Bang team for their hard work and all the support I've gotten from everyone involved (and some who weren't). Please make sure to check out the awesome complements done for my story! And, like always, CarpeDentum did the beta'ing <3

The banner and scene break art is done by me.
Dodging Bullets

Jake knew that it was a part of his responsibility as a little brother to allow Jess to fuss over him and therefore waited obediently for her to straighten his collar and tuck in the edges of his jarringly bright green scarf inside it. Never mind that he had already done it to near perfection. He just figured that she had earned it for being such an awesome big sister.

Well, that and the fact that she was a far better shot than he was and he wasn't entirely sure if she would let their family ties keep her from 'accidentally' shooting him in the foot if he didn't do as she pleased. Come to think of it, she would probably be more inclined to shoot him in the foot on accounts of them being related. It was strangers and people she didn't like that she shot in less painful and yet considerably more permanently lethal places. Like their heads.

"I don't like this, Jake. You should wait until George can come with you," Jess muttered under her breath, dislike coloring every syllable. The dull, grey light of dawn seemed to smooth out the shadows angling across her face as they stood just outside their door, their breaths soft clouds of pearly white against the pale morning sky.

"I'll be fine, Jess," Jake assured her, placing his hands over hers when it became obvious that she was continuing to tug on his clothes simply because she didn't want to finish the task and let him leave. He caught her gaze, holding it firmly while smiling effortlessly. "It's a routine check, you know that. You've done it yourself several times."

"Never without backup," she replied sharply, not releasing her grip on his collar. It could have been threatening if it hadn't been because it was Jess and Jake knew how fiercely protective she could be.

A part of him wanted to mention that he was soon thirty – she didn't have to dote on him like that – but he was still her little brother. Nothing would ever change that. He knew that she would never not feel responsible for him and that included being cautious and paranoid.

Everyone was, truth be told, since they knew all too well what could happen if you went outside the gates on your own. But it really was nothing but a simple routine check to make sure that the generators and transmitters in the Gallagher district were in working order. It was one of the conditions that constituted the shaky but vital truce they had with that particular settlement and they couldn't postpone it much longer, not even until George was back on his feet after that nasty case of the flu of his.
"I'll be fine," Jake repeated, squeezing Jess' fingers even if he couldn't feel the softness of her skin through his thick mittens. "And I have all my toys. I'm not defenseless."

Jess gave his collar a sharp tug.

"That's the thing, Jake," she replied anxiously, "they're just toys. Gadgets. You don't know if they work."

"Well, I know that some of them do. I mean, I tried that thing the other day and-"

"Yes," she interrupted with her infamous big sister sigh that soon warped into a soft smile, "I know, Jake. I know."

She still sounded terribly worried. Jake leaned forward, bumping his forehead against hers, the impact softened by the knitted cap he was wearing. It managed to lure a slight smile onto Jess' lips.

"I'll be back before sundown," he promised.

Perhaps a bit after depending on the density of the newest layer of snow, but even when he was forced to walk – you never risked taking a vehicle unless you had someone with you to help defend it against Raiders – he could easily cover the distance in a day.

Jess pursed her lips, still looking reluctant, but eventually pulled her hands from his grip and patted his chest.

"The sooner you get going the sooner you'll be back," she said sagely and Jake couldn't help grinning, pushing his glasses higher on his nose.

"Say good morning to Beth when she gets up." He leaned in, kissing Jess' cheek before backing away, snow crunching under his feet. "And save me some dinner, okay?"

Jess rolled her eyes, her arms already wrapping around herself, no doubt to stave off the chill she was feeling standing out there in the cold without her coat. She had only stepped outside to see him off but as always lingered longer than strictly necessary.

"You come back in one piece, Jacob, or I'll shoot you myself."

Jake's grin widened.

"Rather counterproductive to shoot me if you want to see me safe from harm, my dear sister," he teased, not at all surprised when she answered first and foremost with a rude gesture she'd rather be caught dead than allow Beth to see.

It still made Jake smile to see her stand there, blonde hair dancing in the wind with his big, warm – and admittedly ugly – sweater pulled over her sleep mussed clothes, because even if she was tired and almost huddling for warmth she still managed to keep her back straight. There was an air of confidence and security about her that Jake knew wasn't just him being an idolizing baby brother.

The only reason she wasn't coming with him was because she was needed elsewhere, conferring with the other families in the settlement on what could be done to strengthen their defenses, what repairs to prioritize and how to ensure that everyone would have food the coming year. The long winter months were over and even if the pale, tired summer sun never managed to melt the snow and ice around them it was still the best time for those kinds of plans and improvements.

For about four months the temperature would be slightly more tolerable and less snow would fall. Everyone was eager to utilize it to the fullest since they had learned that it was one of the few
ways to get an advantage over the Raiders sometimes skirting the borders of their homes.

Jake took comfort in the fact that there hadn't been any sightings of Raiders in the past seven months, which was probably one of the reasons that Jess had eventually relented and allowed him to go off on his own. She would have insisted they send more people otherwise. Jake and Jess were the only ones who knew how to inspect and repair possible damage to the generators – as far as Jake knew they were the only Engineers within a ten mile radius – so any addition would essentially be bodyguards.

And while Jake was very fond of being alive and not beaten to death for his boots or eaten by bears it wasn't a long trip to the Gallagher district, nor a particularly dangerous one. Mostly just a wide, seemingly endless expanse of solid, snow covered ice with the remnants of what had once been a sprawling city up ahead. Which wasn't exactly ideal for ambushes of any kind, be they bears or Raiders.

So Jake would be fine. Unless the uninteresting scenery bored him to death which, considering Jake's personality, was definitely not something you could rule out as a possibility.

Jake offered Jess a jaunty little salute before turning to walk towards the gates. The rest of the settlement was still snoozing around him, save for the people posted along the battered steel wall surrounding it. Despite the lack of Raiders the past couple of months they knew better than to let their guard down and ease up on security.

He could hear distant sounds coming from the cattle they kept at the other end of the settlement – lows, bleats and the occasional clucking from chickens – and he met one of their hunting dogs as he walked towards the gates. Most of them doubled as guard dogs and were left to trot through the settlement as they pleased, quiet sentinels until the moment a threat approached.

Jake's settlement was quite famous for their massive, well-trained dogs, the biggest standing tall enough to be at level with Jake's waist. As frightening – and lethal – as they could be to strangers Jake adored them and play-wrestled with them in the snow as often as he could. Taking on what essentially looked like gigantic, domesticated wolves was probably not considered wise by anyone's standards but that had never stopped Jake before.

He couldn't help reaching out a hand, letting it sink into Reaper's thick, grey fur during the brief seconds they passed each other on the snowy path. Reaper responded by walking in a half circle behind Jake's legs until he ended up on Jake's other side, now heading in the same direction, clearly intent on escorting Jake to where ever he was heading. Jake couldn't help smiling, rubbing the dog's ear with a cooing little noise that Reaper was clearly too badass to acknowledge.

It was on mornings such as these that Jake could actually fool himself that things weren't as bad as they seemed. Everything was calm and quiet, the darkness giving away slowly, revealing the houses of the settlement that looked more like white hills than buildings, hidden under patches of snow as they were. It looked rather idyllic – almost sweet – until people started milling about, their eyes tired, shoulders slumped and bodies angled against the cold.

It had been a rough winter. They had lost two people during it – George could have become the third – and Jake hoped that summer would offer some relief. He was still young, strong and incurably optimistic but it was obvious that for some each new winter just wore them down more and more until there wasn't much left besides a haggard, cold shell.

Jake had actually performed a study of sorts, just because he could, and had found that the average life expectancy for people in their settlement was just above fifty. It was unsettling, in a way, to know that according to the statistics both Jess and Jake had lived half of their lives already and were expected to die fairly soon.
That could put a damper on anyone's good mood, so he was smart enough not to share his findings with anyone, not even Jess.

Carol and Hazel were watching the gate when Jake approached and he offered them both a beaming smile. Carol replied with a derisive snort, like always since Jake might or might not have set her husband's coat on fire by mistake two years prior – she could hold a grudge, that was for sure –, while Hazel smiled right back. If he had had the time Jake would have stopped for a friendly chat but he'd rather get going and was also fairly certain that both Carol and Hazel were counting down the minutes to when the morning shift started and they would be relieved from their duties.

So all he offered was some nonsensical babble while Carol and Hazel worked the hatch wheel that unlocked the big gate, metal shrieking and groaning in protest as it was forced open for the first time in about a week, by Jake's calculations. Jake would have helped if they would have let him but he knew better than to ask, restlessly weighting back and forth on his heels instead and occasionally rubbing a hand over Reaper's head, who had sat down on his haunches next to him.

They opened the gate just enough for Jake and his backpack to slip past and he offered the huge dog a grateful parting pat before walking through the gap. Jake had to hold back a groan when he found himself in almost knee deep snow. It was always a priority to keep the snow at a relatively manageable level inside the settlement but they rarely ventured outside the wall except to clear off the piles that sometimes gathered against it, somewhat defeating the purpose of having a wall in the first place if the snow made it climbable.

"Cheer up, Jake. It looks like the sun from yesterday left a bit of a crust. If you're lucky it will hold your weight," Hazel said behind his shoulder.

Jake sighed and offered her a quick smile before testing that theory. Climbing up on top of a crusted layer of snow without breaking through was a lot harder than it sounded in theory. Pushing too hard would send you right through but pushing too little meant that you tumbled back down again. Luckily enough for Jake he had no dignity whatsoever and didn't really care if Carol and Hazel thought he was hilarious when it took him three tries before he managed.

He turned to grin proudly at them once he stood tall on the firm layer of snow and not even Carol seemed able to hinder an amused snort at that, before she slipped out of view, back inside the relative safety of the gate. Hazel was still peering out at him though, some of her black curls slipping out from under her cap, twisting around her face as the wind caught them.

"I'll let the evening shift know to expect you back by sunset," Hazel called out, further proving just how much of a routine check this was. They all knew where he was going and how long it would take for him to get back.

"Thanks!" Jake replied with a grin and a wave before starting his long, dull walk.

The first couple of steps were taken rather gingerly as Jake was careful not to break through the crust, but as soon as he found that it would hold his weight even if he speed up he did just that.

Jake didn't have the constitution and peace of mind to actually appreciate the vast, empty stillness before him – mostly covered in white or light blue except where branches, stems and stones peeked out, offering splashes of muted colors – and occupied himself by letting his mind wander. He would have loved to bring some music but it was a luxury he hadn't been able to prioritize with a clear conscience. There were a lot of other things he should repair long before he tried to resurrect the old portable music player he had found, even if it was for the benefit of his own sanity.
He could make do with running various equations inside his head and planning just how to reroute the power lines within the settlement to better serve their needs. He knew that Jess would stress that as a priority during the meeting since some of the circuits had fried over the winter and needed to be replaced anyway – that and to strengthen the wall. It wasn't nearly as durable as it looked on a distance, which was part of the point really, to make it seem more imposing, but if anyone were to attack it needed to be able to withstand more force.

Jake knew that she wouldn't bring up their private little project, despite the fact that they had been working on it for over two years. They had argued about it just the other week but Jess had decided, rather dictatorially, that it was better not to get anyone's hopes up before they had actual results. Jake wanted to point out that hope might actually help them accomplish their goal but he knew better than to try. There were more important things to focus on.

Walking in itself was pretty easy despite the distance he had to travel. Just putting one foot in front of the other. It was mechanically repetitive in a way that Jake took a certain amount of comfort in. He liked mechanics, as if his chosen field didn't prove that well enough.

That's not to say that he enjoyed the excursion.

The view was, as previously established, flat, barren and boring and without anyone to keep him company he was left to his own inner musings which normally turned rather peculiar without anything there to ground him. The sight of towering buildings up ahead wasn't as reassuring as one would believe, mainly because Jake knew that it would still take him hours to actually reach his destination.

Just because it looked close didn't mean that it was.

So Jake could admit that he felt pretty tired when he finally climbed over the low wall marking the start of the city limit. It wasn't in any way meant for protection what with the city being pretty much abandoned and served only as a reminder of times since long past.

The Gallagher settlement was southwest of where Jake entered; carved into one of the old city districts. Much like Jake's own settlement a strong wall had been erected to protect the citizens within while the rest of the big city slept in eerie silence, deserted and slowly crumbling without anyone to maintain it.

The skyscrapers were like jagged teeth against the pale white sky, gaping open where windows had been smashed or scavenged, metal and other useful materials stripped from the frames leaving aching, glaring holes behind. Snow and ice clung to the cracks like an insistent, ruthless sickness, crawling into the open spaces to spread its chill.

Jake didn't like the city. It set his teeth on edge with its bare metal skeletons and fractured walls. It felt like anything could be hiding in those dark crevices. Jake's shoulders were tense – his spine rigid – as his gaze swept over his surroundings time and time again, just to be sure.

He much preferred his own settlement where the houses were robust and primitive in comparison to the fancy apartment complexes in the Gallagher district but all the more cozy for it. The Gallagher settlement was much bigger but in no ways better. Without Jess and Jake they wouldn't even be able to maintain the buildings that they occupied, much less survive amongst all the steel and concrete.

But Jake didn't mind. The truce they had with the Gallagher settlement included trading of wares and other necessities and Jake was happy to offer his services as a mean to keep his family alive. The people in the Gallagher district – though Jake had never met more than two of them in person – were all dependent on them in a way that meant that they would be willing to offer protection.
and shelter should the need ever arise.

Jake took a small break in a relatively shielded nook, hiding from the biting wind while he ate and drank from the provisions he had brought. He spent an extra couple of minutes waggling his toes inside his boots and rubbing some warmth into his hands and limbs, just to make sure that he kept his circulation going.

He slipped his scarf over his nose before cautiously heading out onto the city streets again, knowing better than to show his face if he could help it. A solitary man, who clearly was no scout, walking through the city was practically unheard of and even if Jake didn't expect to run into anyone he'd rather not take any chances. The people in the Gallagher district could probably guess who he was if they saw him, which had to be avoided at all cost. Not even when the deal was struck between the two settlements had the leaders from the Gallagher district been allowed to see the Engineer that would be helping them.

They didn't even know that there were two of them.

Jake would have thought that the precautions were unnecessary if he didn't know firsthand that they weren't. Engineers were invaluable to the settlements they belonged to and while some were wise enough to barter for their services – like those in the Gallagher district – there were others who wouldn't hesitate to forcibly kidnap one if they had to.

But at least that meant that any hostiles would rather take Jake alive because he wasn't of much use to anyone dead.

He continued his journey to the outskirts of the Gallagher district, his pace brisk and eyes attentive. He and Jess both knew which paths to take to avoid being seen from the high wall surrounding the settlement, slipping in through the basement door to a nearby building rather than the front. It was risky to have the generators supplying the big settlement with electricity outside of the actual walls since it made them weak to attack should anyone ever find them, but it also offered a small amount of safety should they malfunction and explode. Not to mention that there was more than one, which meant that Jake had about three hours of solitary work ahead of him, checking up and readjusting the generators.

All the necessary tools were in his backpack, along with the keys to the inner rooms of the buildings he needed to visit to perform the maintenance checks. At least it was indoors, which protected him from the worst of the wind and snow. He patiently waited a couple of seconds for his eyes to adjust to the dim light before heading towards the first heavy steel door blocking his path, keys jingling in his hands. It was all routine by then, even if he usually had company. The silence was beginning to grate on his nerves and that was never a good thing. It made him paranoid.

He had to tell himself not to react to every single creak he heard as if it was a threat, but it was very difficult not to. Jake had very wild imagination.

So he hummed to himself as he worked, glad to finally have something to do with his hands. Granted that his fingers became stiff with cold within minutes after he had folded back the flap that turned his mittens into fingerless gloves, leaving his skin exposed to the nippy air, but he'd rather endure that than the boredom itching along his spine.

The scarf kept his nose and mouth warm, the trapped moisture from his breaths making the air stuffy and thick to breathe – the complete opposite of the sharp sting he would have experienced without it. He could feel the bite of the cold against his cheekbones while intricate patterns of white frost splayed over the green of his scarf and clung to his eyelashes, born from the vapor he exhaled.
It wasn't very difficult work but it kept him occupied, especially since he couldn't afford mistakes. He took his time, knowing that Jess would berate him otherwise, and didn't pack up until he was absolutely certain that he had checked every bolt and wire, just to be on the safe side. The next checkup wouldn't be for another month and Jake didn't want anything to happen during that time. While they shared a peaceful truce with the Gallagher district for now Jake wasn't keen on finding out what would happen if either of the parties ended up breaking their part of the deal – and he had no intention whatsoever of being the cause for it.

He stopped only long enough to eat the last of his packed food – some rather bland sandwiches, a couple strips of dried meat and half a canteen of water – before heading out again. The sun would be up for another couple of hours but he'd rather get home before dark if he could. The crust made it easier and if he hurried he might actually make it back before Jess had time to clear the dinner off the table.

That thought was enough to put a slight spring into his steps as he carefully slipped out from the building he was in, readjusting his backpack and checking that his clothes left as little bare skin on display as possible. He quite disliked the sensation of wet, recycled air but pulled his scarf up over his nose all the same, more for the sake of anonymity than warmth.

The return trip through the city was spent in the same kind of desolate silence and Jake barely held back his urge to start humming again, listening instead to the howl of the wind and crunch of snow under his feet.

That was probably the only reason that he heard them coming in the first place; not that it did him much good in the long run.

Jake didn't have time to do more than freeze in sudden alarm, a chill running down his spine, before he caught sight of a movement up ahead. It was subtle – barely visible – but he knew it shouldn't have been there in the first place. He was supposed to be alone.

It was gone as quickly as he had spotted it and even if he whirled around, gaze flickering across the seemingly empty street, nothing else seemed to be out of place. No footprints had disturbed the snow and no one was peeking out from behind the cracked, gaping holes in the surrounding buildings.

But that didn't mean that there wasn't someone out there.

His pulse quickened and instinctual fear grabbed hold, making his heart race inside his ribcage. It might be scouts from the Gallagher district but even they could be dangerous depending on the circumstances. Sometimes settlements decided to kill anyone encroaching on their territory long before they even considered asking questions and Jake really didn't want to be put in a situation where he would have to defend himself. There had been no spare guns for him to bring, for one.

Jake swallowed before quickly flicking back the flap on his gloves, his fingers fumbling along his left forearm. It was difficult to feel underneath all the layers he was wearing but there was a satisfying click once he managed to find the small button along the bulky pieces of metal wrapped around his arm, a soft, whirring hum filling the air. The vibration of the awakening machinery seemed to thrum through his bones. He knew that they were just toys in Jess' eyes but it was better than nothing. Better than being left defenseless.

He was reaching up to his ear, pushing in one of the earbuds from his pocket, when he saw a movement in the corner of his eye. He didn't wait to confirm what it was and just dove forward, fighting to keep his balance when he slipped on the snow. There was a colorful curse behind him – which was all Jake needed to know that someone was definitely out to get him – but he didn't
bother to look back, focusing instead on getting his feet under him.

The second earbud fell from his hand but he didn't have time to worry about that when he heard more than one set of footsteps crunching through the snow behind him. He berated himself for letting anyone sneak up on him but the truth was that there were too many places where people could hide amongst the cracked city ruins.

These must have been lying in wait for him.

He saw movement in his peripheral vision – more people – but Jake didn't stop running until a man stepped out on the street several feet ahead, blocking his path. Jake came to a skidding halt, his arms flailing and heart caught in his throat. The barrel of a mean-looking rifle was aimed at Jake's chest and it didn't take long for the others to close in, surrounding him with their guns raised.

"Wow. This escalated quickly," Jake breathed, not able to hinder the reflex to throw his hands in the air, as if that would actually save his life.

To Jake's immense surprise no one took the shot.

He was left panting, gaze flickering between the three men he could see, guessing on four more behind him. That was too big of a group to be scouts from the Gallagher settlement, which only left Raiders.

Jake barely held back a curse. He should have listened to Jess. He should totally have listened to his older sister's wisdom. But he hadn't and now he was going to die. Perfect. Then again, he wasn't sure if having another person with him would have evened out the odds all that much.

"We would like to ask you some questions," said a voice from behind Jake's back. The man sounded amused, obviously certain of their advantage in the situation and, yeah, Jake could admit that it wasn't likely to change anytime soon.

From what he saw of the three in front of him it was the middle one he had to be wary of – the one that had stopped him in his tracks. The other two were grinning at each other, looking triumphant and certain of their catch, but the middle one kept his focus on the target. On Jake. There wasn't even the slightest tremble to his rifle while the other two were letting their guard down and had almost started lowering their weapons already. Those two Jake could probably have gotten past but not the third one.

"Oh yeah? Questions that involve holding me at gunpoint?" Jake replied, keeping his tone lofty and at ease, as if he wasn't in fact standing with several guns aimed at him. "You could just have asked nicely."

Jake dared a glance over his shoulder, slightly relieved to notice that there were only three other men present. That still meant six against one. Tricky odds, even with the warm hum of his toy against his arm. But he couldn't discharge it yet. He shouldn't do it at all – not when he had lost one of the earbuds – but he might very well have to if he wanted to get out of this alive.

"Call it a precaution," one of the men replied – the same man – and obviously the one in charge. Possibly the biggest threat judging on the sheer compact size of him and the way he handled the gun in his hands. It might be lowering that very moment but something told Jake that it would whip up again at the smallest sign of trouble.

Jake turned slightly, so that he would be able to keep an eye on the two men he deemed most dangerous. It was only distantly that he registered that they seemed to be wearing pretty much the
same outfit – which was surprisingly organized for Raiders – and wielding the same type of weapon, save that guy who carried what looked more like a long range rifle instead of an assault rifle.

"Ask away," Jake replied with a careless shrug.

That's not to say that he would give informative answers but he had to cooperate for now. If he could just make them relax a little more he might be able to get the upper hand.

The leader smiled, an action that should have felt comforting but definitely didn't considering their situation. Or it might just have been something with the angular, weathered face that didn't sit well with Jake.

"We've heard rumors."

"Oh? I'm not much for gossip myself," Jake blurted out, mostly without thinking. It earned him a small twitch of annoyance but no major reaction besides that.

"They say there's an Engineer nearby."

Jake felt his breath stutter in his throat but he forced himself not to flinch. Panic started curling in his gut but he didn't have time to reply before the man picked up again, expression rather pleased.

"You don't happen to know anything about that, do you? We'd love to have one of our own, you see."

Kidnap and forcibly recruit one, in other words.

Jake swallowed as subtly as he could before forcing a smile, never mind that no one could see it with his scarf blocking their sight. His eyes flickered between the men, three of them having relaxed to the point where they would be a fraction of a second too late if Jake were to try anything. But that still left a vaguely alert one, the leader and that insanely focused guy. He barely seemed to have moved since the whole conversation started, still aiming at Jake with frankly alarming precision.

And was the guy actually wearing a cowboy hat? Who the hell did that in this weather?

It made Jake uneasy since that, in combination with the grey scarf pulled up much like Jake's was, meant that he couldn't see the man's face at all. Not even a glimpse of it. It was creepy.

"Yeah, I've heard those too," Jake replied, congratulating himself on how his voice didn't tremble as he said the words. He had to try and bluff his way out of this somehow. "There's one that fixes our generators."

"So you're from the Gallagher district?" the lead Raider asked.

Jake nodded, knowing that he couldn't let them know which settlement he was from. That could lead them straight to Jess.

"Check it."

For a second Jake didn't quite understand what the leader was asking for, until one of the Raiders walked up and grabbed Jake's right hand. As much as he tried to wrench free his sleeve was eventually pulled back and the man caught a glimpse of the tattoo on the inside of his wrist.

Fuck. Fuckfuckfuck.
"Not the Gallagher mark. This one is from someplace else," the Raider reported back with a particularly smug expression that Jake was dying to wipe off his grinning face. But he knew better than to do that unless he wanted to have all those guns trained at him again.

So he couldn't do much when the Raider reached out and pulled down his scarf either, giving them all a clear look at his face.

"Hey!" Jake barked indignantly, partly because of the rudeness and partly because the cold suddenly biting into his skin with renewed vigor, only strengthened by the slight dampness from his trapped breaths. He could practically feel the frost settling in.

He snatched his hand back when it was released and backed up a couple of steps. The guy with the hat seemed to be the only one who actively followed Jake with his gun, making him the trickiest one to get past. Even the leading Raider seemed to be getting overly confident about the outcome of this particular standoff.

"We questioned and killed one of the Gallagher scouts," the leader offered in a lazily drawled explanation, "but not without taking a peek at her tattoo. We know what it looks like. So which settlement are you really from?"

They obviously weren't familiar with the area but even if they had been they probably wouldn't have recognized Jake's tattoo. His home was so small that barely anyone besides them and some in the closest settlements had ever seen their mark. And Raiders usually didn't care about whom they killed. They made their members burn or carve off any settlement crests as soon as they joined to literally cut all former ties with their families and home settlements, to better show their loyalty to their fellow Raiders. The tattoos were meant to help you recognize friends and allies and gain access to your settlement and Jake honestly hadn't expected it to turn around and bite him.

These Raiders were clearly more organized and strategic in their search for an Engineer to kidnap than Jake had predicted.

Jake wondered how long it would take before they figured out they had just caught one.

Not long at all, he guessed, considering that he would be searched eventually and had very suspicious tech on his person. Quite a lot of it, actually. He would have to act soon. Real soon.

His moment came when the leader looked to one of the other Raiders, probably to ask him to help with the strip search, and most of the others seemed relaxed and unsuspecting. Jake knew that he still had that one very determined rifle trained at him but he had to take the chance.

He made sure to act fast.

One slight step to the side and he had cut off the line of sight as well as he could, partly shielded by one of the hat wearing Raider's fellow compatriots, which was obviously enough to cause a moment's delay. Jake didn't waste time before reaching out to flip the last switch on the device strapped to his left arm. He really shouldn't set it off with just one earbud but he didn't have much choice with the other lost somewhere in the snow. He would have to settle for pressing his hand against his unprotected ear.

It was difficult to explain exactly what it felt like when the sonic burst went off but Jake was stumbling backwards even before the first Raider hit the snow covered ground. They weren't dead, he knew that much, but he heard whimpering groans of pain, even through the ringing in his own ears.

Yeah, he was definitely not going to set that off without a full set of earbuds ever again.
Jake was everything but graceful as he ran towards an opening between the towering buildings, vaguely disoriented and not quite steady on his feet, but he was in much better shape than the Raiders he left behind.

The thought had barely crossed his mind before he felt a shiver down his back and he chanced a glance over his shoulder.

That one bastard – whose hat seemed to have fallen off as he slumped forward – was pushing himself up on his knees and raising his rifle again. Sure, he had been standing the furthest away according to Jake’s calculations and therefore least affected by the sonic blast but that was one stubborn fuck.

Whatever they were paying him he definitely deserved a raise.

That errant thought screeched to a halt when Jake realized that the Raider was trying to shoot him.

Jake’s response was to instinctively reach for his right arm, for another one of his toys that was hidden under his thick layers, and it hummed to life without a hitch. It all happened in the brief span of a couple of breathless seconds but felt so much longer, Jake turning, even as he didn’t stop stumbling backwards, while the Raider yanked down his scarf to ease the aiming.

Jake could literally count the three rapid breaths the other man took before squeezing the trigger, Jake’s heart slamming against his ribcage in pretty much the same pace as those breaths.

To say that it was over in the blink of an eye wouldn’t even be an exaggeration.

One second Jake was raising his right hand, boots sliding through the snow as he was pushed back – just one brief second – before the magnetic field and the slight twist of Jake’s wrist sent the bullet off course, burying into the wall behind him with a dull thunk.

Jake flailed as he lost his balance, his body not knowing quite which way to go with all the pushing and pulling and he ended up on all fours in the snow, breaths wheezing in and out of his chest. The cold air seemed to burn down his throat.

Had he just done that?

He had only ever tried deflecting tiny metal pieces Beth launched at him with her slingshot before and that was nothing like dodging a real bullet. Not that he had any intention of getting boastful. It had probably been more luck than skill – and an absurd sense of timing – that had saved him and given the numbers he would never be able to do it that successfully again.

"Well fuck me," he mumbled a little dazedly, trying to regain his bearings.

He could feel the snow melt against his uncovered fingers but for once the cold felt reassuring rather than invasive. Real. Grounding.

He might possibly be in shock because of the adrenaline and near death experience.

He looked up, almost surprised to meet the eyes of the Raider that had fired the shot. Their gazes held and Jake wasn’t quite sure what he was seeing on the other’s face except for startled disbelief.

The aim had been true despite the shape of the shooter, angled to hit Jake’s shoulder rather than dead in the chest – probably because they wanted him alive after the stunt he just pulled – but Jake had deflected the bullet. Not just dodged it but changed its course entirely.

It was obvious that the man before him wasn’t quite sure what to make of that.
For a couple of seconds Jake couldn't get his brain to work. It was like he was just waiting to get shot at a second time but instead of raising the rifle again the Raider did something else – a gesture Jake had to search his memory for before he could identify. A cross. He was signing a cross.

A religious Raider?

Religion was rare enough as it was and to see it in a Raider was practically unheard of.

Jake snapped back from his musings at the sound of one of the other men groaning, quickly realizing that he was losing his slight advantage. His limbs shook when he struggled to his feet and for some reason – he honestly couldn't say why – he found himself locking gazes with that Raider again.

The guy was just staring at Jake, making no move whatsoever to raise his rifle even if he probably could have. Jake didn't know if it was a conscious decision the man made or just lingering shock but Jake decided to be grateful for it none the less.

After swallowing hard he turned on his heel and ran, without looking back this time.

He could still felt that gaze follow him until he disappeared out of sight and he honestly had no idea what to make of that. But what really lingered with him was the spark of almost innocent wonder and curiosity he had seen in the other man's dark eyes just before Jake turned and ran, transforming the Raider's face into something softer. Something relatable.

Jake couldn't say why but that feel pretty much as scary as almost getting shot.
Jess was, understandably, pissed off by Jake's little adventure, to the point where she grounded him for two weeks. He tried to reason with her because a) it clearly wasn't his fault, b) he had obviously managed to escape unharmed, and c) he was soon thirty years old for heaven's sake and even if she was four years older she had no right to ground him.

Except that she apparently did.

Fancy that.

Not that Jake could deny that he was shaken by the whole thing. He tried not to think about it if he could help it. As dangerous as their lives were he had never been quite that close to dying or had anyone see his face and identify him as an Engineer before. When Jess found out she immediately made sure to get everyone to agree that fortifying the wall was their main concern, just in case the Raiders were able to follow Jake's trail back to the settlement. Jake felt bad for bringing this on them but Jess assured him that they had plans to do that anyway, they would just bump it up the list.

Jake spent the majority of his first week being grounded locked away in his cramped room – that was honestly more of a workshop than anything else – tinkering away with his projects while singing loudly out of tune to his music, purely out of spite. On the eighth day Jess cracked and allowed him to at least help with the work on the wall, which Jake happily agreed to, before moving on to the power lines and maintenance of their own generators. There were always things to do, especially now when the sun helped hold back the worst of the chill, and Jake liked keeping himself busy.

So when he wasn't helping out within the settlement he retreated to his sanctuary to work on his numerous projects, often with a curious Beth at his side. Jake and Jess had no intention of forcing Beth to follow in their footsteps and become an Engineer but she did seem to have a natural talent and interest for it, so Jake never sent her away if she wanted to observe him while he worked.

Jake took the whole Engineering thing a bit more seriously than his sister did.

Jess was good at it – downright brilliant with bigger engines and mechanical engineering – but Jake had a sense of detail that she didn't. He preferred the intricacies of technology, with all the small wires and circuits, or computer code with its straightforward complexities. Where she had
little interest in exploring Jake did so on a daily basis, scouring what was left of the Internet, scraping all the useful information onto his battered hard drives for safe-keeping.

That was how he found music. And movies. No one but Engineers had access to those kinds of things since so few knew how to operate computers – even less the pitfalls of the spotty, fractured behemoth known as the Internet – but Jake loved it. He loved the challenge. He built his own inventions out of the scraps not needed for his bigger projects for the settlement, always full of ideas on how to expand his horizons and actualize his sometimes ludicrous ideas.

Jess let him, probably because she knew that he would go stir-crazy without it. It was an outlet of sorts, where Jake could channel his energy and focus into things that weren't always useful but deepened his knowledge and sharpened his talents and intellect. He needed to be stimulated and while heavy physical work could tire him out just fine his mind wouldn't stop spinning enough to let him rest unless he could also express his need for delicacy and detail.

Not to mention that he loved working with his hands.

Jake didn't think that he could ever have been anything but an Engineer, even if Marie hadn't taken him and his sister in after their parents died and taught them the trade. Jake was pretty certain that he would have been drawn to the soft hum of computers even without proper training, not because they needed more Engineers – which was Jess' main reason for doing what she did – but because he just couldn't help it. Engineering wasn't easy in their day and age what with all the limitations when it came to materials and the fact that they were a dying breed to begin with, too many having focused on the simpler, immediate means of survival rather than the tactical details, but Jake really didn't want to be anything else.

Even if it happened to paint a big target on his back.

The world needed Engineers to survive since they were the only ones capable of handling the life-sustaining machinery and technology.

Jake would happily shoulder that burden if it would help protect his family.

It was just how the world was after the Disaster.

It took until the third week after Jake's encounter with the Raiders before Jess allowed him to step outside the wall again. Jake didn't mind it so much since he had still had guard shifts and other duties to keep him occupied – one involving the secret project Jess and Jake kept in their basement –, but he could admit that he felt giddy with excitement when it was decided that he was to go along with George and Juan when they went to the Holden settlement to exchange goods. Since it was in the completely opposite direction of the Gallagher district Jess apparently deemed it safe enough to even allow Beth to come along.

It would be Beth's longest excursion outside the wall yet.

While it was certainly dangerous for the children to leave the safety of the settlement they also knew that the sooner they started getting used to it the better they would be able to navigate the outside world when they became adults. It was one thing to stress the importance of caution and
safety and another entirely to scare them into fearing everything outside their own little isolated bubble of existence. That would only breed a generation of people who would be too frightened to actually do what was necessary for their own survival.

Beth wasn't the oldest of the nine children within their settlement with her eight years but since Jake was going she got permission to come along.

It wasn't a very dangerous journey considering that it was significantly closer than the Gallagher district and they would be taking one of the battered, rusty Jeeps they had on hand at the settlement, so neither of them would have to walk.

It still demanded a lot of work to make all the necessary preparations.

It had taken days before the snow was deemed compact enough that taking the Jeep would actually be possible and it had to be fully charged to make the trip back and forth to the Holden settlement, which put a lot of extra strain on their generators. Then the gates had to be open wide enough to let the bulky car through, and finally a ramp had to be shoveled to get the Jeep up onto the snow that always rose higher outside of the walls than inside it. The snow chains only made it marginally easier to find traction on the snow ramp.

Pretty much every able man and woman inside the settlement helped with the preparations and since they knew that it would bring them new supplies – mostly cloth and wool which was the Holden settlement's specialty – no one complained despite the early hour and insistent chill around them.

Beth waved goodbye to her mother from the backseat of the Jeep once they were finally on their way. Jake couldn't help reaching out to twist the purple knitted cap on her head as he sat beside her, childishly delighted to hear Beth's surprised squeal. She punched his shoulder for that – surprisingly hard for an eight year old – but beamed a second later when she righted the soft cap on her head. Jake had made it for her, a detailed pattern of small pink hearts lining the edge, and Beth loved it so much that she would probably wear it until it started falling apart entirely.

Jake sort of wished he had one too, but he would have to settle for his pink and yellow mittens for now. At least until he could get some more yarn.

As the Jeep made its progress through the snow covered landscape Jake couldn't help praising humanity's insistence to perfect the use of vehicles running on electricity rather than gas before the disaster hit. It was so many years ago that Jake only knew of it through hearsay but from what he had been told the supply of gasoline and oil – like so many other things – had basically dried up a couple of months after the Disaster hit, since no one was around to refine and produce it anymore. Without the shift from fossil fuel to electricity humanity really would have been doomed when the by now constant winter settled, cutting off communication, shattering countries and halting production.

It was only through told stories and confirmations from the Internet that Jake knew that the place where he lived had once been known as the United States of America. There was no such thing anymore. There were no countries or governments – no police forces or military. There were just small settlements, dotted around the habitable parts of the world, stray tribes of Nomads and bands of Raiders.

Civilization as a gathered, united whole was just a memory, having dissolved so far back that Jake had no recollection of it himself. He had been born into the world he still lived in, not much having changed even in the past thirty years. Perhaps the settlements had grown a little stronger – the Gallagher district sure had – but all in all it was the same routine year after year. Sometimes there were things to celebrate, like marriages or births, and sometimes they gathered to mourn the
lives that had been lost, but the only thing that didn't change was the cold.

The snow always lingered.

There probably wasn't a single person left alive who could remember what it had been like before the disaster, when there was green grass, beaches and enough sun to make people yearn for the cold. The snow and ice had reigned for eighty years and Jake was fairly certain that it would for a long time to come. There was no use waiting for some kind of miracle or for the snow to melt – all they could do was to survive, against all odds, with the few means they had.

Jake was brought back from his musings when the Jeep slowed to a halt with a chugging motion.

"Something's wrong."

Jake blinked twice at George's words, leaning forward to look out through the windshield. The Holden settlement was up ahead but even from where they were – and despite Jake's not quite sufficient glasses – he could tell that the gate was open.

The gates leading into a settlement were never left open.

"No smoke," Juan muttered from the passenger seat, glancing at Jake who was practically climbing over to join them in the front in his vain attempt to see better.

"Meaning no fires," Jake mumbled almost to himself.

No fires was never a good thing. It meant that no one was there to keep the hearths alive.

"Get closer," Jake said, nudging George's shoulder. "We need to find out what happened and if there are any surv... people left."

Jake barely had time to correct himself when he remembered who was with him in the backseat. Not that Beth didn't know of death and loss – her own dad had died when she was three – but that didn't mean that Jake wanted to push it on her either.

George's grizzled face was twisted into a frustrated, anxious grimace but he nodded all the same, starting up the Jeep again.

As they got closer Jake felt his heart sink. Even if they were partly covered in snow Jake was all too familiar with what a frozen corpse looked like, two of them lying sprawled on the snow in front of the open gate. He barely managed to hold back a curse – something that Juan was obviously less successful at.

"Uncle Jake, what's wrong?"

Jake closed his eyes briefly before leaning back and smiling achingly at Beth.

"Something bad, sweetie, so you'll be good and do as I say, okay?"

Beth nodded, expression far too serious and solemn for an eight-year-old, but there wasn't anything Jake could do about that. There was only so much sheltering you could offer in a world such as theirs.

"Last snowfall was when?" George asked from the driver's seat, just as he pulled to a stop a couple of feet away from the open gate.

"Midday yesterday," Jake replied.
The bodies were almost covered with snow which meant that they died sometime before then, but how much earlier was difficult to say. Jake was looking out through the side window while Beth obediently made sure not to. He didn't know if she understood what was out there but she seemed to realize that he didn't want her to see it if she could avoid it.

"Then they're probably gone now," Juan remarked as he cautiously opened the passenger side door. He didn't need to say who 'they' were since it was only Raiders that left these kinds of sights in their wake.

Jake could feel the tension in his shoulders; the curling fear in his gut. He told himself that it was only natural but that didn't mean that he was in any way eager to face whatever was inside those walls.

"George, stay with the car," Jake ordered before climbing out of the Jeep, only to find himself getting tugged back when Beth grabbed the belt he had wrapped around his waist, on top of his thick coat.

"I wanna come with you, Uncle Jake," she pleaded, voice small and frightened. Her eyes were wide when Jake turned around to face her and he fumbled for a second before he figured out what to say.

"It's safer here with George, in the Jeep," he told her softly, trying to gently push her back inside.

"I promise I won't look."

George gave Jake a sympathetic glance in reply to the helpless one he shot their driver. Jake was rubbish at saying no to his niece, especially when she leveled him with those puppy eyes of hers.

It was a possibly stupid decision but Jake didn't think that any of the Raiders would have stayed at the massacred settlement this long. It should be safe.

If not Jess would definitely kill him.

"Okay," he relented reluctantly before lifting her out from the Jeep and down onto the packed snow, "but you won't let go and will keep your eyes closed or on me the entire time, okay? And if I tell you to run back to the Jeep you will do that, understood?"

Her nod was firm and as soon as he turned around he felt her small gloved hands grab a hold of the back of his belt again.

"You ready, sweetheart?" They had practiced this before – and been forced to use it – so it wasn't anything new to either of them but he still wanted to make sure. Beth tugged once, signaling her assent, and Jake caught Juan's gaze before nodding towards the gate.

Their progress was cautious to say the least, not only because Jake had Beth following in his footsteps but because they didn't want any surprises. Juan was the only one armed, carrying one of two battered handguns that the settlement owned, but the more bullets they could save the better. While both Jake and Jess could make more if necessary they didn't have the materials to spare so any shots fired had to be sure to hit.

The inside of the gates looked pretty much like Jake had suspected, if only because he had seen it happen to two other settlements.

Snow had covered most of the devastation but the breathless silence that lingered was enough to run a chill down Jake's spine. He was surprised by the lack of scavenging birds but he couldn't exactly say that he minded. As it was he could almost pretend that the bumps here and there –
some small enough to cause bile to rise at the back of Jake’s throat – wasn’t dead bodies.

The only good thing with the cold wrapping around them was the fact that frozen corpses didn’t smell. It wasn’t much of a consolation but Jake was grateful that Beth wouldn’t have to experience that.

He tried not to look at their faces if they happened to peek out from under the snow. He didn’t want to know if he recognized any of them; didn’t want to have their dying expressions seared onto his retinas. Despite his best efforts Jake couldn’t stop staring the moment he saw a big, furry lump lying just in front of one the houses. Jake knew it had to be Baron – the lively pup they had sold to the Holden settlement last spring. Now the dog lay motionless in the snow, his light grey fur matted and lumpy with blood.

Jake could barely stand it. If he could have he would have tried to remain clinical but it was pretty much impossible in the face of so much death. It wasn’t anything he hadn’t seen before but that didn’t mean that he was in any way prepared to experience it all over again.

He forced himself to continue all the same, Beth following close behind.

The stillness was thick and unsettling, standing in such stark contrast to the pale blue sky and pristine snow. Nothing moved except some stray piece of cloth waving in the wind and a door that swayed forlornly on half broken hinges. Jake made sure not to take a closer look inside at the sight of the frozen blood pooling by the threshold, not quite having come far enough to mingle with the snow.

Jake gestured for Juan to head in one direction while he and Beth took the other. He didn’t need to say that they were looking for survivors but by the look of things – the lack of fresh footprints in the snow – no one had moved through the settlement in a day’s time.

Jake was still willing to delude himself that they might find someone alive.

The Holden settlement wasn’t much bigger than their own even if there were some noticeable differences in how they had built it around a couple of older brick buildings originating from before the Disaster. Jake had never ventured this far into the settlement before – strangers, even those you traded with, weren’t allowed much further than a couple of steps inside the wall – and he wished he could have seen it when it wasn’t in such a state as it was now.

The silence was suffocating. Jake almost wanted to stop breathing altogether, as if that would keep the lingering aftertaste of death from spreading to his lungs or seeping into his skin and bones.

The destruction was limited to a couple of bullet holes, slight damage to the houses and the frozen corpses but it was still obvious that this place should have been teeming with life, not buried under a thick layer of fresh, white snow. Jake couldn’t tell if all the people in the settlement had been killed or if some had escaped but once again the lack of footprints told him that it was abandoned either way.

Just seconds after having come to that conclusion he spotted something that stood in stark contrast to the pearly white. A couple of feet ahead, next to half covered, staggering imprints in the snow, was blooming spots of bright crimson, speckled with white snowflakes.

Blood.

Relatively fresh blood at that, not quite on top of the snowfall but it had definitely landed there long after everyone else must have died.

Jake immediately stopped, feeling Beth bump into him from behind at the sudden change of pace.
She didn't say anything though, knowing from his careful instructions not to do so until he told her it was safe. He could tell that she was pressing her face against his back, hiding from what was around them. Jake wished that he had the time to comfort her.

Instead he took quick stock of the situation, following the footprints with his gaze – two sets if he wasn't mistaken – to one of the brick buildings. Blood was smeared on the handle and while Jake had no idea if the person was still alive or not he had to make sure. His conscience wouldn't allow him to just turn around and leave.

So he quickly led Beth to the side of the building, silently instructing her to duck low to avoid being spotted from one of the windows, just in case, before asking her to stay put. She looked defiant as she gazed up at him but Jake could tell that she was also studiously not looking at anything but him. She still understood how serious the situation was.

He hurriedly pressed a quick kiss to her cheek before gesturing for her to stay next to the wall while he took the last couple of steps towards the door.

Jake found himself stopping however, when his brain caught up with him enough to actually notice that the body lying a couple of feet away from the door – the one he had been trying his best not to look at – wasn't covered in as much snow as the others. And Jake recognized him.

It was one of the Raiders from three weeks ago, the one that had inspected his tattoo.

A myriad of questions were flying through Jake's head but it was clear that this Raider had died – shot by the looks of it – after the settlement was attacked. Possibly by whoever had tried to seek shelter inside the house. That would explain the two sets of footprints. One was from the Raider and the other the person he was hunting.

That settled it then. Someone might still be alive after all.

The handle went down easily but the door creaked when Jake pushed it open, to the point where he almost winced. He felt a gust of slightly warmer air, telling him that some of the heat was still on, probably space heaters running on electricity, but all of that fled his mind the moment he took the first step inside and realized that he was once again staring down a gun – unbelievably enough held by the very same man as last time.

Jake wasn't sure who looked the most surprised; he or the Raider.

The man was slumped against the opposite wall, giving him a clear line of sight to the door, and judging on the small but not insubstantial pool of blood on the floor next to him he had been there for a while.

He was the one who was hurt. He was the one who had shot the other Raider.

Despite all the questions bubbling inside of him Jake slowly raised his hands. The tense, almost awkward, silence that lingered between them could break any second and most likely by the sound of a gun going off. The weapon – a handgun this time – was trembling ever so slightly but judging on the blood loss and possible hypothermia the man must be suffering from it was still admirably steady.

To Jake's surprise he didn't get shot this time either.

Then again, the last time the man had tried Jake had deflected it, which probably lingered with a person long enough for them to wonder if the same would happen a second time. Jake knew that he wouldn't be able to, not at this distance and especially not since the magnet vambrace wasn't even turned on, but he wasn't stupid enough to say that. If this Raider believed that Jake was
bulletproof then he was totally going to pretend that he was.

The stalemate was broken by the one thing Jake hoped wouldn't happen.

"Uncle Jake?"

For a second his heart stopped beating.

For a brief, crushing second Jake thought that he would have to see Beth get shot when he felt her move to stand beside him in the doorway, and the man's gaze and gun snapped to aim at her instead.

"Beth! No!"

Two things happened at once.

Jake moved to shield Beth from the incoming bullet and the Raider swiftly angled the gun away, his eyes widening in something strangely reminiscent of horror.

Jake's heart was in his throat, barely able to breathe around the spike of panic pushing against his ribcage, but the gun wasn't pointing at either of them anymore. Beth's tiny, trembling body was pressed tightly against Jake's back, one of his hands reaching out to hold her in place, and he could only stare wide-eyed at the Raider on the opposite side of the room.

The very same one who hastily dropped his gun – despite the pained wince the movement obviously caused – and slid it across the uneven floorboards towards Jake before raising his hands in surrender.

Jake thought that he was well within his right to stare.

What the ever loving fuck was going on?

A part of him got it; the Raider didn't want to shoot Beth. He had turned the gun away the moment he had realized that he had been aiming at a small child, but it didn't make sense why he would care. In Jake's experience Raiders didn't. There were enough slaughtered children lying mute and unseeing out in the snow behind him to prove that. Raiders didn't care who they killed.

And they certainly didn't surrender their weapons when they had the clear advantage.

Except this one did.

Jake stood frozen, uncertain on how to react, until the moment when the man seemed to slump back and close his eyes, teeth gritted in pain. Right. He was wounded. He probably wouldn't survive long anyway so getting killed for surrendering might actually be a relief at that stage.

Jake swallowed before carefully unfurling Beth's surprisingly strong grip around his coat, turning around and crouching down to be able to look her in the eye.

"Hey. Hey, sweetie." He could see clear as day that she was frightened and he pulled her into his arms, hugging her tightly. "It's okay. We're okay."

Jake glanced over his shoulder, briefly catching the Raider's unreadable gaze.

"Is there anyone left besides you?" Jake asked, Beth seemingly understanding that he wasn't talking to her. He could feel her tiny nose press against his cheek, despite how much she usually complained that his beard was itchy.
The Raider shook his head.

Jake wasn't entirely sure if he could trust the man but he had a couple of questions he liked to ask, now that he was fairly certain why the Holden settlement had been attacked.

"Beth, sweetheart, I want you to find Juan, okay? Tell him and George to start packing anything of value onto the Jeep." It was better than letting all the food and other necessities go to waste since the settlement was unlikely to recover from this. "If they can find another car then we're taking that too. And you stay with them until I get there. Can you do that?"

It clearly went against the rule of not looking and Jake could feel Beth hesitating. He drew back enough to give her an encouraging smile, never mind that it was a little strained.

"Everything is fine. Just find Juan and tell him that, okay?"

"Okay," she whispered softly after a couple of seconds and Jake's heart broke at the look of fear in her eyes.

Jess was going to kill him.

Or alternatively force him to be the one to soothe any possible nightmares Beth might have from then on, which was honestly a fate worse than death. Jake had no defenses whatsoever against crying eight year old girls.

"I'll be right with you," Jake promised before rising to gently lead her out the door in such a way that she didn't have to stare at the Raider lying dead in the snow just a couple of feet away from them. "Just stay with them until I get there."

She nodded with a shaky but determined look on her face. Beth reminded him so much of Jess in that moment that something in Jake's chest twisted and squeezed. He kissed her cheek and silently urged her to get going. Her hesitation was brief but Jake lingered until she disappeared out of sight behind one of the houses, hopefully safe.

He had to remind himself to breathe.

Jake allowed himself a couple of precious seconds to gather his composure before heading back inside the house, not surprised to find that the Raider hadn't moved, not beyond leaning his head back against the wall again and closing his eyes.

They snapped open when Jake walked in though, following him quietly as he pocketed his mittens and bent down to pick up the gun. It felt cold and hard against Jake's palm but he made sure to check and secure it before putting it away in one of his pockets.

He wasn't going to say no to a free gun.

Jake took the time to study the man while he considered his options.

The Raider's complexion was darker than Jake's, closer to Juan's, but that didn't mean much, especially not to Raiders. Race and nationality wasn't important when everyone was fighting to survive and Raiders picked up members wherever they went. They, like Nomads, where the only ones that traveled to any notable extent and Jake had a feeling that this man wasn't from a settlement nearby.

The clothes were the same as last time, the cut so similar to his fellow Raiders' that Jake almost suspected it to be some kind of uniform. It didn't sit well with him. It looked too much like someone with actual resources had equipped them and the implications of that – in combination
with what they were looking for – would be enough to leave Jake sleepless for more than a couple of nights.

The black cowboy hat was on the floor, well out of the blood's reach, but it seemed like the man was wearing something for actual warmth too – a cap he had on underneath it. His dark hair reached just below his shoulders and despite being injured his eyes remained alert, probably performing a similar scrutiny of Jake in return. It would have been interesting to know what the Raider saw but Jake knew better than to ask.

So he cleared his throat before walking closer, not surprised to see the Raider stiffen. Not that it made Jake stop but he took note of it all the same.

"Thanks for not shooting my niece. Or shooting me in front of my niece." Jake crouched down, close enough that he could touch if he wanted to and, by extension, close enough that the Raider could as well if he felt so inclined. Jake somehow doubted that it would come to that however. "I can't help but ask why you didn't though. I mean, it's not like you haven't tried to shoot me before..."

There was no humor in the words and neither of them smiled. The Raider twisted a little, letting out a slight hiss, his left hand pressed tightly against his right side. Jake could see the blood staining the man's gloves but made no move to help stop the blood flow.

The Raider looked tired. Exhausted even. But with good reason, Jake presumed, given that he must have been sitting there – wounded and just barely on this side of too cold – for a full day.

"No children," was the reply, muttered through clenched teeth.

Jake couldn't help that his eyebrows rose but it was in resentful disbelief rather than surprise.

"Really? Have you even looked at the scene that you and your friends caused out there? There are dead children littering the ground," Jake snapped none too gently.

The Raider had the gall to look offended, his dark eyes hard and angry.

"Not me. The others." There was a vague accent to the words that Jake couldn't place and that, coupled with the curt, simplified sentence structure, told him that English probably wasn't the man's first language.

It was uncommon for people to speak more than one, not unless you had people in your settlement that could teach you. Most didn't, which only served to widen the rifts between certain settlements, because they might not even be speaking the same language. This man had probably been forced to learn another when he joined up with Raiders.

Jake sighed and rubbed a hand over his face, his fingers stiff from the cold. The space heaters in the house only managed to take the worst bite out of the chill, not beat it entirely. The air was still raw, just waiting to creep under Jake's skin, but he didn't want to put his mittens back on just yet. A part of him honestly wanted to reach out and have a look at whatever wound the man was valiantly suffering from – Jake was far too kind for his own good sometimes – but that might very well get him killed.

"The others. You mean like that guy?" Jake pointed over his shoulder, at the Raider lying just outside the door.

"Sí." It was the nod and not the word that let Jake know that it was some kind of confirmation. His curiosity was peaking of course, wondering just exactly what language the man was speaking, but he didn't have time to linger on that now.
"You killed one of your own."

The grin that spread on the man's lips was downright feral and Jake fought his instinct to recoil. It took some effort but the Raider was able to raise his right hand, holding up three fingers.

Jake blinked stupidly before his brain caught up.

"You killed three of them?"

A nod.

"Because they killed the children?"

Another nod.

"Well... that's-..." Jake honestly had no idea what that was except perhaps terrifically terrifying. He cleared his throat and scratched his beard. "So that's how you got injured?"

"Sí."

Jake held that dark gaze but there wasn't a single trace of a lie in it.

"That's very noble of you," Jake said haltingly, which earned him a disbelieving scoff. It was suddenly difficult to hold back a crooked smile. "Well, for a Raider," he amended.

The shrug and slight tilt of the man's head seemed to signal some kind of amused agreement.

Jake's gaze flickered down to the blood stained glove and the pool gathering on the floor. He felt his chest constrict and had to grit his teeth to keep his voice even.

"I'm not gonna lie – I hate you more than a little bit for what happened here. I know you must have killed at least some of the people out there and you had no right to do that. It wasn't for survival – they weren't a threat to you, we both know that."

While the Raider maintained eye contact Jake could tell that it took a huge amount of stubbornness to do so; stubbornness, not pride. There was a huge difference. A faint flicker of a conscience seemed hidden somewhere deep within those eyes and it was honestly a little disconcerting to see. A remorseful, religious Raider adamant on not hurting children? Jake wasn't sure what to think.

He cleared his throat, pushing the thought away. The man was still a murderer.

"You know, from where I'm standing you've got two options," Jake began slowly, looking up to catch the man's gaze. The silent question he found there was somehow enough to prompt Jake to keep going, no actual word required. "Either I leave you here to die from hypothermia or blood loss – whatever gets your first --, or we work out some kind of deal where I agree to save your life in exchange for information I know you have."

There was a glimpse of skepticism on the man's face and Jake huffed out a strangled chuckle.

"Yeah, I mean it. Not because I feel any sympathy for you-" which might have been an outright lie but the less the Raider knew the better "-but because I know you came here, to this settlement, to find me. Your merry little band of Raiders is still hunting me, right?"

Even if Jake knew it to be the truth he still felt a clench in his chest at the reluctant nod he received in reply. It wasn't his fault the Holden settlement had been attacked. It wasn't.
He took a deep breath.

"Right. Or at least they were before you killed off half of them." Jake cleared his throat again, ignoring the slightly amused look on the Raider's face. "The thing is that I'd like to know why. I'm not an idiot, you see – I can tell that there's something off about you guys. You're too well-equipped and Raiders don't generally have much use for Engineers since they don't have a fixed place where they stay and therefore very little technology." Jake leaned forward. "So I want to know who sent you after me."

He was met with nothing but stubborn silence at first but a part of that might have been because Jake had said so much in one go and the man's grip on the English language seemed rather basic so far. Jake decided to simplify it, just to be sure, gesturing between them as he spoke.

"I save your life and you give me the information I want. Okay?" The silence still lingered and Jake rolled his eyes, gesturing towards the doorway and deserted settlement outside. "Unlike them I'm not going to ask you to hurt any children which, as far as I'm concerned, makes me a much better friend to have than the ones you've been running with lately."

A brief glimpse of something that could probably be identified as amusement flickered past but it was gone before Jake could really catch it.

Jake waited patiently while the Raider seemed to make his decision, which apparently didn't come easy, either due to lingering loyalty or pride. Jake guessed on the latter.

"Fine." The Raider still sounded awfully grumpy about it, which meant that Jake was going to do his outmost to be the complete opposite, just to piss him off.

Jake grinned, readjusting his glasses.

"Awesome. Now, what's your name?"

"Cougar."

Jake actually paused, blinking in surprise.

"What? Really? Like the-"

A subtly raised eyebrow was all the answer he needed but it wasn't enough to hinder his rather childish snort. Jake tried to keep a straight face but admittedly failed rather spectacularly.

"I can't imagine any parent naming their kid that, but okay. I won't pry." His smile was deceptively amicable. "I'm Jake," he introduced himself politely, despite the rather peculiar circumstances they found themselves in. "And, Cougar?"

Jake waited until he had the other man's attention before he leaned in, just a little closer, and placed his hand on Cougar's shoulder.

"I'm going to take you to my home settlement to get you fixed up so there's one thing you should know before we go, okay?" Jake was still smiling but he could feel the muscles under his hand stiffen, Cougar's eyes narrowing warily. "If you hurt me or my family – sell us out and betray us in any way – I will hunt you down and kill you. I don't care how good of a shot you are or how far you might travel, I will track you down. I will literally follow you to the end of the world if I have to and kill you as creatively as I can possibly imagine. Okay?"

Jake knew that it wasn't the words he spoke that were the unsettling part – it was the smile. Cougar was staring at him, expression carefully blank and unreadable, but the mere fact that he
was hesitating said quite a lot. Perhaps he understood that Jake wasn't kidding – because he really, truly wasn't – or perhaps he was wondering just what an Engineer might come up with if they wanted to kill someone as physically painful as possible.

"You understand?"

Cougar nodded firmly.

"Sí."

Jake beamed, patting Cougar's shoulder hard enough to force him to hide a pained wince.

"Great! Then we'll get along just fine!" Jake straightened before holding out a hand to help Cougar get to his feet. A wide, pleased grin spread on Jake's lips. "We better get going soon or else you might bleed out before we even make it back."

Cougar looked like he might be regretting this already.

But he did accept Jake's offered hand. Only to snarl wordlessly a second later when Jake tried to pick up his hat for him. Talk about a weird guy. It seemed to be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

Unless they ended up killing each other which, at the moment, seemed statistically more likely.

Oh the joy.

Chapter End Notes

Do you have any idea how much fun I have writing the interaction between these two? It's incredibly interesting exploring what it would be like when they don't actually trust each other.

A huge thank you to my beta CarpeDentum, because she puts up with the insane amount of words I write. Although I think she secretly enjoys it. Or, actually, it's not even a secret that she does. Here's my Tumblr if you're interested!
The journey back was spent in tense silence, George eyeing their new passenger with tangible distrust pretty much the entire way. Jake was tempted to point out that he should probably spend less time looking in the rearview mirror and more time watching what was in front of them but he knew that wouldn't go over well.

Both George and Juan were pissed at him for bringing Cougar along and while Jake could understand that – he hated strangers, and especially Raiders, just as much as they did – he still needed information. These Raider attacks were too organized and if Jake was correct it wouldn't take long for another group to show up, even if Cougar had clearly decimated the one he belonged to.

Jake was sure that there was something bigger behind this.

But Juan and George didn't want to listen to his reasons and Jake knew that very few back at the settlement would either. Jake should have left Cougar to die. It was what anyone else would have done. If he was so desperate for information he should have tried to torture and question Cougar on the spot.

It was just that Jake knew that wouldn't have worked. Partly because he wasn't keen on torturing a wounded man who had voluntarily surrendered to him and partly because he was pretty sure that Cougar wouldn't crack. He couldn't say why but he doubted that pain could somehow make that man talk. If Jake wanted information he would have to offer something that Cougar actually wanted and his life was probably one of the few valuable things Cougar had, Raider or not.

Jake was glad that he only had to put up with George's judging looks because Juan was driving the other vehicle they had managed to find at the Holden settlement. There had been more, that much was obvious, but Jake assumed that the two Raiders who had survived Cougar's vengeful ways might have taken them.

Either way they were returning with a lot more supplies than they had anticipated and while most of it was technically stolen Jake hoped that it would serve as a diversion long enough that he'd have time to whisk Cougar away before anyone asked too many questions.

If Cougar even survived that long, that was.
Jake had been the one to quickly wrap a makeshift bandage around Cougar's middle but since they hadn't had time or opportunity to actually remove any of his clothes it was barely doing its job. Cougar was beginning to look a little pale and weary, to the point where he didn't quite manage to hide how he flinched every time they drove over a bump.

Jake suspected that George might be jostling the car on purpose but Cougar didn't utter even the smallest sound of complaint.

Not that Jake could see much of Cougar's face. They had tied his own scarf over his eyes – to which there had been no protests, not even from Cougar himself – to if possible prevent him from seeing the route they were taking. Navigating wasn't all that difficult if you could remember all the landmarks on the way and they couldn't let anyone, especially not a Raider who knew that Jake was an Engineer, know exactly where their settlement was.

Jake had decided against tying Cougar's hands, if only because he needed them to keep pressure on his wound. And he really didn't seem to be in any condition to hurt those around him anyway, not when they were his safest bet for survival.

Beth was curled up in Jake's lap where he sat in the backseat next to Cougar. She had, for some reason, refused to sit up front with George. Her wide, blue eyes strayed to Cougar ever so often but the longer the journey progressed the less afraid she seemed. So maybe Jake shouldn't have been surprised when she spoke up, voice hushed to the point that George probably couldn't hear it over the roar of the Jeep's engine.

"Is he going to die?"

Jake blinked, throwing a quick glance towards Cougar, noticing the slight tilt of his head that probably meant that he had heard Beth's careful asked question.

Jake chose to stick with the truth.

"He's hurt pretty bad so I don't know, honey."

Cougar had confirmed that it was a gunshot wound and those could be pretty nasty.

"But you're going to help him? That's why we're bringing him, right?" Beth was still looking at Cougar when she spoke even if her words were for Jake. She seemed curious, if not outright fascinated.

It suddenly struck Jake that Cougar was probably the first person Beth had seen up close that wasn't from their settlement. Too bad it wasn't someone who could make a better impression.

"Yes, sweetie, that's why we're bringing him along."

Well, part of the reason anyway. She didn't need to know about the rest.

Beth pursed her lips in thought, looking conflicted for a second, before she suddenly reached out and gingerly patted Cougar's arm. Jake was grateful as fuck that Cougar was too weak to accidentally lash out and hurt her but he did seem startled by the touch, probably because he hadn't seen it coming what with his eyes being covered.

"I hope you get better soon," she said, sincere as only an innocent child could be.

Cougar looked taken aback and Jake couldn't exactly blame him. He couldn't imagine that Raiders met a lot of children and if they did it wasn't usually under circumstances where they could be offered compassion. Jake's arms tightened instinctively around Beth when he remembered what
had happened to the last couple of children Cougar had met.

It actually seemed as if Cougar's thoughts might have been going in the same direction if the way he twisted a little uncomfortably was anything to go by.

He still seemed to understand that Beth was waiting patiently for his reply and Jake couldn't help staring a little when he saw Cougar's surprisingly sincere smile.

"Gracias, chica."

Beth looked up at Jake, her nose wrinkled in confusion.

"He said thank you," Jake assured her, even if he had no clue if that was it. But he sure hoped so, for Cougar's sake. The lack of disagreement probably meant that Jake was right.

Beth seemed pleased either way, smiling to herself as she snuggled up against Jake's shoulder again, obviously settling down for the rest of the journey. Jake wished that he could have the peace of mind to do that but he knew what awaited him when they got back.

While most people at the settlement respected and valued him and Jess to the extent that they sometimes bent the rules for them Jake knew that Jess wasn't going to be as lenient. Not when he was bringing home a Raider – one that had tried to shoot Jake, no less. Jess would be the one he had to convince to let Cougar stay.

Which was why Jake tried to take the cowardly way out and just avoid her when they finally rolled through the gates and came to a stop, safe inside the walls of their settlement. Everyone clearly had a lot of questions, like why they returned with two vehicles and where all the extra supplies came from, but Jake simply referred everyone to George and Juan while helping Beth climb down from the Jeep.

Getting Cougar out without drawing attention was practically impossible – especially since the Raider barely managed to remain on his feet at that point – but Jake was glad to find that people shied away rather than inched closer when they realized that he wasn't one of them. It gave Jake a couple of extra seconds to steer Cougar towards his and Jess' house, perhaps a tad bit too roughly. Cougar's attempts not to stumble were admirable and a little heartbreaking and even if he still couldn't see anything he made no move to remove the scarf covering his eyes, despite the fact that his hands were untied and he definitely could have.

Jake appreciated not having to knock him out.

"Jacob! Get back here!"

Sometimes Jake couldn't help but marvel at how far Jess' voice could carry and the sheer amount of sharp, reprimanding command she could infuse her words with. A quick glance over his shoulder told Jake that she was marching towards them, her expression dark and menacing. Cougar should be glad he couldn't see it because Jake was her little brother and he felt terrified, and Jake wasn't even the one who was in risk of getting clinically executed if this didn't go well.

They had been so close too; just a couple of more feet and they were at the front door.

"Shit," Jake breathed before leaning closer, whispering hastily in Cougar's ear. "I'm truly sorry if my sister ends up shooting you but she'll aim for the head so at least you won't feel it. I'm so, so sorry."

It was a crap apology but all he could manage before Jess was upon them, her blue eyes flashing with both alarm and fierce, spitting anger.
"Jacob! What do you think you're doing?" she barked, loud enough to make Jake wince and several people turn in their direction. Jess, unlike the others, didn't seem afraid of Cougar which could either be really good or really bad.

Knowing his sister Jake would have to go with bad.

But he also knew that she was just being protective and worried. So if he wanted to keep Cougar alive for the foreseeable future he would have to explain his reasons.

"Don't die," Jake urged as he pushed Cougar close enough to their house that he could support himself against the wall if he had to.

A second later Jess was yanking Jake away until they were out of Cougar's earshot.

"Who's that?"

Jake knew better than to lie.

"The Raider who tried to shoot me three weeks ago."

Then again, while honesty was great he should probably learn to present it less bluntly.

Jess stared at him as if he had grown a second head which, yeah, he could admit wasn't entirely uncalled for considering the circumstances.

"What?"

Jess seemed to think that Jake should be more insulted by this but the truth was that if Jake would hold a grudge for every time someone threatened him with violence he wouldn't have any friends except maybe Beth. Not that Cougar was a friend but Jake could at least momentarily forgive the fact that Cougar had tried to shoot him. It wasn't unheard of.

"Okay, I know it doesn't make much sense."

"Damn straight."

"-but I know what I'm doing," he finished without letting her interruption stop him. She pursed her lips, staring him down as if that would make him change his mind. Before it might have but not now.

Jake usually had nothing against doing whatever Jess told him – not because she was older but because she was clearly the wisest out of the two of them – but that didn't mean that he obeyed her without question. He had a purpose with this and he was determined to get his way, at least this once.

"Jess, listen to me. He has information. I want to know why a group of Raiders is suddenly looking for an Engineer. You know that's something out of the ordinary." He hurriedly kept going before she was able to get as much as a word in, lowering his voice to make sure that only she could hear. "He doesn't know about you. He thinks I'm the only Engineer around."

She was still glaring at him.

"Jess, please trust me on this."

"What if he hurts someone?" Jess hissed fiercely.
"I'll cuff him to my bed, okay?" Jake winced even before Jess leveled him with an incredulous look. "Alright, I can admit that came out a little differently than I had intended. I'm just saying that I can restrain him with the shackles I have lying around."

"You actually managed to make that sound even worse, you do realize that, right?" Jess drawled acidly, arms crossed over her chest.

"Yes, yes I do. Everything is suddenly sounding like a sexual innuendo, which is just weird because I've been trying not to notice how good looking he actually is and-"

"Jacob."

"-my point is that he won't hurt anyone. I'll keep an eye on him."

Jess didn't seem convinced. Jake honestly couldn't blame her considering how well he was handling this conversation.

"He has information. He'll give it to me if I save his life. That's it." Jake spread his hands wide. "We can kick him out as soon as he's well enough to walk on his own."

Jess sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Only you, Jake," she muttered under her breath. "Why can't you be like other kids and bring home a lost kitten instead of a murderous Raider?"

"Funny you should say that actually because his name happens to be-"

"I don't care what his name is!" she interrupted, voice rising in volume.

Jake took a slow breath before letting his shoulders slump, smiling tiredly at her.

"You're not going to change my mind, Jess." They were both equally stubborn and part of her anger undoubtedly came from the fact that she knew that too. "I'm going to do this whether you want me to or not. So I'm just going to leave this conversation for later when the man I'm trying to keep alive isn't dying from blood loss."

Jake was already backing away from her, towards Cougar who wasn't even trying to hide that he was leaning against the doorframe for support.

"I'm not done yelling at you," she called after Jake, but there was a hint of defeat in her voice that told him that he had already won.

"I know," he replied all the same, smiling faintly. "Would you please go get Carol for me? I'm gonna need her help."

Jess seemed on the verge of protesting but eventually nodded, going off to find their resident doctor. Jake didn't wait to see how that particular conversation would play out and instead reached out to steady Cougar, not the least bit surprised when the man jumped at the touch. He was probably half unconscious by the looks of it.

"Easy now, easy," Jake mumbled without really thinking, easing the door open before gently steering Cougar to step over the threshold. Even if it was clearly an effort for Cougar to keep moving Jake couldn't help smiling when he led Cougar through the house, heading for Jake's room.

"Look at it from the bright side," Jake suggested breezily while reaching up to tug down the scarf
covering Cougar's eyes, not missing how the other had to blink several times before his gaze was able to focus. As soon as he could he gave Jake a mildly confused look and Jake grinned in response. "She didn't actually threaten to shoot you."

Cougar's expression seemed to say that Jake was being a bit of an idiot but he had never let that deter him before. So he just patted Cougar's shoulder before nudging him towards the awaiting bed.

"But if she ends up strangling you in your sleep you have my sincerest apologies."

Whatever Cougar muttered was clearly not in English and probably not very flattering either so Jake pretended that he didn't hear it.

Cougar was asleep for almost a day after his initial arrival. Carol had said it might be up to two days but Jake wasn't overly surprised when the shift in Cougar's breathing pattern, clear enough to make it obvious that he was conscious again, occurred after a little more than eighteen hours. Cougar seemed intent on defying most of the logical rules and realistic limitations placed on his person or expressed in his immediate vicinity.

Jake didn't look up, far too busy with his soldering. Cougar probably wanted to take a couple of seconds to regain his bearings anyway.

The gunshot wound had proven to be fairly shallow, if still painful, so it was definitely the blood loss and the slight hypothermia that had hit Cougar the hardest. Carol had stitched him up, reluctantly, and snapped some instructions to Jake on how to proceed from then on, making it rather clear that she wouldn't be helping out again. If it was because of her grudge against Jake or her grudge against strangers was difficult to determine but Jake knew not to push it.

Jess was still pissed at him even after Jake had let her yell at him for a full hour while Cougar was dead to the world – metaphorically speaking – and Beth was playing with the other children outside. Jake had tried to soothe any complaints and worries Jess had about his irresponsible behavior but she refused to see reason. Well, Jake's reasons, at least.

It didn't really matter though. Cougar had remained asleep in Jake's bed during the entire time and no one had gotten hurt. Except maybe Jake's back when he had been forced to share Beth's bed with her on accounts of his own being occupied, but Jess was clearly not generous with her sympathy at that point. Beth hadn't minded since she loved to sneak into Jake's bed and curl up against him for warmth, but it obviously wasn't as easy to do it the other way around.

Jake should have thought of that before giving up his bed to a Raider he didn't trust or like. And one who might very well end up being uncooperative enough to go back on their deal. There really were no guarantees that Cougar would honor their arrangement even if Jake had every intention of doing so.

It wasn't until Cougar started pushing himself up into a sitting position that Jake said anything.

"Welcome back." He still didn't look up from what he was doing, seeing Cougar's halting movements in the corner of his eye. "There's some water there by the bed if you're thirsty."
Jake carefully twisted the wire he held between his fingers, curling it just so around the piece of metal he was working on, but even then he didn't miss the way Cougar seemed to stiffen at the sound of metal clinking against metal. Or chains rustling against the steel of Jake's bed frame, more exactly.

Jake did look up then, rubbing the side of his nose with the back of his hand, smiling apologetically.

"Yeah, sorry about that," he said with a nod towards the manacles securing Cougar's right foot to the bed frame. "Jess insisted. But the chain is long enough that you can walk around at least. Even reach the bathroom with the extension I made."

Cougar looked like he was trying very hard to seem unaffected by the fact that he was basically a captive. Jake couldn't exactly blame him, turning back to his work to give Cougar a couple of seconds to conciliate with that thought. Because while Jake was sorry he wasn't nearly sorry enough to unlock the chains. It hadn't been a part of the deal that Cougar should be restrained but Jake wasn't going to take any chances when it came to his family's safety.

A couple of seconds of silence lingered and when Jake glanced in Cougar's direction he had to do a double take when he saw a familiar look of innocent wonder creep across the Raider’s face. Not that Cougar was looking at Jake, oh no; he was looking around at Jake's room.

Which, well, was a rather understandable reaction from someone who hadn't seen it before.

Jake's room was a mess of things that most people would probably consider junk but for him was the beginning of countless glorious, new inventions. The rough, stained walls were covered with hooks and shelves, each stuffed full with wires, bolts, screws, shards of metal, gutted machinery and technology – basically anything that Jake could get his hands on that seemed useful. In the middle stood his worktable, littered with his current projects, tools and various pieces of equipment, but also a battered, humming laptop that glowed softly next to Jake's brighter desk lamp.

There were two other computers and an array of different hard drives stored away on one of the benches in the corner but they were backups rather than ones Jake used on a frequent basis. Bigger pieces of machinery and two space heaters stood on the bare, concrete floor, haphazardly pushed out of the way, leaving just enough room for one person to squeeze through.

The only real pieces of furniture besides Jake's workbench, his chair and two other benches used as storage spaces was the bed Cougar was sitting on, and despite this the room was practically stuffed to the brim with things. All of them mechanical or technological somehow.

Jake couldn't hold back a lopsided smile.

"You having fun?"

Cougar immediately schooled his expression but Jake had already seen it and catalogued it for later use and possible blackmail material should the need ever arise. Instead of replying Cougar reached for his boots that stood next to the bed. While Jake's concrete floor wasn't nearly as cold as it could have been, situated over the heated basement as it was, it still wasn't warm. It was also littered with screws, flakes of metal and other sharp, nasty things that might or might not infect any unsuspecting victim with tetanus. Shoes were practically a requirement.

Cougar remained silent, looking down at himself and plucking at the too big sweater he was wearing.
"Yeah, that's mine," Jake explained without prompting. "Yours sort of had bullet holes in them so I figured you could borrow one of mine until I've fixed that for you."

Cougar's raised eyebrows seemed to suggest that he hadn't expected anyone to be mending his clothes for him. Jake shrugged.

"I'm a man of many talents." He placed his tools down on his workbench, pushing the chair back enough that he could turn and face Cougar more comfortably. "So, how are you feeling?"

It was pretty obvious that he had to be in pain considering that he hadn't been given anything to counteract it but Cougar looked surprisingly okay when he tested the movement in his limbs. A little stiff, yes, and careful, but not nearly as incapacitated as Jake had expected.

Cougar was either not entirely human or had the world's best poker face.

Jake wasn't sure which one it was, nor if he had any personal preference.

"Fine," was the succinct and possibly slightly exaggerated reply.

Jake scoffed, crossing his arms over his chest while Cougar lifted the sweater to peer at the bandage underneath, almost shockingly white against his dark skin. At least there was no sign of any blood having seeped through.

"Yeah, okay, let's go with that." Jake shook his head. "You were lucky that the bullet passed through without nicking any of your organs too badly, otherwise Carol might not have been able to stitch you back up. But you did lose a lot of blood and we still need to look out for infection and all that usual stuff... but you should be fine for now."

Cougar really didn't look all that scary when he was wearing one of Jake's lumpy sweaters and not carrying more weapons than Jake had ever seen on one person before. It had been a very interesting experience trying to find them all and Jake had resolutely vowed never to mention anything about it out loud. Ever. At least Jake had let Cougar keep his pants on.

And compartmentalizing was an extremely useful skill.

One Jake clearly wasn't as adept at as he would like to think because the only word that popped into his head at seeing Cougar still a little drowsy from sleep and wearing an ill-fitting sweater with his hair in disarray was cute. Jake knew that calling a confirmed Raider and murderer cute might very well be one of the top five stupidest things he had ever done – and he had done a lot of stupid things – but he couldn't help it.

Cougar didn't look like someone Jake actually wanted to hate.

He cleared his throat a little awkwardly, pushing that errant thought aside.

"I'm guessing you're hungry?" he asked instead, desperate for something to distract himself with.

It actually seemed like Cougar had to seriously consider the question before nodding.

"You really don't talk much, do you?" Jake just had to ask.

Cougar shook his head.

"But you understand what I'm saying?"

A nod this time, coupled with a slightly amused smile.
"Alright, fine by me." It wasn't like it actually mattered. Jake could fill the silence for them both, no big deal. He rose from his chair, grimacing when he felt his spine pop back into place as he did so. He probably shouldn't have been sitting there for as long as he had. It still only took a second or two before he was grinning again. "Right. I'll go find you something to eat and then we'll have a look at your stitches."

Jake navigated through the mess in his room with practiced ease, gesturing towards the doorway leading to the rest of the house.

"The bathroom is the door opposite to mine." Jake figured he didn't have to elaborate beyond that and after offering a quick smile he headed off to the kitchen to find Cougar some food. At the sound of his own stomach growling Jake realized that he should probably bring some for himself as well.

Jess would be pissed at him for eating an early dinner without her and Beth but Jake had more important things to deal with at that moment. Family dinner would have to wait, especially since it would honestly feel a bit rude to just leave Cougar there on his own. Not to mention that he could do a lot of accidental – or intentional – damage to Jake's things if he left him too long without supervision.

Jake could hear the distant rustle of chains as Cougar moved around but he made no conscious effort to track the movements. It took a great deal of self-discipline not to because Jake was a curious creature by nature, but he figured that since Cougar couldn't go far both on accounts of the shackles and his injury it probably wouldn't be very interesting.

When Jake returned twenty minutes later Cougar looked far more alert, first and foremost because he was on his feet rather than sitting down. He had obviously found and moved his hat from the bedside table to the far corner of the bed – like a kid would do to his favorite toy that he wanted to keep out of other people's reach – but was currently focused on studying the various tools spread out across Jake's desk.

The calculating look on his face left no question about the thoughts running through his head.

"Go ahead," Jake offered easily as he stepped back inside the room, a bowl of stew in each hand. "I won't stop you if you want to use my tools and try your luck at breaking the lock or the chains. But I'm gonna give you fair a warning by pointing out that I built them to last and I won't help if you happen to cut your own foot off."

Cougar looked insulted but something told Jake that what really pissed Cougar off wasn't his words as much as the fact that he had seen right through his intentions. Jake held out the bowl of stew as a peace offering, if only a momentary one.

It was accepted and Jake took note of how Cougar seemed wise enough not to move too hastily when he sat back down on the bed. He still seemed almost alarmingly unaffected by the wound and the lack of blood in his system but it could be an act. Either way Jake had no intention of calling him out on it. Not yet, at least.

They ate in silence, Jake focusing on scrolling through documents on his computer rather than eating in any kind of presentable manner, but he figured that his company wouldn't mind or care. He could tell that Cougar was still curious about all the things fighting for space on Jake's shelves but as long as he didn't ask Jake wasn't going to start offering that information freely.

In truth only half of his attention was occupied by the pages flashing past on his screen. The other half was busy formulating questions he wanted to ask Cougar about his band of Raiders. Jake had a good enough grasp on Cougar's personality by then that he understood that if he wanted
information he would have to ask very precise and simplified questions, since he would only ever get a couple of words in response. It didn't make it impossible per se, just a bit more complicated than usual.

Jake waited until he was sure that Cougar was done with his food before he suggested they inspect Cougar's wound. There were no complaints and Jake couldn't quite decide whether the agreeable, polite way they treated each other was a good or a bad thing. Either way it felt misplaced and awkward.

They clearly didn't trust each other. Cougar froze every time he was reminded of the manacles – how he was inarguably at the mercy of someone else – and Jake couldn't deny that he felt more cautious now that Cougar was awake. Neither of them seemed to want to cause trouble but it was a very tight rope they were walking and there was a lot of tension in the air.

Jake tried to pretend that Cougar was like anyone else but he couldn't quite forget the massacre they had left behind at the Holden settlement. And he couldn't quite bring himself to forget what it had felt like staring down Cougar's gun. Twice.

It wouldn't take much for their shaky, transparent truce to crumble, in other words.

With that in mind Jake made sure to be as brief and clinical as possible when looking over Cougar's stitches, not touching the other if he could help it and let Cougar reattach the dressing himself. It seemed better that way and Cougar was clearly adept at taking care of his own injuries – with all that implied.

Jake couldn't quite help observing Cougar a little discreetly while standing by his workbench and putting things away in the first aid kit though. Cougar was shirtless for the time being, having taken off his borrowed sweater for convenience, but that really wasn't what caught Jake's eye.

It was the tattoo.

While every member of a settlement had a tattoo to signify where they belonged they rarely had time or resources to do anything beyond that. But Cougar had a real one; a gorgeous piece of art, right there on his chest, the colors mixing rather beautifully with the tone of his skin.

Jake had first seen it – and the burn mark inside Cougar's right wrist where the settlement crest should have been – when he and Carol had been stitching Cougar up. Now, when Cougar was awake, Jake couldn't help debating whether to ask about it or not. There had to be some kind of significance to a tattoo like that, perhaps related to Cougar's religion. Or his home settlement. Maybe both.

But while Jake might be too curious for his own good he also knew that asking about it would probably be considered invasive and rude. Cougar might clam up on him if he did.

So he went for something else; something only tangentially related.

"You come from the south, don't you? Originally, I mean."

If the rumors were true a lot of religious settlements could be found in the south and west.

Cougar seemed confused by the question if his frown was anything to go by and Jake was honestly surprised when he got a reply, even if it was just a curt nod. Jake snapped the first aid kit shut, allowing Cougar to pull the sweater back on before asking his next question.

"What's that language you speak?" Jake could probably find the answer on the Internet but he'd rather ask. Saved time if nothing else.
Jake could vaguely remember hearing about that one. Then he knew what to look for.

"How long have you been a Raider?"

This time the look Cougar gave him was suspicious – almost hostile. He clearly didn't appreciate the question. Their deal had never mentioned anything about revealing personal information but if Cougar was stupid enough to answer then that was hardly Jake's fault. Until Cougar told him to stop Jake wasn't doing anything wrong. Technically.

But judging by the way Cougar pursed his lips Jake knew that he wouldn't be forthcoming this time. The silence and Cougar's stiff posture only seemed to confirm it.

So Jake cut his losses and moved on to the real reason that he had allowed Cougar into his home, offered his bed and even fed the man. Food might not be terribly scarce now that they had managed to scavenge some from the Holden settlement but it wasn't something you just shared with strangers for no reason. Jake had promised to save Cougar's life and he had. Now it was time for Cougar to fulfill his part of the deal.

"Alright. You weren't just any band of Raiders, were you?" Jake asked, his expression turning serious, which was obviously a change that Cougar seemed to appreciate. As if it was easier to handle the situation when Jake wasn't trying to find out things about Cougar's personal life.

Cougar nodded.

"Someone gave you those clothes and weapons and sent you out to collect Engineers." Jake couldn't help that his voice sharpened somewhat but Cougar didn't seem to take offense.

Despite the fact that Jake hadn't quite added the correct emphasis to make it into a question – it sounded more like an accusation – Cougar nodded, his expression not revealing anything about what he might be thinking.

"Who?"

This seemed to make Cougar hesitate but it was difficult to tell if it was because he didn't want to answer or because he had to try and find the correct words in English.

"A man."

Well, that was informative. Jake held back his urge to groan in frustration.

"What man?"

"Never saw him."

Jake ran a hand through his hair, pacing a couple of steps before turning back towards Cougar again.

"Okay, does he have a name at least?"

"Max," Cougar replied pretty much instantly and not without a hint of distaste.

That was interesting.

"And what does he want with Engineers?"
Cougar shrugged and looked at least vaguely apologetic in the face of Jake's disappointment, as if he wanted to be able to offer more but couldn't. It might be an act though. Cougar could be lying or holding back. But at the same time Jake knew that it was more likely that he was telling the truth. Cougar was essentially hired muscle and you had to be stupid to reveal every detail of your plan to your mercenaries.

"What do you know about him?"

Once again Cougar seemed to hesitate but the slight crease between his eyebrows probably meant that it had to do with the language barrier this time.

"He has a base. A... fortress."

"So an educated guess would be that he wants the Engineers for his fortress. Perhaps make it stronger or something like that." Jake was just talking to himself but Cougar nodded all the same, obviously agreeing. Jake bit his lip before clearing his throat, fingers wandering restlessly over the sharp edges of the one of the tools lying on his desk. "And I'm guessing he won't give up just because of what you did to your team?"

The smile on Cougar's lips was anything but happy. He shook his head.

"Wade survived," Cougar said, now making no attempt whatsoever to hide the contempt and disgust in his voice.

"Wade?"

"The leader. A horrible man."

Jake was inches from pointing out that Cougar might not be the best judge of that but he'd rather keep the conversation civil. No point insulting Cougar when he didn't necessarily have to.

"And he'll assemble a new team and come back again?"

"Sí."

Jake breathed out slowly, trying to decide just how that made him feel. Frightened, definitely, both for himself and other settlements nearby who might fall prey to a crazy crusade they had no part in. Angry, that someone would do something like this and not care about the lives it would cost. Resigned, because he knew that it had only been a matter of time before someone got this desperate.

Jake's smile was weak and strained.

"And it's me they're coming for – I'm their target." Jake kept his eyes on the junk littering his workbench, ashamed to hear how his voice wavered. "They know I'm an Engineer. They'll hunt me down, won't they? They'll keep coming back, killing more and more people, until they have what they want."

It was a mistake to look up, Jake knew that, but it still felt like a kick to the chest to see the blank look on Cougar's face. Of course he didn't care. Was Jake really expecting to get sympathy from a Raider? One who was technically, for all Jake knew, still loyal to the order of bringing an Engineer to this Max fellow. An Engineer like Jake.

Cougar wasn't a friend or someone that could offer comfort.

Cougar was the enemy.
How could Jake have forgotten that?

"I'm going to go and... go." Jake didn't even have a good excuse, his fingers flickering – dancing nervously – over the scattered things on his workbench. He couldn't keep them still. "I'm just going to-..." He stopped, took a deep breath and tried again, resolutely not looking at Cougar. "Please don't break anything while I'm gone. I can't stop you but I would be grateful if you didn't."

Restlessness was crawling and itching under Jake's skin. He couldn't stay. The target on his back was bigger than ever and right there was a person who was probably just waiting to catch him unawares.

"I just need to-..." Jake didn't know. Hug Beth, maybe?

Yeah, that sounded like a good idea.

The rustle of Cougar's chains startled Jake enough to make him jump and just the mere knowledge that Cougar was moving – standing up – was enough to have Jake practically running for the door.

"I'll be back later."

Cougar might have been meaning to say something in response – Jake wouldn't know – because a second later he has left the room and shut the door firmly behind himself. He desperately needed to find someplace where he could breathe.

This was such a bad idea. What was he thinking, leaving himself vulnerable and bringing Cougar home with him? Jake was their fucking target – he had known that from the beginning – and his brilliant plan included bringing one of the people hunting him to his settlement.

That wasn't just stupid – it was outright moronic. Jake was still Cougar's target. Cougar was there to find and kidnap Jake. Cougar was his enemy.

And Jake had let him right in.

Fuck.

Why couldn't he learn to listen to Jess?

Jake didn't set a foot inside his room for the rest of the evening and while Jess seemed to find that beyond odd Jake pretended not to notice. He spent his time with Beth instead, completely ignoring the fact that Cougar might be wrecking or disrupting his things. They weren't irreplaceable.

But Jake was.

And he was officially the target of a well-funded, ruthless manhunt.

Shit.

Chapter End Notes
I really hope you guys enjoy slow build because I am far too fond of slowly but surely putting the story together and developing the characters. There's also a huge plot coming up. So, yeah, this might take a while. But we ARE getting somewhere!

Next chapter will be uploaded on September 12th since I'll be busy with a visiting friend until then, and depending on whether I've finished the rest of the fic or not you'll either get one or two chapters a week after that. I'm still sticking to some kind of schedule, like usual.

CarpeDentum beta'ed as usual and I'm still not sure why she sticks with me through monster fics like this one, but ah well!
Jake knew better than to let Jess know that he had second thoughts about bringing a Raider into their home. She would undoubtedly take it as a go-ahead to march in there and shoot Cougar in cold blood. And while Jake could agree that that might be the best course of action, all things considered, he still couldn't help feeling reluctant to let it go that far.

He had promised to save Cougar's life and while Jake didn't put that much stock in his own sense of honor he was against it on principle. Cougar had upheld his part of the deal. And it probably wouldn't take more than a week before Cougar was fit enough to leave. He seemed unnaturally durable.

That still left the problem that if Jake didn't feel like spending time in Cougar's company he had effectively banished himself from his own room. There was no other place to keep Cougar. Their house was small to begin with – one room for them each, the bathroom, a compact kitchen and the basement – and if Jake wanted to keep Cougar away from Jess and Beth he didn't have many options. Even the basement was out considering the sensitive equipment Jess and Jake had stuffed in there.

Handing Cougar off to someone else in the settlement would be an even worse idea since they would probably 'forget' to feed him or just kill him outright the moment Jake turned his back. No one wanted a Raider in their midst and Jake could admit that he might not have thought this through as well as he should have.

Then again, that was pretty much standard operating procedure for him.

Still, he refused to let Jess see his hesitation. They just had to wait for Cougar to get better and then they could drop him off somewhere far, far away from their settlement and forget all about it.

Except the fact that more Raiders was coming. Jake didn't even want to think about that. How the heck were they supposed to prepare for something like that? The work on strengthening the wall was still ongoing and there was no telling what the Raiders might bring now that it was confirmed that someone else was equipping them. Jake still wasn't sure how they had managed to overrun the Holden settlement but he couldn't help fearing that his would be next.

He knew that he should have brought his concerns to Jess but she was far too angry with him to listen to reason. She would discredit the information simply because it came from Cougar and they
couldn’t afford that. So Jake bided his time. He’d tell her when he knew that she would actually listen.

In the meantime Jake busied himself with helping to catalogue and organize the resources and supplies they had brought from the Holden settlement. A second trip had been made to fetch whatever they hadn't been able to bring the first time so there was a lot to stow away in their storages and sheds. No one had any qualms about looting; not when it concerned survival. Frozen corpses had no use for warm clothes, food and building material.

Jake kept himself busy, in other words, possibly because he had an injured Raider in his bedroom that he'd rather not face. Usually people would have to drag Jake away from his room but now he barely even went near it. But it wasn't like Cougar actually needed Jake to be there.

Cougar had access to a bed, the bathroom and the first aid kit Jake had left on his workbench. The Raider surely knew to check his stitches every now and then to make sure they were healing as planned. He wasn't starving either since Jake made sure to bring him food.

Okay, he barely even stepped inside the room, placing the meals on the bench within arm's reach of the door rather than the bedside table, but it was close enough. Cougar never said anything. Neither did Jake, as a matter of fact. He avoided looking at the Raider altogether if he could.

That carried on for three days.

Jess was less angry and more worried at that point since Jake was getting increasingly fidgety and restless without access to his computer and projects. Chaining Cougar to his bed had really been a stupid idea. The whole thing had been stupid.

In a desperate effort to keep his hands occupied Jake found himself mending Cougar's clothes. Jess gave him disappointed, dirty looks throughout it all but still let Beth help since she needed to practice her sewing skills. It was educational no matter who happened to own the garments.

The downside of this was of course that once they were finished Jake had to return them, which would require at least a short explanation. Jake postponed it until it was time to bring Cougar his dinner, after Jake, Jess and Beth had eaten theirs. He would have postponed it further if he could but then Jess would no doubt have started asking question.

It was already on the tip of her tongue, Jake just knew it.

So on the fifth day of Cougar's arrival at their settlement Jake pushed open the door to his room with some fumbling, plate of food in one hand and Cougar's clothes folded over his other. For the first time in three days Jake actually laid eyes at the man he had essentially taken prisoner and chained to his bed in a very non-perverted manner. It was a little difficult to know exactly what to feel.

Not that Cougar looked that much different.

No, he looked pretty much the same except healthier, more alert and with a slightly more prominent beard, but what he was doing definitely gave Jake pause. Mostly because Cougar just looked up and raised a questioning eyebrow, as if he didn't feel the least bit worried about being caught trying to break open the lock on his restraints. Cougar's right leg was pulled up and folded on top of the bed to give him better access to the shackle wrapped around his ankle, Jake's tools spread out around him on the bedcover. He was still wearing Jake's sweater together with his own pants, his hair pulled back and fastened at the back of his neck with something that Jake sure hoped wasn't one of his computer wires.
The look Cougar was giving him was mildly impatient, as if Jake had interrupted him in the middle of something very important. Which was just hilarious and also slightly confusing.

Jake blinked stupidly, frozen in place for a brief second, but couldn't help the soft scoff that eventually escaped him. He had technically given Cougar explicit permission to try break free if he wanted to and Cougar did seem like the kind of guy who would be very literal.

So yeah, maybe Cougar had no reason to look guilty.

Not to mention that he had to be dying for something productive to do after three days in captivity; trying to pick the lock was probably one of the few past times he had. Which made Jake feel like a very bad host but, then again, he had been the one to chain the guy to the bed frame in the first place; Cougar probably hadn't expected much in terms of entertainment.

Jake placed the food on the same bench as usual before taking a step closer to the bed, holding out Cougar's clothes for him to take.

"Fixed them, so you won't have to wear mine," Jake explained.

Cougar didn't react. His hands were still poised over the joint of the shackle – he had apparently decided to try that rather than break the lock – but his eyes were focused on Jake. His gaze was dark and unreadable and Jake got the distinct feeling that Cougar was trying to look straight through him.

Jake cleared his throat awkwardly before simply tossing the pile of clothes onto the bed next to Cougar. That stare unnerved him. He was already turning to leave when the sound of Cougar's voice made him pause.

"Three weeks."

Jake allowed himself a second to breathe before facing Cougar again.

"Come again?"

Cougar finally relaxed, placing the screwdriver he had been holding next to the other tools on the bed before leaning forward a little, bracing his elbows against his thighs, once again proving that he was moving far too effortlessly for someone who had recently been shot.

"Before they return."

The silence that settled over the room was brief, Jake stepping closer without even thinking, heart suddenly racing in his chest.

"You mean the Raiders?"

Cougar nodded, holding Jake's gaze with the kind of insistence that was practically impossible to maintain unless you were being completely honest. His expression was open and sincere and if Jake didn't know better he'd say that Cougar actually didn't want the Raiders to succeed with their mission.

Jake knew that it was foolish to fall for it – to potentially trust this man – but he had spent three days in near hysterics so even the slightest sign of compassion felt like a balm to his frayed nerves. He could pretend, just for a second, that Cougar actually cared.

"You know that how?"
Cougar seemed to hold back a sigh.

"Back to base. Find new recruits. Return." He used hand gestures to show the progress from one point to the other, then back again. "Three weeks."

"Even by car? They took at least one from the Holden settlement."

"By car," Cougar confirmed. "Longer on foot."

Jake sank down on the bed, thoughtfully staring ahead while his mind worked. One of those weeks had almost passed already but there should still be enough time to finish the fortification of the wall. And after that it might take another couple of weeks before the Raiders actually found the right settlement.

The question was just how many other smaller settlements would fall prey to the Raiders before they did, and if Jake's conscience could handle the guilt he'd undoubtedly be forced to bear. Not because the attacks would be his fault – that blame lay solely with the Raiders and Max – but because he wasn't quite prepared to surrender himself to prevent it from happening in the first place. Were he a good person he knew that he should have but he honestly couldn't say if he would be able to make that sacrifice.

"Are you sure it's three weeks?" Jake turned to face Cougar. "They don't have anywhere to recharge the cars, do they? So they'd power down after a while."

The slight tilt of his head showed that Cougar was reconsidering his estimation, probably doing some kind of math in his head. Jake wouldn't know. When it came to travel he knew only how long it would take to reach the nearby settlements. He had never ventured further than that and had no idea how long it would take to cross certain distances. Sure, his computer could tell him how far it was but it couldn't account for the terrain and other obstacles you might run into on the way.

"Five weeks. If they hurry," Cougar amended, and before Jake had time to answer Cougar was speaking again. "They have weapons."

Jake knew that Cougar wasn't trying to state the obvious – he meant that they probably had more guns than Jake would even like to consider. The mere fact that five of the Raiders had been equipped with assault rifles and the sixth a long distance rifle had been proof enough of that.

After letting out a slow exhale Jake looked back up at Cougar, willing himself not to sound too pathetic or hopeful.

"Why are you telling me this?"

The question hung in the air between them but Cougar didn't hesitate exactly; it seemed more like he was trying to figure out how to answer. What words to use.

"You saved me."

Cougar didn't look away. He maintained eye contact, as if that would help him get his point across. And it kind of did.

Jake looked down at his hands with a chuckle, his voice raw and rasping in his throat.

"Yeah, I guess I did."

Cougar tapped two of his fingers against the bed, just on the edge of Jake's field of vision,
catching his attention and making him look up without having to touch him.

"And you look sad."

Jake couldn't help the ugly, snorting laugh that bubbled out of him.

"You're telling me you actually care about that?" Jake asked incredulously and not without a certain degree of amusement.

The shrug Cougar offered was careless but the hint of a smile made it seem teasing rather than insulting. Jake was trying really hard to remember that he had been understandably wary of this man just a couple of hours ago. But really, Cougar didn't seem to be very loyal to the cause if he warned Jake about when the Raiders were expected to be back.

That had not been a part of their deal.

"I really don't get you," Jake admitted, secrecy and cautiousness be damned.

Cougar grinned, looking almost obnoxiously pleased with himself. Jake was pretty sure that wasn't actually a good thing but he couldn't quite find the motivation to be mad about it. He did, however, feel a need to get some straight answers.

"Are you going back to them?" Jake elaborated when seeing the confused look on Cougar's face: "To those Raiders."

Cougar's confusion morphed into a frown but he seemed insulted rather than mad.

"No," he practically growled which, okay, yeah, immediately pushed them closer to the general territory of fucking terrifying. "They kill children."

Jake knew that Cougar might be lying. Any person with half a brain would answer no to that question and while Jake wasn't quite willing to trust him yet he couldn't deny that Cougar had to be one hell of an actor to fake the intense hate burning in his eyes.

"You can't blame me for asking," Jake remarked but if Cougar's expression was anything to go by he didn't agree. Touchy.

Jake drummed his fingers against the cover of the bed before pushing his glasses into place.

"But yeah, I can't imagine that they'd want you back after what you did anyway." Dark, unreadable eyes met his. "So you're not going to sell me out?"

The shake of Cougar's head came pretty much immediately. Jake had no way of telling if he was lying or not but could settle for what little stability that answer offered to their cautious truce. Cougar had behaved surprisingly well considering the circumstances. He probably loathed being chained down but hadn't trashed Jake's room in petty revenge – the tools lying on the bed were the only things he had touched by the looks of it.

Maybe Cougar deserved some credit for maintaining his calm.

Jake's gaze drifted over to his workbench, his laptop screen dark from the lack of activity in the past couple of days. The idea struck him so suddenly that he was on his feet and walking over to it before he even consciously registered the thought.

"I want to try something," he tossed over his shoulders as he unplugged the computer from its charger.
He returned, laptop in hand, and settled down on the bed while waiting for his computer to boot up. Jake twisted so that he was facing Cougar, mirroring his pose, sitting close enough for their knees to touch. Cougar didn't seem to react to the sudden increase in proximity.

"Do you know how to spell? And read?" Jake asked while tapping out a restless rhythm against the worn plastic of his laptop. Not everyone did since it depended on whether anyone in your settlement had the right kind of knowledge and decided to teach you, but most had a basic understand of what letters looked like.

"Sí."

"Awesome." Jake's fingers danced over the keyboard as he wrote a couple of quick commands and fluently flipped the laptop around when he had found the correct page. He rested it against his own leg and adjusted the angle of the screen so that Cougar would be able to see it clearly. "This here will translate whatever word or sentence you want – with slight limitations and room for errors. You type it with these-" Jake pointed at the keys "-and it will tell you what the Spanish word means in English."

Cougar looked at him as if he was nuts and Jake wasn't sure whether to feel insulted or burst out laughing. That expression was pretty hilarious.

"Just try it," Jake offered, rather generously if he might say so, gesturing towards the keys.

He was fairly certain that Cougar knew what a computer was but the odds of him having used one before were slim. Still, Cougar only hesitated for a second before he reached out and tapped a couple of keys; not too hard or too lightly. The way Cougar's eyes widened in surprise and poorly masked awe a second later was both comical and adorable and Jake couldn't help grinning.

"Pretty cool, huh? I'm telling you, being an Engineer comes with pretty nice perks."

Jake hit backspace and gestured for Cougar to go again, figuring that he'd give him a couple of tries for learning purposes.

It was actually really fascinating to watch. Most people in their settlement were impressed by what Jake and Jess could do but never showed any kind of interest in learning themselves, either because they felt it came with too many risks or because they weren't interested.

Cougar didn't seem to care about that. His fingers were hesitant on the keys – nowhere near Jake's confident, smooth typing – but he picked up on what the backspace key was for without Jake having to tell him and he only needed directions once if he got stuck on something. He seemed almost mesmerized by what he could do with the simple translator, eager and curious in a way that Jake wasn't used to.

Jake found himself staring rather excessively at the shifts in Cougar's expression – small as some of them might be –, the only saving grace being that Cougar was too engrossed in what he was doing to notice. Or perhaps he was just ignoring it. Either way Jake was doing something he knew he really shouldn't be doing.

He hadn't been lying when he told Jess that he had consciously been trying to keep himself from noticing how attractive Cougar actually was. It was rather easy when Jake pictured Cougar as a ruthless Raider who had tried to shot Jake at least once and held him at gun point twice, but now? When his eyes were alight with barely curbed excitement, distractedly blowing an errant lock of hair away from his eyes and sitting significantly closer?

Yeah, it was pretty fucking impossible not to notice.
And that was a bad, bad thing. While Jake might be selectively intelligent when it came to certain aspects of his life this wasn't one of them. Finding a Raider – a man he didn't trust – attractive was quite literally suicide.

Jake told himself that he wasn't that stupid.

Only, he kinda was, wasn't he?

Jake froze when Cougar's fingers suddenly stopped typing and his gaze flicked up to meet Jake's. It was impossible to read the expression on his face and Jake made sure to keep his own carefully blank. But really, he had no idea what Cougar might be seeing. Or thinking.

Their gazes held for a couple of seconds and Jake was beginning to fear that Cougar knew, but before he had time to start panicking Cougar looked back down without a word, acting as if it hadn't even happened in the first place.

Jake was fairly certain that he was supposed to feel unsettled and boy, did he ever.

He wasn't nearly out of it enough not to notice when Cougar moved to take the laptop from his grasp though. Jake immediately pulled back, reflexively lifting the computer out of Cougar's reach.

"Whoa! Hey! Don't get greedy now." He frowned, shooting Cougar a warning look, completely ignoring the raised eyebrow he received in reply. "Do you have any idea how valuable this is?"

Cougar's stare was disapproving, as if he had any right to judge Jake.

"Don't you give me that look," Jake snapped. "I'm not touching your hat without permission, am I?"

That seemed to give Cougar pause as he glanced towards the hat still lying as far away from Jake as possible. Jake scoffed.

"Yeah, I'm not an idiot. That hat obviously means a lot to you and you're very protective over it. As am I over my computers. There aren't many left and if one breaks I might never be able to fix it again." Jake lowered it into his lap again. "So no, I'm not handing it over. Especially not my favorite one."

Cougar's stare was unnervingly sharp and admittedly a little intimidating but Jake had no intention of backing down. Not when it came to this; Cougar could glare all he wanted. Jake had already been a lot more generous than he usually was so Cougar was the one who would have to fold.

And sure enough, after a couple of seconds Cougar seemed to – grudgingly – admit defeat. In his own way.

Meaning that there was a moment's pause before Cougar leaned forward again, reaching for the keys, but he stopped before he actually touched them, as if to ask for permission this time. Jake felt a strange little pinch in his chest at the serious look on Cougar's face – as if he took Jake's reprimand to heart and didn't want to make the same mistake and overstep his boundaries.

Jake's smile was lopsided as he nodded for Cougar to go ahead.

Something bright and happy was curling in Jake's gut but he couldn't quite say why it was there. He didn't trust this man and wasn't supposed to either. But Cougar seemed so honest, like it went against his very being to be anything but genuine and true to himself. Jake wanted to believe him.
And he definitely wanted to keep staring at that adorable, curious expression on Cougar's face. He looked like Jake's laptop was a tiny little miracle, all in itself, and the tools for unlocking the shackles lay forgotten on the bed next to them. People rarely showed such interest in what Jake had to offer – listening to his instructions without impatient eye rolls or suffering sighs – and he could feel his walls crumbling.

He knew it was bad – Jess would lock him into the bathroom and shoot Cougar on pure principle if she knew – but a tiny, dormant part of Jake was flickering back to life. That innocent, eager part of him that didn't have any place in their cold, harsh world. The one that wanted to share and explain just how brilliant and vibrant everything was through Jake's eyes. The one that sought recognition, attention and yearned for closeness with such ferocity that it made Jake's bones ache.

The one that made him so, so vulnerable.

Jake knew that he should hold back. He shouldn't let it shine through. But when Cougar looked up, smiling wider than Jake had ever seen before, he knew it was already too late. He was fucking doomed and his only hope was that Cougar wasn't lying; that he wouldn't betray him somewhere down the road.

Because then, right there, all Jake saw when he looked into Cougar's eyes was someone who held the potential to become at the very least a friend. But they shouldn't. They couldn't. Cougar would be gone in a couple of more days when his injuries were fully healed.

Jake swallowed around the thick lump in his throat, grinning despite the way his heart was beating fast and hard in his chest.

"If you think that's cool just wait until I show you YouTube."

Cougar's curiosity was almost tangible and the way he looked at Jake – as if he was an entirely new, fascinating species – shouldn't have been flattering but somehow managed to be all the same.

Jake tried not to beam too much but really, he wasn't fooling anyone. Least of all Cougar judging on his amused huff. The smile seemed to linger on Cougar's lips though so it was all good. Jake didn't mind.

If anyone asked Jake wouldn't be able to say exactly what possessed him to start up one of his backup laptops and hand it over to Cougar with strict instructions not to break it. Not even Jess got to touch his computers without first having promised to repay him with her firstborn if she broke it.

Jake almost kinda hoped that she would break one so he'd be entitled to claim Beth as his.

Cougar was very careful with the laptop, following Jake's directions to the letter. He wasn't a natural by any means, frowning at the screen more often than not, probably stuck on something arbitrary, but Jake knew better than to butt in. There wasn't too much damage Cougar could cause anyway, not if he kept calm and read everything carefully, and remaining calm wasn't exactly something that Cougar seemed to have issues with.
Jake still felt a little awkward in Cougar's presence, especially once he started wearing his own clothes again and looked more like the man that had held Jake at gun point. Since Cougar spent his time indoors where it was relatively warm most of the time he wasn't dressed in the full getup, but he looked significantly more dangerous when he wasn't wearing Jake's big sweater. Even without the weapons that Jake had confiscated and still kept hidden it was impossible to ignore the reminder that this was a Raider – someone who killed routinely for a living.

Raiders pillaged and took whatever they wanted, no matter who might actually own it. They murdered for their own benefit – sometimes for sport – and Cougar was one of them.

But at the same time he wasn't.

Unless Jake had lost his touch entirely when it came to reading and gauging people Cougar didn't see it as sport. He had killed people, obviously, but he didn't seem to enjoy it as much as he deemed it an unfortunate necessity – which, on the other hand, was still a very subjective scale of judgment.

Fact still remained that Cougar might just be trying to survive as best he could. There was no telling what had caused him to join up with Raiders in the first place or how old he had been when he did. If Jake had to guess he'd say that it had to have been several years ago but that Cougar hadn't remained with the same band his entire career. He must have been a fairly new addition to the group he had now abandoned; otherwise he wouldn't have been so surprised and appalled by the killing of those kids.

Jake couldn't help being curious, which he felt was only natural since he was actually spending time in Cougar's company now. Not a lot – Jake still had other duties he had to attend to on a daily basis and Beth wanted her fair share of his attention – but he wasn't afraid to return to his room. Cougar still didn't say much, often engrossed in the computer he got to borrow, always with songs from the vast library of music Jake had downloaded playing in the background. He couldn't say for sure what Cougar was doing but Jake suspected that he spent at least some of his time improving his English. Or possibly just watching cat videos on YouTube. Cougar's expression sure didn't give anything away.

If Jake didn't know better he'd say that Cougar was well on his way towards becoming an honorary Engineer. Or, well, a computer geek, at the very least.

He clearly didn't know much about the inner workings of the laptop but he learned to navigate the operating system just fine. Jake could tell that Cougar saw it as a tool rather than something for entertainment but that probably had to do with Cougar's personality more than anything. He was a very dedicated, efficient person who tackled problems with a sharp, focused tenaciousness that was both astounding and a little terrifying. Not to mention that he was quick to learn and adapt.

Cougar was an interesting person and Jake couldn't help studying him the times they were in the same room. Discreetly, of course, even if Jake had a feeling that very little passed Cougar by. But he never reacted to it and never told Jake to back off so he assumed that he wasn't being too invasive.

While Cougar was clearly restless from being chained down and virtually motionless for so long he handled it admirably well. He was still working on the shackles from time to time but it seemed to be on principle rather than any actual hope of managing – as if he couldn't accept the fact that Jake had made a pair of locks that could hold him. Cougar could of course just have broken the bed frame if he really wanted to get free, but that was a solution lacking in finesse and solving the challenge in such an ungracefully manner would undoubtedly be just as bad as admitting defeat.

That streak of stubborn pride – essentially honest and strangely honorable at the same time – was
somehow endearing. And possibly also a bit of a turn on but Jake tried not to think too much about that.

On the seventh day of Cougar's stay Jake asked for an update on Cougar's injury, just to figure out how much longer the Raider would be staying. Jess had started hinting that if he wasn't working for his keep Cougar was soon going to find himself without food to eat. Charity was a foreign concept to most people and Jake would have agreed if it wasn't for the fact that he might be getting a little attached.

Or at lot.

Which was only made worse when Cougar apparently took Jake's question about his injury as a desire to inspect it. Jake couldn't say that Cougar seemed eager to whip his shirt off but he didn't seem to have any particular objections against it either.

Jake did. He would even write them down if he could only decide on whether to do it alphabetically or chronologically.

As it was Cougar was healing up just fine. If Jake was to be clinical and rational about it he'd say that it wouldn't be more than a couple of days before Cougar would have recovered enough to be able to leave, especially since he showed very little signs of being in pain.

The lack of shirt – while distracting in more ways that one – soon pulled Jake's thoughts back to Cougar's tattoo. Which was understandable considering that it was right there. And now would definitely be a more opportune moment to ask, if there even was such a thing when it came to questioning someone about their body art.

Jake decided to give it a shot, if only to sate his incurable curiosity.

"I thought Raiders required you to get rid of any settlement crests?" he asked almost casually.

Cougar was in the middle of picking up his shirt to pull it back over his head but paused to give Jake a dubious look. After a second he brandished his right wrist; the patch of burnt skin where the settlement tattoo should have been seemed to be several years old if Jake wasn't mistaken. It was, quite frankly, still a rather ugly scar.

Jake's smile was crooked – almost teasing.

"Not that one." He nodded towards Cougar's chest. "That one."

Cougar seemed to stiffen almost imperceptibly before he forcibly relaxed, his scoff both amused and a little miffed. His eyes, when they met Jake's, showed a certain amount of approval.

"How?"

Jake retreated to his workbench, feeling that physical distance might be a good idea until Cougar decided to go through with his plan to get dressed again. It seemed momentarily put on hold thanks to Jake's questions.

He tried to tell himself that he felt bad about that.

"You are very lucky I'm clever enough to actually understand what you mean, otherwise this conversation would be very difficult to maintain," Jake drawled with a cheeky grin, completely ignoring how Cougar shook his head at Jake's antics. "But, to answer your question on how I know: pure speculation really, based on various facts. Few people get tattoos beyond the settlement one so if you have more – especially one that big – it has to mean something. And since
you're religious I'm guessing it has to do with that, which in turn is directly connected to your home settlement. They raised you to be religious." Jake crossed his arms over his chest, shrugging. "Your fellow Raiders were probably too stupid to understand that for you both are settlement crests."

Cougar seemed to consider this for a second before offering a smile. Jake pretended that it didn't affect him at all.

"But not you," Cougar said, voice low and amused.

Jake grinned.

"But not me," he agreed. "Partly because I have no doubts about you being a sneaky little shit. You have somehow been able to hide that you're still practicing your religion from your fellow Raiders, haven't you? Because you still are, right?"

The smile faded so swiftly that it almost seemed like it hadn't been there in the first place. Cougar wasn't hesitating exactly but it took him a moment before he nodded. When he finally pulled the shirt back on he looked noticeably distracted. Sad, almost.

Jake didn't know much about religion. It was a foreign concept to him and a word he didn't use often, and what little he did know came from the Internet. It had been widespread before the Disaster but no one really knew to what extent it had survived; no one knew which ones were still practiced – since there were obviously several different kinds – but it wasn't common. Cougar was the first religious person Jake had met since none of the nearby settlements were into that stuff.

To be perfectly honest Jake had no idea what it really meant and what kind of impact it had on Cougar's everyday life. He was pretty certain that asking might be a tad bit rude though.

So he didn't and Cougar seemed reluctant to elaborate.

And just like that the conversation withered and died right before Jake's eyes and there was nothing he could do to stop it. It was clearly a subject he shouldn't have broached in the first place. Damnit.

Jake's first clue that he had been spending far too much time with Cougar came when Jess started asking pointed questions about his progress when it came to their super secret project. She rarely spoke openly about it so if she did it meant that she thought that he had been neglecting it.

And she was possibly right in this case.

Jake tried to tell himself that even if he and Cougar were on friendly terms it didn't mean that they were actual friends. It was stupid of him to be so pathetically eager for attention.

While Cougar clearly didn't understand half of what Jake was doing – even less when he tried to explain it – it was still all very fascinating to him. Perhaps because he couldn't do it himself. Jake, Jess and other Engineers were useful in a way that came as quite a shock to some people and the
sheer amount of things they could do, find and build was rather impressive. Cougar seemed to agree, even if he was awfully discreet about it.

But, then again, he seemed like a very discreet person overall.

Either way Jake took to showing Cougar what he was working on, to the point that Jake almost considered finding them another chair because Cougar ended up standing next to Jake's workbench more often than not, listening to Jake's babble. Cougar probably didn't care all that much about what Jake was saying but Jake was lonely enough to pretend. He liked having company.

Before he knew it two more days had passed. Cougar had been there for nine days and half of the times Jake didn't even remember that he wouldn't be staying; he was enjoying himself too much.

Not only did he get to show Cougar the wonders of technology and Jake's various projects but it really seemed like Cougar might be having fun too. Even if he didn't speak all that often he eventually started asking questions and actually listened to Jake's replies. He took an active part in what Jake was doing and more than once got to offer an extra hand or two when Jake needed it.

And sometimes when he might not actually need it, simply because he quite liked having Cougar stand close enough that Jake could practically feel the warmth radiating from his body. But that was his little secret.

He also taught Cougar how to knit. Or, well, tried to at least.

Cougar was clearly quite deft with his hands which made it a little more confusing that he didn't take to knitting as easily as expected. It all stemmed from the fact that Cougar's gloves were pretty much ruined by blood stains so Jake had offered to knit him a pair of mittens of the same design that he had, since Cougar had seemed impressed by the ingenuity of them being both mittens and fingerless gloves. Cougar had, not entirely surprising perhaps, insisted he do it himself.

And vetoed the bright yellow yarn Jake had suggested.

So Jake gave him a deep green instead and set out to teach him how to knit, both of them sitting cross legged facing each other on the bed, knees close enough to touch. Jake had taught both Beth and Jess and wasn't unaccustomed to correcting and helping when needed, but he couldn't deny that it wasn't quite the same when it was Cougar. His hands were bigger than Jess and Beth's – more calloused – and Jake found it a little hard to breathe every time he reached out and gently repositioned Cougar's fingers, skin warm against his.

But Jake could ignore that. He had to ignore it.

Cougar didn't seem to mind being corrected time and time again. He was offended only when Jake decided that he'd just make the mittens for Cougar, in a desperate attempt to maintain what little amount of sanity he had left. Touching Cougar really wasn't good for his poor heart and Jake pretended not to notice Cougar's narrow-eyed, insulted glares. He still got a pair of mittens so really, he had no reason to complain.

Jess had become more amicable by then even if she still didn't speak to Cougar or acknowledged him with anything but sharp, warning glares. Cougar never reacted to any of it, which actually seemed to make Jess even more annoyed, as if she would have preferred if Cougar had been the violent, bloodthirsty man she so clearly wanted him to be. Now she didn't seem quite sure what to do with him, especially not after having walked in on their knitting practice.

No one managed to look threatening while failing to knit a pair of mittens.
Beth liked Cougar. Well, as much as you could like someone you were a teensy bit afraid of and only spoke to on occasion. She was fascinated though, but learned quickly that asking questions didn't give her much since Cougar's replies were brief at best. Sometimes she tried to ask Jake about Cougar when they were just about to sleep – Jake was still sharing Beth's bed with her, even if she had taken to sleeping with Jess some nights because she claimed that Jake snored something terrible – but Jake didn't know enough to answer.

Still, Beth was hesitant to spend as much time in Jake's room as she usually would, even if she was still more than welcome. Cougar made room for her, always careful not to touch or scare her, but Jake suspected that she understood that as long as Cougar was there Jake was more distracted than usual.

Not to mention that Jess wasn't quite okay with her daughter spending time with a Raider, never mind that they didn't actually communicate much.

Jake knew it wouldn't last. He knew that Cougar would be on his way soon and that Jake really needed to get back to the secret experiments he and Jess were performing in the basement, but he wanted to cherish it just a little while longer.

For the first time in his life it actually felt like he might have a friend who wasn't his big sister, niece or someone just putting up with him because they needed his expertise. Only Cougar wasn't his friend. Jake knew that. He made sure to remember that. He couldn't let his guard down. They were still technically enemies and Cougar would leave soon.

And Jake really should tell Jess about the Raiders bound to come searching for him. And possibly stop spending so much time with Cougar.

Jake just knew that the former would be significantly easier than the latter.

Chapter End Notes

I think a lot of you didn't get the notifications for the first three chapters (if you're subscribing to me, that is) but it will hopefully work as usual from here on out. There are still many chapters to go so be ready for a long ride this time around, lovelies!

I will update once a week, on Fridays to begin with, since my beta, CarpeDentum, needs some time to catch up first. Either way I hope you're enjoying it! Jake is so confused, the poor thing. And Cougar isn't helping.

ALSO! HERE are the mittens - both Jake's and the ones he knits for Cougar in this chapter - made my the amazing jujitsuelf. Go have a look!
Jake actually felt a little guilty as he made his way down the flight of stairs leading to their basement, carefully having closed the heavy, reinforced steel door behind him. He could hear the sound of Jess moving around before he actually caught sight of her, walking between the rows of fragile plants lining the wide space.

She looked up when he reached the bottom of the stairs, her expression carefully schooled. He could still see hints of her anger however and knew that the only emotion that could possibly overshadow it was worry.

He cleared his throat a little awkwardly while looking around at the green sprouts, then at the humming equipment – bright lamps, humidifiers and carefully constructed space heaters. Jake had built most of them based on their shared ideas and he knew that if there was one thing he would eventually consider his life's work this was it. These painstakingly built machines trying so hard to mimic the conditions that would allow for crops, plants and flowers to grow again.

It wasn't a bad legacy, all things considered.

But Jake hadn't been down since Cougar arrived. Ten whole days. Not that Jess couldn't handle it all on her own if it so pleased her. If it wasn't for the fact that Jake was slightly better at delicate wiring than she was she wouldn't even need him. He had a rather alarming habit of killing the plants in the most peculiar ways as soon as he was in charge of them. He was way better with machines.

Jake licked his lips.

"How are they?"

Jess raised an eyebrow that managed to convey both disappointment and a sharp reprimand.

"Fine. For now."

But that could change overnight, as they both knew all too well after two years working on this project. It was a constant struggle to keep the plants from dying and if it hadn't been for the fact that they were both stubborn to a fault they would have given up by then.
The basement really wasn't ideal for the type of thing they had set up – the cold from the frozen ground never stopped trying to seep in through the walls and floor and it took a lot of effort to counteract it – but there was no other space big enough to contain their improvised greenhouse. Not where people wouldn't ask what it was for anyway.

Jake started walking down the first of three aisles, plants on either side. Some were small and struggling, probably close to dying, while others were fairing better. None of them were blooming however and the majority of the pots were just filled with soil, showing no sign of life whatsoever.

He couldn't even remember whose idea it had been but both he and Jess had taken to it with the kind of focus that was probably a tad bit scary to normal, well-adjusted people. Not that anyone in their settlement knew what they were up to. Jess didn't want to disappoint them if it turned out to be a dead end.

Things were still growing, even in the cold, snow covered world they lived in, but it wasn't easy. Some plants had mutated and adapted in order to survive while others had disappeared completely; mostly those that bore food. Some root vegetables could still endure the climate under the proper circumstances and Jake was glad for that, but he and Jess wanted to do better.

But it wasn't just the cold that made it difficult for plants to grow; it was the lack of sun and rich soil too. It had taken Jake and Jess over half a year before they had managed to artificially produce sunlight, another eight months before they could introduce heaters efficient enough to fight back the chill of the basement and now, when they should have pretty much all they needed, they still weren't getting any reliable results.

Jake could make an educated guess as to why but that wasn't what he had come to talk to her about.

"More Raiders are coming."

Jess paused, the spray bottle she had been showering the plants with freezing mid air. She turned her blue eyes towards him – so much like his own – and gave him a steady look.

"Oh?" She didn't sound doubting per se, more like hesitant. As if she couldn't quite tell where he was going with this.

Jake walked over to the closest bench, fingers brushing against the soft, frail leaves of the nearest plant, Jess hovering in the corner of his eye.

"I knew you wouldn't listen if I tried to tell you before but Cougar said that there will be more of them coming. And soon, probably."

Jess snorted, the sound unusually ugly to have come from her.

"I bet he did."

"Jessica."

She gritted her teeth – just a second of unflinching stubbornness – before her shoulders slumped, relaxing, if only a little.

"Sorry. I'm just... I don't like having him here, Jake."

Jake smiled sadly, shuffling closer.

"I know, Jess, and I'm sorry for that. But he's actually not that bad once you get to know him."
Jake chuckled softly at the incredulous look she leveled him with. "But I'm not going to blame you if you don't feel like giving him a chance. That's not why I want to talk to you."

"You're here because you think there are more Raiders coming," she said, voice tired but definitely not weak. She looked up at him. "After you."

Jake's responding smile was listless.

"Yeah, afraid so... And they're not just any Raiders, Jess. Someone else is pulling the strings." Jake leaned his hip against the bench, arms crossing over his chest. "Some guy called Max. He's the one who wants the Engineers and he's sending out Raiders as search parties."

Jess seemed to consider this, a soft frown on her face.

"And he's not going to give up, is he?" she asked after a couple of seconds of silence.

"Cougar doesn't seem to think so and right now I'd rather be prepared for the worst than get caught unawares."

Jess' expression hardened but out of determination rather than anger.

"Well, we'll just have to make sure to be prepared then. We found some guns in the Holden settlement and the work on the wall is almost done. We'll fight them if we have to."

Jake had always loved Jess for her practical nature. While Cougar was still not her favorite person in the world she did understand the importance of not ignoring a potential threat just because he was the one who brought it to their attention.

"Have I told you how much I love you lately?" Jake blurted out, grin spreading on his lips.

Jess snorted, giving him an amused but tender smile.

"Not lately, no."

"Well, I should rectify that then." He leaned forward, kissing her forehead, just because he could. "I love you."

She pushed him off but the smile lingering on her lips and the playful slap she gave his arm sort of diminished the harshness of it.

"I love you too, you big dork. Some days I have no idea why but I do."

"It's because I'm so adorable," Jake replied with a serious nod. Jess slapped his arm again, just for good measure.

"I suggest you make yourself useful and water the back row, Mr. Adorable, before I revoke your Internet privileges."

Jake gasped theatrically, hand on his heart.

"You wouldn't!"

Jess just bumped her hip against his to get him going and Jake laughed before he went to do as she asked. He owed her that much at least considering what an awesome big sister she was.
Jake did a fairly good job of living in denial but he knew that there was only so much he could do before it started becoming obvious that he might not be making a very big effort to kick Cougar out of the house. He had sort of promised Jess to do it as soon as Cougar had recovered enough to walk on his own – which he undoubtedly had been able to for days now – but Jake kept postponing it.

The surprising part was that Cougar didn't bring it up either. Jake didn't really know what to make of that. Cougar was definitely eager to get out of those shackles but he didn't seem the least bit interested in leaving. There was a difference between the two and Jake would be lying if he didn't admit that he was acutely aware of just how big it was.

That frail, innocent part of him couldn't help clinging to the belief that Cougar wanted to stay with them, if not for Jake's sake then at least because he was beginning to feel at home there. Jake wasn't picky – he could settle for either one.

In the end it was Jess who got the ball rolling but definitely not in the way Jake had anticipated. If anything he thought that she would take matters into her own hands and literally kick Cougar out – or alternatively stop feeding him like she had threatened to do several days ago – but that wasn't how it happened.

The day after Jake had been down to help Jess with the plants she came to his room, expression grim and exhausted in a way that told Jake that she had bad news. She didn't even seem to care that Cougar was right there on the bed, busy with whatever he was doing on his borrowed computer.

Jess had kicked up a fuss about that – the fact that Jake put such valuable equipment in the hands of someone they couldn't trust – but Jake had more or less ignored her arguments. Mostly because he hadn't had any of his own that could counter hers. He really was behaving increasingly reckless around Cougar and even if Jake could see himself deteriorating he was helpless to stop it. He just loved having company and it hadn't taken long at all for Cougar to become a silent but stable presence just outside of Jake's point of focus. He liked it. He didn't want it to end.

Still, he knew he had a sense of duty to his sister first and foremost. So he got up from his workbench and stepped out into the narrow hallway outside his room to hear what she wanted to say. Cougar might still see them but if they spoke quietly enough he wouldn't be able to hear it – not over the music that was playing.

"Two more plants have died." Jess' voice was full of disappointed frustration, her shoulders tense and muscles coiled, as if she would have preferred to have an opponent she could actually strike out against. Trying to give life in a world as cold and barren as theirs left them with enemies that were beyond their powers to beat. Sometimes you just had to accept that you couldn't defy nature.

Jake held back his sign, running a hand through his hair.

"And the others?"

"Alive, if only barely." She met his gaze. "But there's only eighteen of them left now, Jake, and they're not blooming or dropping seeds. At this rate we will run out within a couple of months and
after that there's nothing more we can do. It will all be for nothing.”

That really was the core of their problem. As much as they could build machines to create the perfect environment they still couldn't force the plants to grow. Finding the few sprouts and seeds they had there now had been difficult enough and they were slowly dying, possibly because of how badly equipped they had been at the start of things.

"We can't give up," Jake tried feebly.

"Then what should we do?" Jess snapped, sharper than she had intended, no doubt. Jake didn't take offense; he knew she was just angry because no matter how hard they were fighting their struggle didn't seem to be paying off. They were losing the plants faster than they could grow them.

"We just need to find more seeds. Better ones – ones that aren't already damaged by the frost." Jake had been thinking about that a lot. It was one of the few variables they had yet been unable to control; the one missing link that was most likely the cause for their failures so far.

"As much as I wish it was that easy you know it isn't, Jake," Jess replied while pinching the bridge of her nose. "We have no idea where to find seeds like that."

"I do."

Jake was pretty certain that both he and Jess flinched at those two simple words, spoken loud enough to be heard over the music playing in the background. They stared at Cougar who was sitting on the bed, his legs folded and expression utterly calm and poised while he looked at them over the computer in his lap.

"What? You read lips or something?" Jake blurted out without thinking, knowing that he and Jess hadn't been speaking nearly loud enough to be heard from across the room.

"Sí."

Well. Okay.

"That's just great," Jess hissed, clearly indecisive about whether to direct the majority of her anger towards Jake or Cougar. "Two years we've been working on this without anyone finding out then you get the brilliant idea to bring a Raider into the house and it all goes to hell."

"It's not my fault!"

"I'm actually pretty sure it is, Jacob."

She only ever called him Jacob when she was angry with him. That and sometimes when she was worried.

"Well, at least he's offering to help!" Jake wasn't sure who he was defending – Cougar or himself – but he knew it fell on him to do so. Jess would only get angrier if Cougar spoke up again.

"What? And you actually believe him?" Jess asked dubiously, hands settling on her hips.

Jake faltered, looking a little sheepish. It was only a brief moment of hesitation but it was enough for both Jess and Cougar to take notice.

"You can't be serious!" Jess gaped before pointing at Cougar. "He's a Raider! We can't trust him!"
"I didn't say we could!" Jake replied, voice pitched a little higher than usual.

He made sure not to look in Cougar's direction. He didn't want to know what Cougar might be thinking and Jake was infinitely grateful that Beth was off with the other kids learning how to read and write. Neither Jess nor Jake had ever felt comfortable arguing in front of Beth.

"He's dangerous and-"

"He's behaved so far," Jake interrupted, his voice sharpening somewhat. It felt weird talking about Cougar as if he was one of their misbehaving dogs and Jake hurried to continue before Jess had time to respond with something even more scathing. "Can you at least agree that hearing him out won't hurt?"

Jess gritted her teeth, eyes hard and angry, but Jake knew that she prided herself on being a reasonable and rational person. Her emotions got the best of her from time to time, sure, but her protectiveness and firmness came from competence, not overcompensation. She was one of the cornerstones in their settlement not only because she was an Engineer and therefore invaluable but because of her intellect and dependable nature. Jake knew that appealing to that side of her usually won him more arguments than whining or guilt ever could.

She took a deep breath before turning to face Cougar. She didn't step inside the room and her expression was nothing short of murderous but it was a clear sign that she was prepared to listen – at least for the time being.

Which was probably as much lenience as they were going to get.

Cougar seemed to understand this without any kind of prompting and had apparently been busy while Jake and Jess had been arguing between themselves. He turned the computer in his lap and held it up with the clear intent to show them whatever was on the screen. Jake had to step closer to be able to read, feeling his surprise build as he did.

"I didn't think those were for real," Jake mumbled. Cougar met his gaze and nodded as if to say that yes, they were. Jake carefully took the laptop from Cougar's hands and pushed some tools and stray pieces of wire aside to be able to place it on the edge of the workbench. "Jess, come look at this."

She seemed reluctant at first but her curiosity won out and Jake could feel her move to stand beside him, leaning in to look at the screen.

"Agricultural and botanical seed bank," Jess read out loud. She paused for several seconds, no doubt to allow the significance of those words to really settle inside her mind.

"I've looked at them before," Jake explained, "in a passing at least, but I figured they were destroyed or not even real to begin with. Or too far away."

Cougar had opened the page for a very specific seed bank, one that apparently housed several thousand kinds of different seeds for various plants and flowers. Jake quickly skimmed the content of the article, noting the explanations of the climate controlled environment, various safety measures to avoid damage and infiltration, but all of that wasn't as important as the fact that it might be real.

And Cougar obviously knew where it was.

"How far is it?" Jake asked, barely able to curb his excitement. He wasn't sure if Cougar knew the exact location of Jake's settlement but he seemed able to give rough estimates all the same. He might even have looked up a couple of maps since he got to borrow one of the computers.
Cougar seemed to consider the question while Jess, surprisingly enough, didn't protest.

"Two weeks. On foot."

That was further than anyone in their settlement had ever traveled and definitely too far to bring a car, which Cougar had obviously taken into account as well. Two weeks on foot – a month if you counted the journey back as well. Still, it was doable.

"No, Jacob, don't even think about it."

Sometimes it was a teensy bit scary just how well Jess seemed to know him. Jake turned towards her, almost bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"Come on, Jess! Do you realize what this means? This is exactly what we need! If this is real-

"If, Jake, and that's a very big if," she interrupted sharply. She leveled Cougar with a fierce glare.

"You say you've been there?"

Cougar nodded and remained seated on the bed despite the hostility in the air. A slight but noticeable twitch in his fingers betrayed the fact that he might not be as calm as he seemed however, but he obviously knew better than to let his instincts take over and actually lash out.

Someone who had been living with Raiders for years was no doubt conditioned to go on the offensive a lot quicker than most other humans and Jess was outright challenging Cougar's patience, time and time again. Jake was grateful for the show of restraint.

"And it's still fully functional?" she asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

"I don't know," Cougar replied with a slight shrug. "Couldn't get in."

"But you were there? And the doors were still locked?" Jake knew he sounded far too eager but he couldn't help it. This was they had been looking for – this could be the key to successfully re-growing hundreds of different crops and vegetables.

Cougar nodded again.

"That doesn't mean that the inside hasn't been damaged or contaminated," Jess argued. And Jake got that – he did – but he had always been more of an optimist than Jess. He was willing to put his faith in ludicrous ideas and quirky gadgets to save his life so he was definitely prepared to believe Cougar when it came to this. If it was true and the bank held all these seeds it would be more than just a breakthrough – it would be a miracle that could ensure humanity's continued survival.

"Jess, come on," Jake begged. "It's worth a shot. You know how much we need this."

"I do, Jake, trust me on that. But I'm not sure if I can trust him."

She nodded towards Cougar who didn't as much as blink. If he felt insulted to have his credibility questioned he didn't show it.

"Can you at least think on it? Consider the possibilities and what it would mean not just to us but civilization as a whole. If this works out we could feed so many people and perhaps even grow crops all year round." He tried to convey just how much he believed in this and he could see her decisiveness sway when faced with his certainty. "I just need to have a look at it. Go there and see if it's real and if it is, Jess, just imagine."

Jake knew that he had no real need for her express approval before he did anything – he was a grown man after all – but that didn't mean that he wanted to cause her grief or pain either. If he left while they were in disagreement she would worry herself half to death and as much as Jake could
get distracted by his hunt for knowledge he wasn't *that* heartless.

"Just think on it. That's all I ask. Really think on it, with rational-"

"Alright! Fine, I will," Jess relented, possibly just to shut him up. She didn't look very pleased at all but Jake wasn't going to hold that against her. She met Jake's gaze. "But you have to promise me that you won't do anything until we've discussed it and come to an agreement."

Jake's smile was soft despite how she obviously thought that he was immature enough to sneak out in the middle of the night against her wishes.

"I promise, Jess. We'll make the decision together."

She calmed somewhat after having gotten that assurance and Jake dared to lean in and kiss her cheek. Jess often treated Jake as if he was much younger and frailer than he actually was, but he knew it was partly his own fault. He had let her continue doing so long after he should have told her to stop and the habit was no doubt hard to break after years of being allowed to dote on him.

"Can I show him the greenhouse?" Jake knew it was a risk to ask considering how careful they were about the whole thing – not even Beth was allowed in the basement – but the secret was already out. Cougar knew whether he saw it or not.

That didn't seem to be Jess' biggest concern however considering how she eyed the chain connecting Cougar to the bed frame. Jake couldn't help rolling his eyes.

"Yes, I would have to let him go. But if he really wanted to hurt me he could have stabbed me with a screwdriver days ago. He has suffered through *hours* of my singing, Jess, and if that hasn't made him want to kill me nothing will."

The amused snort that came from Cougar probably wasn't helping their case but Jake was still a little proud about almost having made him laugh. Jess pursed her lips.

"I can't believe that you're prepared to trust him," she muttered, but she sounded defeated rather than angry. She knew that she was fighting a losing battle.

Jake nudged her chin to make her look up at him.

"I'm not, Jess, but I am willing to give him a chance to *earn* my trust. There's a difference."

Jess rubbed a hand over her eyes, her expression pinched.

"Fine." Her sigh was heavy – weary – but she soon turned her focus towards Cougar, the fierceness bleeding back into her words. "If you hurt him you won't get far. If our guard dogs won't catch you I will and I won't be nearly as kind as they would be when I rip you apart."

Cougar held her gaze, his own expression serious – much like it had been when Jake threatened him, as a matter of fact – before nodding to show that he had understood her point.

"I'm going to Hazel's," Jess announced before turning on her heel and walking out the room. She paused just outside the threshold however, looking back at them with a stern look on her face.

"Behave. Both of you."

It sounded very much like they were being preemptively reprimanded, just in case, and Jake responded with a crooked smile and a brief nod, which obviously was enough for his sister. He allowed himself a slow, relieved exhale when she disappeared out of view. That had gone a lot better than he could ever have anticipated.
"You are very alike."

It was impossible not to chuckle at Cougar's measured but unmistakably amused observation. Jake grinned at him before picking up the nearest screwdriver he knew would suffice in opening the shackles.

"Yeah, it happens when you're related." Jake walked over and sat down on the bed next to Cougar, gesturing for him to give him access to his right leg. "But I think she's like, at least ten times scarier than I am."

Cougar hummed in what was probably agreement while obediently repositioning himself until Jake could reach the manacle.

"She's always been overprotective and I can admit that I kinda hate being treated like a kid sometimes, but I know she does it out of-"

Jake fell silent when his fingers slid over the hinges of the shackle, feeling a slight unevenness that shouldn't have been there. Something had put them out of alignment, which could only happen if they had been opened. Jake stiffened in alarm and his instincts kicked in pretty much the same second that Cougar seemed to notice that something was wrong.

They were sitting fairly close so it wasn't difficult at all to grab one of Cougar's wrists with his free hand and pull him in, just enough to press the point of the screwdriver against the softness on the underside of Cougar's jaw. Despite the fact that it barely took a second Jake still wasn't surprised to find something sharp press against his own throat.

He hadn't been able to catch the movement or see exactly what Cougar held but Jake was willing to guess on a sharpened piece of metal. He would have noticed if any of the tools were missing but he didn't have time to count each and every one of his wires or metal fragments, so if Cougar wanted to arm himself without alerting Jake that was definitely the way to go.

It was nothing short of a miracle that they didn't actually end up hurting each other.

Jake's heart was beating furiously in his chest and a spike of adrenaline made his hands tremble, but he held Cougar's gaze, not surprised to find that all the humor and friendliness had left it within the blink of an eye. Cougar seemed just seconds away from baring his teeth, his expression so similar to that from their first meeting – the brief seconds before he tried to shoot Jake – that it was impossible not to shiver.

"How long?" Jake asked, ignoring how his words wavered ever so slightly. He still held the tip of the screwdriver against Cougar's throat, surprisingly detached about the whole thing. He knew he was supposed to be afraid – he could end up getting his throat slashed – but instead he felt some kind of eerie calm settle over him.

"Two days," Cougar bit out through gritted teeth.
Jake felt the room spin. Two days. For two days Cougar had been free to do whatever he wanted, if it so was to run away or kill them all. Jake, Jess and – fucking hell – Beth too. Jake could feel his hand waver, nauseating anxiety building inside of him. He had put his family in danger. Cougar could have hurt his family. Jake swallowed harshly.

"Why are you still here?"

Cougar raised a questioning eyebrow, as if he wanted Jake to elaborate.

"Why didn’t you leave? I know how much you hated being chained down and you've been able to escape for two days. I know you could have gotten away. You could have killed us all and just left. You could have-"

He didn't even know how to finish the sentence, his words unsteady not because of anger but deep, crippling fear. Cougar seemed to still. His expression smoothed out until it was a blank mask that Jake probably wouldn't be able to read even if he had been emotionally stable enough to do so.

Jake's grip around Cougar’s wrist was loose enough that he could easily have shaken it off in an attempt to turn the tables. It was difficult to say who was stronger out of the two of them; Jake might be slightly bigger but that didn't guarantee anything. Cougar could still get the upper hand, if nothing else because he was undoubtedly the more experienced of the two.

Despite this he made no move that could make the situation escalate. If anything he seemed to be forcing himself to relax, which was proved a second later when he lowered the piece of metal he was pressing against Jake's throat. Cougar angled it away from them both before dropping it on the bed with a muted thump – without breaking eye contact.

It was obvious that it demanded a lot of Cougar's self-control to do something like that – to voluntarily put himself in a situation where he was clearly at a disadvantage – but it wasn't the first time either. Cougar might have held Jake at gun point twice but he had also surrendered himself the same amount of times, leaving his fate in Jake's hands.

And Jake wasn't nearly cold blooded enough not to acknowledge that.

He retreated, slowly letting go of Cougar's hand before he removed the screwdriver. A small mark from the metal tip lingered on Cougar's skin but he didn't seem to notice or care. Jake's hands were shaking and he had to remind himself how to breathe properly.

"Where would I go?"

It was spoken so effortlessly, without any kind of emotional weight – as if Cougar was just stating an obvious fact –, which was somehow worse than the alternative. Cougar shrugged softly, as if it made sense for him to stay even if it meant faking being held captive. And in a way it did. Cougar had betrayed his fellow Raiders and as far as his life expectancy went being inside the safe walls of a settlement was probably a huge step up.

A fleeting thought passed through Jake's head, wondering if a Raider had ever been welcomed back into a settlement after having joined up with bandits. Logic told him no because most people would never open their gates to anyone but their own or those they recognized from other settlements. Once you were a Raider you were essentially an outcast for life, the burn mark on your right wrist enough to get you killed without any questions being asked. It was a cruel fate, especially if you had been forcibly recruited.

Jake closed his eyes and sighed. Priorities.
"We are so not telling Jess about this. As far as she's concerned you've been stuck here until I opened the shackles for you." The look they shared was one of understanding. Not even Cougar was prepared to test Jess' patience, it seemed.

After a brief moment of hesitation Jake returned to the task of unlocking the shackles, forcing his hands remain stable during the few seconds it took him to do so. The chain rustled when Jake let it slide to the floor and he tried to deny just how ominous that sound was.

He exhaled slowly, his heart rate slowing even if his shoulders remained coiled and tense.

"I know I don't have to apologize for not trusting you – and I'm not," Jake began softly. He wasn't entirely sure where he was heading with this but he knew he had to say something. "But, in light of recent events – like you not killing my family for two whole days even if you could have – I can admit that you might have at least earned the benefit of the doubt."

Cougar said nothing but his expression was surprisingly open, all things considered. The unflinching look of calm, tempered patience made Jake want to squirm but he held it back, if only barely. Jake took a deep breath before patting Cougar's leg.

"Come on. I'm gonna show you the greenhouse."

Cougar seemed to have no objections against that, back to being his usual, disturbingly collected self. Then again, Jake preferred that over the brief flashes of viciousness he had seen. Cougar was definitely not someone you should mess with.

Like so many other things that Cougar had encountered since Jake had basically kidnapped him the greenhouse in the basement seemed to leave him in awe. Not that Cougar said anything – it was Cougar, after all – but the look in his eyes and the way he gently, almost reverently, touched some of the plants really said it all. He had definitely never seen anything like it before.

Jake could admit that it was a bit weird to have Cougar walking around without the accompanying rustle of chains but he told himself that he had no reason to worry. If Cougar really wanted to hurt them he would have done so the minute he had gotten rid of the shackles, but he hadn't.

Cougar didn't want to hurt them.

To distract himself Jake rambled on about the machines he had built and the experiments they had been running; how long it had taken to set everything up and what they did to keep the plants alive. It was easy to lose himself in the retelling of a project he had had constantly at the back of his mind for over two years, the data and variables familiar and comforting to his sometimes frazzled nerves.

"Will you manage?"

Jake snapped back to attention, clearing his throat when he realized he had been asked a question in the middle of his long monologue. Cougar was looking at the meager rows of green plants struggling for survival, the low hum of the various pieces of machinery filling the air.
"To make them grow again? Perhaps, if we're lucky." Jake shrugged, staring at the empty pots – those that had never started growing or had died during some stage in the process. "It's difficult since there's only so much you can do, you know? After a certain point you're working on pure faith."

Cougar's scoff was derisive and Jake couldn't help stiffening.

"What?" he asked defensively.

"Faith has... limitations." There were so many underlying emotions in those three words that Jake didn't know quite what to say.

"Why do you say that?" was what he eventually managed.

Cougar's smile was soft and Jake couldn't help how his heart skipped a beat at the sight. Whatever Cougar said next was clearly not in English and Jake had no hope of following. He could only stare as the, to him, incomprehensible words flowed from Cougar's lips. It sounded beautiful even if Jake had no idea what Cougar was saying and by the looks of it there had to be a lot of meaning behind them.

Cougar was still smiling when he finished but it had an added tinge of sadness.

Jake walked closer and couldn't help bumping Cougar with his elbow, as if to ask for his attention even if Jake was pretty sure that he had it already.

"And that was?" he asked when Cougar looked up at him, seemingly not bothered by the close proximity or the casual way their arms were brushing.

"A prayer."

"For faith?"

Cougar nodded and Jake felt a small smile grow on his lips.

"Hey." He nudged Cougar again, desperate to make him stop looking so forlorn. "I know it's not easy to have faith all the time since it's pretty frail and all, but you can have some of mine, if you want?"

Cougar blinked, staring at Jake as if he had said something completely insane. Or alternatively something amazing. It was a little difficult to tell and might even have been a combination of the two.

"What?" Jake had only tried to cheer him up.

The sigh Cougar let out seemed to morph into a quiet chuckle and Jake nearly jumped when he felt Cougar lean in, his forehead coming to rest against Jake's shoulder. It wasn't that he disliked it – Jake was an incredibly tactile person – but Cougar had rarely, if ever, initiated any kind of physical contact between them. It was always Jake who did it and certainly not something of this magnitude.

Save for the time when he had been bleeding and suffering from hypothermia Cougar had never shown any kind of weakness. Even when he failed at knitting he managed to maintain his dignity somehow but this? It was an unmistakable admission of frailty and acceptance of support.

Jake had no idea how to deal with that, his heart beating steady and loud in his chest, pushing against his ribs. He barely even dared to breathe.
"Gracias."

It took some effort but Jake was able to swallow down his nerves and force a wobbly smile.

"Okay, I'm pretty sure that means 'thank you'." He felt out of balance but not necessarily in a bad way; more like he had been taken by surprise by the sudden show of trust. Because that was undoubtedly what this was. Jake cleared his throat. "I'm not sure what I did but you're welcome."

"You are unbelievable."

Jake snorted.

"Oh, you better believe it. Jess has been telling me for years just how annoying I am and she-"

"Incredible, Jake," Cougar interrupted, his voice softer than Jake was entirely comfortable with because he didn't know how to interpret it in a way that didn't make his heart race and stomach twist itself into delighted knots. "I meant incredible."

Bashful didn't even being to cover what Jake felt in that moment, both because of the compliment and the fact that it might actually have been the first time Cougar said his name, strange as that was. They had spent over a week in each other's company but Cougar's penchant for silence meant that he rarely spoke more than ten words a day – and Jake's name obviously wasn't one of those ten.

Jake scratched the side of his nose, looking at the plants in front of him rather than Cougar, who straightened but remained distractingly close.

"You will manage. With the plants." Cougar sounded so sure, as if it was some sort of uncontestable truth. Which it honestly wasn't.

"You can't know that," Jake mumbled.

"I can. And I do."

Jake just had to turn his head and look at him, frowning incredulously.

"How?"

"I have very little faith. None left." Cougar shook his head with a self-depreciating grimace but when he looked up, catching and holding Jake's gaze with the kind of intensity that left shivers down Jake's spine, there was no mistaking his sincerity. "Except in this. I have faith in you."

It might have been the look in Cougar's eyes or the words he spoke – maybe even the situation as a whole – but Jake could barely breathe. Something seemed to lodge in his throat and he just had no idea what to say. He could feel the importance of those words – how much they meant to Cougar – even if he didn't quite understand them.

"Okay," Jake croaked eventually, his voice barely carrying across the short distance between them.

Cougar remained silent and didn't make any more attempts to touch or talk to Jake, but his presence was more than enough. It took a moment for Jake to identify the emotion that was growing in his chest but once he did he knew he had to convince Jess to allow him to search for the seed bank.

No matter how fragile or innocent it might be Jake was willing to embrace it.
He felt hope.

Chapter End Notes

So that's a really mushy chapter for you. Or, well, the END is at least. Because yeah, Cougar here is religious which Jake might not understand, so the talk of giving faith? That's a whole lot more significant to Cougar than to Jake, but no less sincere. So fluff. You're welcome. Also some signs of the actual plot! Woho!

The next chapter will be a bit late. I'll still upload it next Friday but I'll be at a conference thingie most of the day so I won't have computer access. But you'll get it eventually! Just be a bit patient :) I hope you are enjoying everything so far!

CarpeDentum beta'ed as usual and I also want to thank Cleo for giving me various links to seed banks and for helping me solidifying that part of the plot.
The Journey

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Convincing Jess that it was completely reasonable to go on a month-long journey with a Raider to find a seed bank that might or might not still be in use proved to be easier than Jake had thought, but that was mostly because he had thought that he wouldn't manage at all.

Not that Jess was being overly cooperative by any definition of the word but she did find herself running out of arguments eventually since she had made the mistake of allowing Jake a couple of hours to perfect his own. He could be annoyingly relentless when he really wanted something – as Jess very well knew – which was also why she soon gave up on trying to change his mind. She still asked a lot of questions to make sure that he had thought it through and Jake made sure to answer them all.

It was true that going on an excursion outside the walls while there was most likely Raiders coming for him was dangerous, but it would also make him more difficult to pinpoint. The fact that he had never travelled that far and might not be fully equipped for a journey of that magnitude didn't matter since Cougar would be coming with him and he had the necessary skills and knowledge. A lot of it relied on Cougar, as a matter of fact, which seemed to be what worried Jess the most.

Jake couldn't blame her. She didn't know Cougar all that well and she had definitely not heard the conversation Cougar and Jake had had down in the basement; the one that still left Jake with a pleasant and warm flutter in his chest.

Jake couldn't quite say that he trusted Cougar – at least not explicitly – but he honestly didn't have the heart to question the look he had seen in Cougar's eyes either. He was willing to believe that Cougar wouldn't fail him.

In the end Jess was persuaded. She clearly didn't like the idea of it being just the two of them but it wasn't like they could spare anyone else either. And Jake could see that she would definitely have preferred to know for sure that it would be worth the effort, but she couldn't deny the breakthrough it would be for them if it turned out that the seed bank hadn't been compromised or destroyed.

It took her about three days to come to terms with the thought – during which Jake and Cougar were already busy doing preparations – but when she finally did it was obvious that she was willing to commit to the plan, no matter how daring she thought it might be. Jess helped them get
the supplies and equipment they needed and while Jake wouldn't stretch as far as to say that she was friendly with Cougar she was at least being civil.

Still, Jake didn't stop her when she not-so-subtly cornered Cougar to undoubtedly threaten him some more and explain in exquisitely morbid detail what she would do to him if he harmed her little brother. Jake knew that it would help her sleep at night and Cougar was a big boy.

Jess was the one who decided that it would be better for them to leave at dawn and that she would tell the rest of the settlement about it once it was already too late for anyone to protest. People were not going to like the fact that she let one of their Engineers head out with a Raider, especially not when she couldn't tell them where they would be going and why, but she assured them that she would be able to handle the fallout.

While they could easily have waited a couple of days more before leaving it was probably better to do so as soon as possible. No one had dared to complain about Cougar's presence so far – many had probably decided to ignore it entirely since they had never actually seen him since his arrival – but they couldn't rely on things remaining that way. Not to mention that more plants would die the longer they postponed it.

So two weeks after he had first made his appearance at the settlement Cougar was leaving again but this time Jake would be joining him. Cougar wasn't fully healed from the gunshot yet but whenever Jake tried to broach the subject he was studiously ignored and was eventually forced to accept that Cougar might be a better judge of whether he was up for it or not.

Jake made sure to sneak into Beth's room and kiss her goodbye before he left. He had never been away from his family for longer than a day and he had no idea how he was supposed to handle the homesickness he would no doubt be facing. He was used to going outside the wall but to actually travel – like the Raiders and Nomads – was something he had no experience of. He was a Settler through and through.

That was one of the reasons that he had made sure to listen to all of Cougar's precise and curt instructions. Jake would be completely lost without guidance and he knew that the power balance between them – though shifting as it had always been – would lean in Cougar's favor while they were out in the wilderness. Jake knew how to do a lot of things to ensure his survival but to navigate and actually manage for more than a couple of days was beyond him. He needed Cougar and if for some reason decided to betray or leave Jake he would be dead long before he managed to make his way back home.

Jake knew it, Jess knew it and Cougar definitely knew it. Cougar was the first person outside their settlement that Jake would entrust with his life and he hoped that he wouldn't regret it. Not only because he didn't want to run the risk of dying but because he was fairly certain that it would destroy him on a completely different level – one that might be even worse.

He knew it was foolish to get attached but he couldn't help it. He had been desperate for a friend and despite his stoic demeanor Cougar was surprisingly fun and easy to be around. Jake truly hoped he hadn't misjudged him. Innocence was a fragile thing and Jake would have hated his own if it hadn't been for the fact that it made his life so much more beautiful.

He wasn't sure what he would do if Cougar betrayed him.

Jake tried to push those thoughts aside as he gathered his things and made sure that he had everything he would need. As much as it frustrated him he knew that he couldn't bring one of his laptops – he would have nothing to charge it with whenever it ran out of batteries – but he had still packed tools, some of his gadgets and certain other equipment that he suspected would be necessary to break into the seed bank once they got there. Cougar had been able to explain in
rough details what the lock had looked like and Jake would just have to improvise from there.

"You should take Mirage with you."

Jake looked up when he heard Jess' voice, frowning softly.

"You sure? I don't think the others will like it if I steal one of the dogs as well."

Jess rolled her eyes.

"You won't be stealing her – I'm giving you permission to bring her with you."

Mirage was one of their calmest, most dependable guard dogs; possibly also the prettiest with her snow white fur and almost eerily blue eyes. Jake wasn't the one tasked with taking care of and raising the dogs but he had stepped in and helped when Mirage had been a pup and she seemed to have taken a shine to him ever since.

Still, he wasn't sure if it was a good idea to bring her and he opened his mouth to say just that, only to have Jess interrupt him before he even got started.

"She can hunt and keep herself fed – you know that – and it would make me feel calmer if I knew that the two of you had some protection besides a hunting bow, knives and one handgun." Jess' voice was firm but the look in her eyes said exactly how worried she was.

She had a point. Jake couldn't with a clear conscience take any of the guns from the settlement – they would need them for their own protection – so the only one they would bring was the one Cougar had surrendered during their meeting at the Holden settlement. It wouldn't be nearly enough to save them if they were ambushed by a group bigger than three or four people, but Mirage was trained to attack and would definitely be able to even out the odds.

Jake was also bringing his vambraces but no matter how comforting the weight felt on his forearms Jake knew their limitations. He had brought earplugs both for him and Cougar but it would take time to put them in and the magnet – cool as it might be – was even more unreliable.

"Alright," Jake relented with a sigh. "We'll take her with us."

He had no idea what Cougar would think about the addition but Jake knew that Mirage wouldn't in any way slow their pace or complicate things. If anything she would make it easier by helping with the hunting and guard them while they slept.

That settled Jake finished off the last of the preparations while trying to ignore the anxious looks his sister kept giving him. It was only natural and he wouldn't dream of telling her to stop. If he had been in her shoes he would most likely have done the same. Not to mention that Jake was feeling pretty nervous too, even if his enthusiasm managed to smother it most of the time.

The thought of leaving the safety of his settlement was as terrifying as it was thrilling; an adventure unlike anything he had ever experienced. He had no idea what he would face out there but he was glad that he wouldn't be doing it alone, which was why he made sure to smile at Cougar once they were standing outside the house, ready to get going. He couldn't think of anything to say but it didn't seem like Cougar expected it either.

Jess joined them a couple of seconds later, returning from having fetched Mirage. Jess' back was straight and her expression firm but it didn't quite manage to hide the worry in her eyes. Jake smiled at the sight of the big, fluffy dog. He didn't have to bend down very far to be able to nuzzle against Mirage's head and coo affectionate little phrases that only she could hear. Mirage seemed to hum in approval.
When Jake straightened he threw Cougar a quick glance and couldn't help flashing an amused grin. Cougar didn't look frightened per se – not even close – but definitely wary and if Jake wasn't mistaken Cougar took a discreet step backwards when Mirage turned her attention towards him with a suspicious rumble that was almost a growl. She could tell that he was a stranger but the fact that Jake and Jess seemed comfortable in Cougar's presence kept her from attacking.

Cougar was still a bit cautious, which was an understandable – and not to mention wise – reaction considering how big Mirage was. Too bad Jake had never claimed to be mature.

"I really want to make a comment about cats and dogs but you'll probably punch me if I do, won't you?"

Cougar's glare was answer enough but it didn't wipe the grin from Jake's face.

Jess grumbled something about Jake's juvenile behavior before herding them towards the gate. Jake tried not to look like an overexcited five-year-old but he was fairly certain that he failed spectacularly if Cougar's slightly judgmental look was anything to go by. Jake pretended not to notice and dug his fingers into Mirage's white fur instead, honestly quite happy to have her along for the ride.

Jess did the talking when they reached the gate. Brenda and Jamal were on guard duty and eyed them with confusion and a certain amount of distrust in their eyes – mostly aimed towards Cougar but not exclusively. Both Jake and Cougar had heavy backpacks and Mirage's presence was only making them more suspicious.

Luckily enough for them people in the settlement were used to following Jess' orders so it didn't take long before they reluctantly started opening the gate. Their decision to comply was probably aided by the fact that they were happy to see Cougar leave. The rusty hinges gave off a loud, piercing wail but Jake paid it very little mind when Jess pulled him close for a desperate hug.

"You be careful, Jacob, and you better come back. I'll never forgive you if you don't," Jess whispered, her voice frail in a way that Jake hadn't heard since they were kids and their parents died.

Jake's throat seized up and he could only nod as he hugged back, squeezing her as tightly as he dared. He had every intention of coming back.

"Promise me, Jacob," she practically pleaded. "You have to come back."

"I will. I promise," he managed to croak despite the tightness in his chest and the sting behind his eyelids. "I promise I'll come back. I'll be fine."

It was obvious that Jess would have kept him there if she could but Jake eventually pulled back, forcing her to let go. Her lips were pressed tightly together when she looked up at him.

"Good luck." She reached up, stroking his cheek before turning her attention to Cougar. Jake couldn't say exactly what passed between them since it was non-verbal communication mostly reliant on fierce glares but it ended when Cougar gave a tip of his hat, as if to concede to some kind of statement Jess made. Jess seemed to relax – marginally at least – before offering a nod of her own.

With that Jake, Cougar and Mirage slipped through the gap left in the gate and while he hadn't changed his mind about the excursion Jake couldn't help turning around to see the big metal structure close behind them, holding Jess' gaze for as long as possible. The spike of dread and panic he felt when the clang of the gate closing echoed in the morning silence was expected but
still not easy to bear. Jake forced himself to breathe through it. He would be fine.

He felt Mirage brush against his fingers and without thinking he let his fingers sink into her fur, accepting the comfort she was clearly offering. He could do this. It was scary and dangerous but also an incredible adventure.

Jake cleared his throat and looked at Cougar, not having realized just how close they were standing. He figured that Cougar would want to stay as far away from Mirage as possible but apparently not. Jake's smile was weak and clearly cracking around the edges.

"I guess it's my turn to put my faith in you," he mumbled softly, making no attempt to hide just how exposed he felt. Cougar would probably be able to see it anyway considering how attentive he was. Jake took a trembling breath, eyes downcast. "Please don't let me down."

Jake wasn't quite prepared to feel the weight of Cougar's hand against his neck, hindered somewhat by his scarf and the collar of his coat but still undeniably there. Cougar was wearing the mittens Jake had knitted for him but with the fingers bare and Jake could feel them brush against his jaw. His gaze snapped up to meet Cougar's.

"I won't." Cougar didn't smile but there was not a single trace of a lie in his eyes. He looked determined and honest, to the point that Jake's smile grew stronger, his confidence growing.

Yeah, they could totally do this.

It didn't take long for Jake to realize that one of the best things about travelling with Cougar was that Jake was allowed to talk about anything and everything that popped into his head. He knew that Cougar probably didn't listen to even a third of what he was saying but he didn't tell Jake to shut up either. It was awesome. Partly because Jake would get bored otherwise but also because it kept his mind off what he had left behind.

So Jake talked a lot and Cougar endured it, pretty much like it had been back at the settlement except that here Cougar was leading and they had Mirage somewhere in their peripheral pretty much all the time. She always walked some distance away from them, no doubt trying to pick up on any threats long before they came near the humans in her charge.

While Cougar seemed uncomfortable whenever Mirage was close – the sheer size of her was something most people needed a while to get used to – Jake could see that he was clearly appreciating the effort she put into protecting them. More than once Jake lost track of her only to find that Cougar could point out exactly where she was, practically invisible against the white backdrop. But that could also have been because Cougar obviously had better eyesight than Jake did and was generally better at noticing things.

The first couple of hours were fine. Jake was used to long walks and physical exertion and the pace they set for themselves was steady but by no means brisk. He kept talking to keep himself occupied, smiling widely the few times Mirage looped in close enough to them for him to pat her with his gloved hand – something she seemed to do for his benefit rather than her own.

Cougar was pretty much completely silent but that wasn't in any way unusual. He had already
showed Jake which route they would be taking, pointing it out on the maps Jake had brought up on his computer before they left, and Jake trusted that Cougar knew where he was going. They were still close enough to Jake's settlement that he recognized everything but he knew that it wouldn't take long before they would have to rely solely on Cougar's sense of direction.

The snow was packed tight with a thick crust – as was common during the summer months – which made it easy to maintain their steady pace. Jake figured that was one of the reasons that it took a while before they stopped for their first break.

Jake took it in a stride, smiling and talking in between bites of food and mouthfuls of water. The weather was surprisingly mild, even for summer, with a gentle breeze and a tired albeit still noticeable sun shining down on them. The sky was actually blue rather than white and it felt like the perfect day to start the kind of adventure they were heading out on.

Not that Jake deluded himself that it would be easy. He knew that the temperature would drop when night fell and while he was no stranger to sleeping outside without anything more than blankets and tarps to shield him from the cold he didn't exactly enjoy it – and definitely not for an extended period of time. While life inside a settlement was far from luxurious it still offered a kind of security and comfort that Jake would have to do without the coming month; like proper sleeping arrangements, the ability to wash off grime and sweat, and warmth in general.

They would have to hunt for food when the second week rolled around and while Jake technically knew how to do that it had never been on a frequent basis. As an Engineer he had been allowed to opt out from the hunting trips and a part of him regretted that now. Then again, he was fairly certain that Cougar and Mirage's combined efforts would be more than enough to make sure that they didn't starve.

Jake had never really thought about it before but it suddenly occurred to him just how harsh a Raider's life had to be. Nomads had their caravans – sleds pulled by horses or reindeers – where they stored their supplies and necessities but Raiders often had to move quickly across wide expanses and didn't have the resources to maintain anything on a long term basis. They basically lived on whatever they could find and Jake realized with rather stunning clarity that during his stay at their settlement Cougar had probably received more regular meals than he had in years.

No wonder he hadn't wanted to leave.

That thought kept turning inside Jake's head as the day progressed, partly because he was curious by nature but also because he was getting a little antsy and wanted to keep his mind busy.

Jake barely recognized where they were by then and it was unsettling to know that he was out there, in the middle of nowhere, with a man he still wasn't quite sure if he trusted. Because as much as he liked Cougar and might also be inconveniently attracted to him he was still a Raider and an outsider. Jake's upbringing made him stubbornly suspicious of anyone not from his own settlement.

They were in the middle of setting up their primitive but vital camp for the night when Jake found himself blurting out the question that had been at the tip of his tongue for the past two hours.

"Why did you agree to this?"

Cougar didn't even pause, quietly unlatching the two tarps meant to cover the snow pits they would sleep in from his pack before giving Jake a quizzical look that was his way of asking Jake to elaborate.

"I mean, I decided that I wanted to go and I needed you to do it." Jake frowned, rubbing his nose.
"But why didn't you say no?"

Cougar raised an eyebrow and scoffed. It was an amused sound – as if Jake was being a wee bit stupid – and Jake almost felt insulted.

"Why would I?"

Jake chewed on the inside of his cheek, absently noting that Mirage was inspecting the small clearing they had settled in. The trees grew fairly wide apart in this section of the woods but Cougar had explained that they would cross through a thicker part soon enough, which would not be in their favor. The snow would undoubtedly be looser there – untouched by the sun due to the tree branches – and hide stones and other things that would make the footing treacherous.

Jake fingered one of the straps on his backpack, restlessness making him fidget more than usual.

"You seemed to like it at the settlement. I mean, you had food and safety and if you had said no you would have gotten to stay since I couldn't very well go without you." Jake met Cougar's gaze, ignoring that he was supposed to be unpacking what little food they would be eating before settling in for the night. "You have no reason to want to go to the seed bank."

The smile on Cougar's lips was surprisingly soft.

"But you do," Cougar replied, tossing one of the tarps at Jake, who caught it on pure reflex.

He blinked in surprise, trying to figure out if there was another way to interpret Cougar's words than the one Jake's hopeful, attention-seeking self seemed to be leaning towards.

"You're saying you agreed because of me? Because I wanted to go?"

Cougar didn't answer – he didn't even look at Jake as a matter of fact – but the way his smile lingered made excitement and breathless delight curl in Jake's gut. He cleared his throat but there was no way to push down the elation that was growing inside of him and he had to be grinning like a complete dork. Cougar was doing it because of him. Cougar had left the safety of the settlement because Jake needed his help.

That had to mean something, right?

Jake jumped when Cougar nudged him with the tip of his boot, both to get his attention and probably chastise him for slacking off. Jake hadn't even noticed Cougar approach but, then again, he wasn't very attentive and Cougar seemed to be one of those people who barely gave off any noise when he moved.

"Get to work." The words were clearly an order but Cougar's voice was affectionate.

Jake grinned and gave Cougar a sloppy salute.

"Aye aye, sir!"

Cougar just rolled his eyes in reply.
In Jake's limited experience travelling had always been kind of boring. There wasn't much else to do other than observe the surrounding landscape while making sure to put one foot in front of the other. Even riding in a car was pretty dull, all things considered, and those excursions were all much shorter than this one.

A long distance journey was, to Jake's great dismay, monotonous and uneventful enough to make his brain hurt. He couldn't even tinker or occupy his hands in some other way because he had to pay attention to where he put his feet to avoid tripping and looking away or veering off from Cougar's trail usually meant that Jake fell flat on his face.

Still, he didn't complain since he was the one who had initiated it. He had wanted to visit the seed bank and Cougar had complied. It was Jake's own fault that he was bored and was trying not to think of how much he missed Beth's bright smile and Jess' cooking. Cougar kept up his part of the deal, leading them through the snow covered landscape with Jake in tow and Mirage circling them and wide, looping arcs.

Days passed like this.

Jake wasn't sure on which one of them he stopped talking because it happened gradually and he had almost lost track of what day it was anyway, all of it blurring together into a jumbled mess of walking, exhaustion, brief stops to eat and restless nights sleeping burrowed down under the snow. They rarely lit any fires because digging the fire pit was more of a hassle than it was worth and the smoke could lead people or predators to their location.

It became obvious that Jake clearly wasn't made for these kinds of expeditions but it was too late to turn back. Even with his messed up grasp on time he knew they were halfway there already.

It felt like he was sleepwalking – as if only parts of his consciousness was present – but he managed to muster up a smile and nod whenever Cougar asked if he was alright. He really was. There was absolutely nothing wrong with him because he made sure to eat and drink whenever Cougar told him to and he still managed to keep up, actually pushing Cougar to pick up the pace the times Jake noticed that they were walking slower than usual. Cougar always seemed surprisingly reluctant to do so but Jake didn't know why.

He was losing himself in the routine of it all. Jake had never liked routine. It made his mind dull and attention slip. Jake was made for brilliant discoveries and intricate complexities, not the quiet, repetitive patterns of travel. He missed his computers. He missed his tools and toys and his room. He missed Jess and Beth – God how he missed them. It was like a physical ache in his chest and sometimes when he tried to sleep he could barely breathe.

The longing felt like nothing he had ever experienced before and a part of him was so terribly scared of the silent, unforgiving vastness they were wandering through. Jake was used to the secure walls of a settlement – not open plains and endless woods with nothing to protect him against animals, Raiders and the harshness of the elements.

If it hadn't already been obvious his state of mind after a couple of days away from his settlement made it painfully clear that he would never be able to feel at home anywhere else but there. It might be pathetic but he wasn't a Raider or a Nomad – he was an Engineer with a loving family and a slight attention deficit that required that he keep himself busy to avoid causing a complete meltdown. He wasn't made for this kind of life.

And it only made him more miserable to know that he would continue to be cold and tired to the point of exhaustion for several days to come. There wasn't much to do about it.
In his quiet desperation Jake took to cuddling with Mirage in the evenings when she joined them just before they went to sleep, burying his face in her thick fur and soaking up her warmth. She didn't exactly smell of home but her presence was comforting and calming. And it was easier than finding something to talk about with Cougar.

One evening Jake even managed to doze off while leaning against her.

He woke to Cougar gently shaking him awake and wasn't all that surprised to see the underlying worry in Cougar's eyes as he sat crouched in front of Jake. That was one of the reasons why Jake didn't object when there seemed to be only one, slightly bigger, hole dug into the thick layer of snow that night. The temperature had been dropping – not alarmingly so but enough to make it increasingly colder during the nights – and Jake didn't mind sharing the space with Cougar. He had a sneaking suspicion that Cougar's main reason for the rearrangement wasn't to conserve body heat but Jake decided not to ask about it.

It was actually quite cozy, all things considered, but the troubled crease between Cougar's eyebrows seemed to linger through breakfast the following morning and the first couple of hours of the day. Something was clearly bothering him but Jake didn't know how to ask about it without sounding intrusive. Cougar didn't like to talk and especially not about himself.

To Jake's surprise Cougar was the one to break the silence.

"Nieve."

Jake blinked, feeling a little disoriented when he looked up and caught Cougar's gaze as he looked back at Jake over his shoulder.

"Huh?" was Jake's intelligent reply, his voice cracking from disuse.

"Nieve," Cougar repeated diligently before pointing downwards, at the snow piling around their feet. Cougar didn't stop walking and it took a couple of seconds for Jake's lagging brain to catch up. Thankfully enough his feet kept moving despite his lack of conscious effort.

"Snow?"

"Sí." Cougar gave a swift nod before tapping a tree he passed, now looking straight ahead again, obviously confident that he had Jake's attention. Which he did. "Árbol."

Jake's fingers grazed against tree, on the same spot Cougar's had, while he repeated the words inside his head, cataloguing and committing them to memory. Spanish words. His curiosity stirred and Jake took two slightly faster steps, until he was walking just behind Cougar rather than several feet away.

"Dog?"

Jake couldn't see Cougar's face but he was willing to bet that he was smiling. Mirage was ahead of them, a quiet, white ghost drifting between the trees.

"Perro."

Jake grinned and that, in essence, was how they spent the rest of the day. First it was just the things around them and then those that weren't. Then Cougar moved on to simple phrases and Jake eagerly repeated them back, feeling happy even when he got it wrong simply because his horrible pronunciation made Cougar laugh.

It took until they were settling down to sleep – once again in the same snow pit rather than two
separate ones – that Jake realized just what Cougar had done for him. It was such a simple act but it had been everything Jake needed to snap out of his daze. So as he was lying there next to Cougar with his eyes closed and breathing slowly beginning to even out he couldn't help but smile. Cougar was teaching him Spanish.

The sun was long gone but the snow seemed to soften the darkness wrapped around them; a dull grey next to the pitch black. Jake could have opened his eyes but decided not to, his hand reaching up to brush against Cougar's scarf. His fingers were bare, the flap of his mittens folded back, and he could feel the texture of the scarf's against his fingertips.

"Gracias," Jake mumbled softly, voice hushed to avoid disturbing the tranquil atmosphere.

A hand wrapped around Jake's, squeezing gently, but he still didn't open his eyes. He didn't need to.

"De nada." The reply was just as low and careful.

Jake relaxed, exhaling slowly in the silence that settled between them. But that was okay – Jake knew when to appreciate silence. His fingers curled around the fabric of Cougar's scarf, holding on without tugging.

It was Cougar who pulled Jake's hand closer.

Jake could almost imagine what it would be like if there hadn't been several layers of clothes in the way – if he could have felt Cougar's heart beat against his palm – but he could definitely settle for this.

They fell asleep like that, Cougar cradling Jake's hand like he never wanted to let go.

It was much easier after that. Jake was kept busy trying to learn Spanish and – when Cougar realized that Jake was mediocre at best – how to hunt properly. Cougar had obviously taken it upon himself to teach Jake how to survive in the wilderness and gave firm, stern orders that Jake found himself obeying if not for the fear of being reprimanded then because he knew that the curtness stemmed from concern. Cougar's protective streak was apparently a mile wide.

Jake quite liked it. Being given something to do and things to learn was just as effective when it came to keeping him on track as his tinkering would have been. He soaked it all up, eager for new knowledge, and even if he didn't manage everything on the first try – or particularly gracefully – he was still a stunningly fast learner. Or at least Cougar seemed to think so.

Jake got back the habit of talking pretty much non-stop – which for some reason eased the tenseness of Cougar's shoulders – now with fragments of Spanish thrown in here and there. The lessons continued and it struck Jake that their roles were completely reversed. Back at the settlement he had been the one with things to share and explain but out here Cougar had the most experience. Jake didn't mind. It was honestly somewhat of a relief to be able to hand over the majority of the responsibility to someone else and simply follow Cougar's directions.

Most of the time Jake tried not to think about how much he missed Jess and Beth. He was aching
with homesickness and it would only make him more depressed if he allowed the thoughts free reign. The adventure was fun and all but he knew that he would be twice as happy when he eventually made it back home. Well, unless Cougar decided not to return with him.

They had never actually discussed it – not even Jess had brought it up before they left – so Jake had no idea if Cougar intended to follow him all the way back to the settlement afterwards. He probably shouldn't what with being a Raider and all, but Jake certainly wouldn't say no if Cougar wanted to stay.

He would rather beg Cougar to come with him than watch him walk away.

Jake still didn't know if a Raider had ever been welcomed back into a settlement but he would gladly be the first to offer it. Cougar wasn't just any Raider and Jake realized, not so surprisingly, that he would be willing to go to great lengths to convince his settlement that Cougar wouldn't hurt them and should be allowed to stay. Jake didn't want to lose Cougar.

It might be reckless – downright ludicrous even – but Jake was helplessly attached by then. It was partly the way Cougar always, no matter the circumstances, seemed to have Jake's well-being first in mind but also the fact that Cougar actually seemed to value Jake's company. Cougar relaxed when Jake was talking and smiling – occasionally smiling back – and patiently answered any questions about Spanish phrases or anything else Jake could think of, as long as he kept it from getting too personal.

It wasn't just that Cougar seemed to put up with him but he seemed to like Jake too. Genuinely like him. He chuckled at Jake's stupid jokes, suffered through Jake's singing with minimal fuss and didn't seem to judge when Jake got all dorky and spastic. All of that without actually spoiling him, because Cougar was still firm when needed and didn't cut Jake any slack. He seemed to know exactly when Jake was just being lazy and when he really needed those extra ten minutes of rest to be able to get back on his feet.

Jake had never met anyone like Cougar. Someone who made him feel appreciated without actually saying it out loud and who seemed to admire him without making a big deal out of it. Because Cougar truly did marvel at everything Jake could do with his computers and gadgets but he also seemed to remember that underneath all that Jake was still only human – and a very flaky, unfocused one at that.

Cougar also had many qualities – some of them vaguely contradictory – that Jake couldn't help noticing and find disarmingly endearing.

He was still very protective about his hat for one, and seemed to have developed a similar fondness for the mittens Jake had knitted for him, but was incredibly selfless and generous in any other aspect. And while he was always dependable and patient he got increasingly cranky if he was cold or wet – doubly so if he was both. The only reason Jake resisted making some teasing comment about cats and their dislike for water was the fact that Cougar was also – just like Jake has suspected – a brilliantly accurate shot. Terrifyingly so, actually, which lead to Jake handing over the responsibility over the handgun to Cougar, because he would undoubtedly be able to use it more productively should the need ever arise.

Cougar had also started discreetly bribing Mirage with pieces of meat in order to make her warm up to him and Jake could tell that it wasn't just a passing, haphazard attempt to erase a possible threat against his person but to really make her like him. Cougar wanted Mirage to feel comfortable around him and tried to show, one step at a time, that he wasn't a threat.

The devotion Cougar showed to something that others might find trivial or unnecessary revealed a great deal about his priorities. Cougar was resourceful and relentless with an eye for detail and he
understood the meaning of subtlety and used it in way that Jake would never be able to fully grasp.

Not to mention that he was inhumanly patient.

It took a couple of days but Cougar's grin when Mirage bumped against him as they walked, allowing him to pet her fur, was one of the most adorable things Jake had seen in his entire life. And he couldn't help thinking that if Mirage accepted Cougar then he had to be a good guy. She wouldn't let herself be swayed by just anyone, even if there was food in it for her.

Jake could admit that he might just be looking for reasons to justify his own emotions; to reassure himself that he wasn't being irresponsible every time he felt his heart skip a beat when Cougar smiled at him. Or how Jake couldn't help bumping, nudging and touching Cougar as soon as opportunity arose. Or how he, when he woke up one morning with his face buried in Cougar's scarf with Cougar's breaths tickling his hair, just couldn't bring himself to pull away and instead ended up snuggling closer.

Cougar didn't say anything and acted as if it was nothing out of the ordinary when they were eventually forced to get up in order to keep going.

Not even Jake was dense enough not to know what all of it meant.

He was in love.

Because it wasn't just the physical aspect. It was certainly a factor even if Jake suppressed it as well as possible considering that he slept right next to the guy most nights, albeit fully clothed, but more than anything he liked the way Cougar made him feel. When Cougar had told Jake that he was incredible Jake had believed him and as a result he felt incredible. Cougar made him smile and never made it seem like Jake was being a nuisance or annoying. He embraced everything Jake was, dorky quirks and all. How could Jake possibly keep himself from falling in love with someone like that?

The answer was, naturally, that he obviously couldn't.

But that didn't mean that he had to act on it. He knew how stupid it would be to do that – to trust someone so explicitly while being as vulnerable as he was – but it was admittedly difficult to remember that when it was apparently mutual.

Well, the attraction at least.

Jake wasn't the most attentive person out there but not even he could miss when his travel companion spent a couple of extra seconds staring at him every now and then or how he was never pushed away when he moved well within Cougar's personal space. Cougar let him close but he never made any attempts to make things escalate. Possibly because he had concluded that it was wiser to leave that decision in Jake's hands, since he was the one still having doubts.

It was mostly about trust. Jake wasn't sure where it would take them if they actually addressed the growing tension between them and it was only his fear of making a total fool out of himself that kept him from blurting it out at any given time. Cougar, who as previously established had enough patience for five people, never pushed.

And Jake had never been so sexually frustrated in his entire life.

It distracted him but not in the same alarming way as his boredom tended to do. Still, Jake was definitely using it as an excuse for why he didn't notice that Cougar had stopped walking until he bumped into him. It was unfair that Jake was the one who almost tripped and that Cougar gave
him nothing but a measured, deadpan look before nodding forward.

Trees were sparse and ahead of them, on the other side of a wide white, glistening field, Jake could hint what looked to be some kind of rocky formations that weren't quite a mountain as much as a jagged cliff side. Mirage was just reaching the edge where the tree line stopped, her white fur blending in with the snow.

"What?" Jake asked dumbly, blinking owlishly as if that would make him see further even if he knew that his glasses wouldn't allow it.

"We're here."

Jake had somehow been unprepared for that. He had been so caught up in other things that he had almost forgotten what they were doing out there in the first place.

Cougar chuckled and patted Jake's chest, perhaps with a slightly patronizing edge that Jake couldn't say was entirely undeserved.

"Come on, cielito."

Jake scrambled to catch up when Cougar started walking again. He wasn't sure what that particular Spanish word meant but he didn't exactly have time to stop and ask either. Giddiness was filling him and he was grinning widely as he looked ahead, suddenly filled with purpose.

They had reached their destination.

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Chapter End Notes

We're getting somewhere! I feel a bit bad for how long this is taking but there's just so much to tell. I hope you're enjoying it anyway! There's a lot of mushy cuteness in this chapter if nothing else.

CarpeDentum is my faithful beta that I use horribly, and you can find me over at my Tumblr.
Jake was practically bouncing when they finally reached the sealed gates leading into the seed bank. The entrance was located inside an arched, hollow space that had been carved into the cliff side, partially shielded from the elements. The main gates were built to allow cars and trucks to pass through but Jake would focus his efforts on the smaller door off to one side, almost hidden in the shaded darkness of the cave-like entrance.

The metal was worn and lifeless by then but it still held fast and Jake couldn't help letting his gloved hand slide over the smooth surface. Behind these doors he might find the key to feeding thousands of people.

Cougar was patient as always and allowed Jake to take his time inspecting the door and lock, occupying himself with looking over the contents of their backpacks in the meantime. Mirage sat like a quiet sentinel at the mouth of the cave, her ears swishing back and forth as she stared out at the field they had just crossed, but the lack of growls or warning barks told Jake that there weren't any serious threats nearby.

"I should be able to get in," he said out loud, mostly speaking to himself.

"Should?" Cougar sounded a tad bit skeptical so Jake shot him a quick grin.

"The technology is old which complicates things and I might set off some alarms but I doubt there will be anyone out there who might respond." Jake shrugged as he walked to where Cougar was looking over and rearranging their packs, crouching down to sift through the tools he had brought. "It's not like I could accidentally set off a self-destruct mechanism or something."

The amused look Cougar gave him seemed to say that if anyone would be able to accomplish that it would be Jake.

"Very funny," he drawled while giving Cougar a push that, to Jake's disappointment, barely made him sway. "Just give me a couple of minutes and I'll get us in."

He picked out the tools he would need, gave Cougar a cocky little wink and then returned to the lock by the smaller side door. Jake thought he heard Cougar mutter something under his breath but it was too low to hear and probably in Spanish too, which Jake couldn't quite understand fully yet so he chose to ignore it entirely.
Jake set to work on the lock, unscrewing the panels to get to the wiring underneath. It had probably been state of the art when it had been built but it was over eighty years old by then and even if technology hadn't exactly made any bold advancements since the Disaster these had been left unmaintained for decades. Some wires were damaged beyond repair and Jake sincerely hoped that he would still be able to open the door without having to switch them out. He hadn't brought any wires.

He kept working while Cougar and Mirage stood guard. It hadn't quite occurred to him until then but both Cougar and Mirage had been a little more alert the past day or so, as if they could sense something – or someone – out there. Jake might be fairly adept at detecting threats when he needed to be but he was clearly not even half as good as either of his two companions.

Jake kept his main focus on the circuits and wires he was working on but could feel Cougar's presence like a calming influence just on the edge of his awareness. It was a little unsettling just how much Jake appreciated and depended on it.

True to his word it didn't take more than a couple of minutes before a whirring hum filled the air, followed by a series of deep, hollow clangs as the mechanics of the door struggled to obey the command and open after so many years of inactivity. It was a small miracle that they even worked.

"There must be some kind of internal power source," Jake said as he got to his feet, brushing away the snow from his clothes with a couple of practiced flicks of his hand.

He couldn't deny that his heart was picking up its pace, beating faster both due to anticipation and dread. He had no idea what they would find in there but the fact that the electronics seemed to be working despite having lain dormant for so long was a good sign. That could mean that the inside was still intact.

Cougar came up next to Jake, handing over one of the backpacks just as a sharp click was heard from the door. The metal shuddered and creaked but ultimately remained unmoving. Jake smiled crookedly while accepting and shouldering his backpack.

"I guess it was too much to hope for that all of the automatic functions would still be working." He shared a look with Cougar who simply shrugged, as if to say that he wasn't going to be of much use in making them operational again. Which was true, in a way, but Jake could recognize when it was better to do things the old fashioned way.

He gestured for Cougar to help him pry the door open and while it took some work and a couple of curses – mostly from Cougar, surprisingly enough – they eventually managed to get a big enough gap that they could fit through. The only thing Jake could see inside was impenetrable darkness and he tried to swallow around the nervous lump in his throat.

"Mirage, stay," he called over his shoulder, knowing that she wouldn't want to go inside with them anyway. There were no arguments and before Cougar had time to insist on doing it Jake took the first step inside.

After some fumbling he managed to retrieve his pocket light, which was too small to offer any real kind of illumination but according to the articles Jake had read about the place he wouldn't need it once they reached the main storage room. If the lights in there still worked, that was.

There was a barely noticeable tug when Cougar hooked a finger around one of the straps on Jake's backpack but since he didn't try to hold him back Jake assumed that it was mostly to avoid losing track of each other. The air was stale and just as cold as the one outside, but it felt rawer somehow. The room they found themselves in was empty save for a set of wide doors that Jake
caught sight of thanks to the pocket light. Cougar followed without protest or comment when Jake started walking, plain, slightly cracked concrete beneath their feet.

The second lock was a simpler one and Jake was able to crack it with the liberal use of a screwdriver. The doors slid open with a tired, screeching wail, revealing a corridor leading deeper into the rocky foundation. Jake grinned around the pocket light that he had temporarily stuck between his teeth when in need of both of his hands and gave Cougar a quick glance over his shoulder. Cougar huffed out what could be a laugh before he gave Jake a slight push to keep going.

The corridor was sloping downwards and each sound they made seemed to amplify and echo between the walls, even if the space wasn't particularly narrow. It was eerily silent but Jake was sure he could hear an almost undetectable hum up ahead, meaning that some kind of generator was hopefully still up and running.

It took a couple of minutes to reach the end of the corridor, leading them into yet another room – smaller this time, with various pieces of unused equipment pushed into the corners – and the doors Jake knew had to lead into the storage area. He could barely contain his excitement. Everything seemed intact and since the seeds were supposed to be stored in colder temperatures the climate changes outside the vault probably had no effect on their viability. These seeds, unlike those Jake and Jess had found, hadn't been submitted to moisture, which meant that they shouldn't be damaged.

Jake's hands were shaking when he set about opening the final door. Cougar was hovering next to him, possibly slightly concerned by the sight of Jake's trembling fingers, but he made no move to make Jake calm down. He seemed to understand just how monumental this was; what Jake and Jess would be able to do if this turned out to be what they hoped for.

The door slid open before Jake was actually ready for it, lights suddenly flickering on when the motion sensors inside the storage room got their first workout in decades. Jake had to blink against the brightness but he barely allowed his eyes to refocus before he took the first step inside the vault.

There were literally thousands of neatly labeled boxes tucked into the rows upon rows of shelves; each probably containing hundreds of seeds of various kinds. Jake wasn't even aware that he had reached out, blindly, before he found Cougar's hand, squeezing the cool fingers he felt against his own.

"We did it, Cougar," he whispered, voice trembling with awe. "We fucking did it."

Jake flitted back and forth between the filing cabinets with the database hardcopies and the numbered boxes he wanted to have a closer look at. He ignored the flowers in favor of vegetables and edible plants and his enthusiasm only grew as his list of useful seeds expanded. There were so many and each bottle contained enough seeds to offer several rounds of experiments if needed.

"This... Cougar, this is awesome! Look! I mean-" Jake waved the papers around after having pushed the latest box he had been peeking inside back onto its shelf "-all of it!"
Cougar raised an amused eyebrow, in the middle of looking over their meager arsenal. He had found a chair and a table somewhere in the vault – Jake had been too busy to really notice – and moved them so that he could keep the door and Jake in his sights at the same time. Gun parts were spread out over the flat surface but Jake ignored that, dumping his pile of papers on top of them despite the stern glare it earned him.

"It's more than I ever dreamed of, Cougar! They've added descriptions on how to grow them and what you need, like the richness of the soil, the temperature, moisture and watering – everything! This... this is like the best thing ever! We have everything we need right here! Jess and I can re-grow everything!"

Cougar's smile was indulgent even if he had already started pushing Jake's papers into neat piles so that they wouldn't disturb his cleaning of the handgun.

"Do you understand what I'm saying, Cougar? It's happening! Two years and we're finally getting somewhere!" Jake grabbed Cougar's shoulder, not quite sure how to get an outlet for all of his excitement. Pure joy was bubbling inside of him and he could barely contain it. "And it's all because of you! I would never have found this place without you and just-... I could-"

Jake made an unintelligible sound, his words failing him completely, and in a desperate attempt to make himself understood he cradled Cougar's head between his hands and bent down, pressing their lips together. Jake didn't even hear the soft thump of Cougar's hat hitting the concrete floor, too busy pouring all of his gratefulness and joy into the kiss.

He pulled back and grinned, wide and dorky.

"You are literally the best, Cougar. Literally the best. You're awesome." And with that Jake let go and turned back to the shelves, practically bouncing from the excitement; completely missing the stunned, wide-eyed look on Cougar's face. Jake was too busy being starstruck over the vault to even realize what he had just done.

The silence that followed wasn't in any way different to Jake and he only distantly took notice of how Cougar sat unmoving, just staring at him, for several long seconds. Jake's focus was on the glass bottles of seeds he was inspecting and not whatever Cougar was up to.

Minutes passed in silence – except for the slight creak of Cougar's chair when he leaned down to pick his hat up from the floor – and Jake started humming to himself, just to release some of the pent-up eagerness inside him.

"Jess is an Engineer."

Jake didn't register the words at first. He heard them, sure, but the implications – and the danger – didn't hit him until a couple of seconds later. He stiffened, feeling a chill travel down his spine.

"What?" he looked up, feigning ignorance. The look Cougar gave him was strangely impatient, his arms crossed over his chest and brows furrowed.

"Your sister," Cougar said, as if he actually had to explain who Jess was. "She's an Engineer."

Jake swallowed as subtly as he could, his fingers clenching around the bottle he was holding. Cougar wasn't supposed to know that. Jake might have started to trust Cougar with his own life but Jess' was another thing. Being an Engineer changed everything.

"No, she's in charge of the plants. I built all the-" Jake didn't even bother to finish the sentence. Cougar's steady gaze made it abundantly clear that he wasn't going to believe any of Jake's lies.
It took a second for Jake to swallow down the flare of panic and take a couple of deep breaths.

"How did you know? We never said anything."

Jake knew that for a fact. Even when he was babbling he knew that he couldn't risk her safety and he had never mentioned anything that could indicate that she was involved in more than the botanical part of the project. His heartbeats were almost painful, echoing inside his chest while dread seemed to curl and squeeze, making it so difficult to act as if he wasn't panicking internally.

Cougar's expression softened, his shoulders relaxing and posture becoming less hostile, as if he didn't actually want to cause Jake the unease he was currently feeling.

"You left."

Jake frowned, not bothering to hide his confusion.

"What? Left the settlement?"

Cougar nodded.

"You wouldn't have." Cougar tilted his head to the side before shrugging. "Unless there was another."

That made a terrifying amount of sense. Jake hadn't even though of that. It was true that if Jake had been the only Engineer he wouldn't have gone on this journey – he couldn't have, not without risk breaking the agreement with the Gallagher settlement. To leave his family and settlement without an Engineer would have been irresponsible, but Jake had never had to consider that since he knew that Jess would be staying; they would still have one. And Cougar had clearly picked up on that.

Jake felt his shoulder's slump, an involuntary sigh slipping out.

"I keep forgetting just how intelligent you actually are. It makes me feel dumb." Jake stared at the floor, too afraid to do anything else. "I know you don't owe me anything but please-"

"Don't." It was spoken kindly and Jake looked up, finding that dark gaze. The slight curl to Cougar's lips wasn't enough to be called a smile but he looked sympathetic and honest. "I won't tell, cielito."

It only took a fraction of a second for Jake to decide that Cougar was telling the truth. Cougar had no one he could tell it to but more importantly than that he would never hurt Jake or his family. Jake had to believe that.

"That's the second time you call me that. Are you going to tell me what it means?" Jake asked, choosing to change the subject entirely.

"One day," Cougar promised with a warm smile, his voice low and rumbling. "You will know one day."

It took a moment for Jake to remember how to breathe properly. He cleared his throat and held back a grin of his own, giving Cougar a spectacularly inefficient glare.

"You, sir, have a very pretty face. I don't trust it one bit."

Cougar's laugh was actually more of a half-choked, amused snort but Jake loved it all the same. Come to think of it, there wasn't much about Cougar he didn't like.
He was in deep.

In his eagerness to return to the settlement and tell Jess all about his wondrous discoveries Jake could easily have began heading back that very same afternoon. Cougar, however, put an effective end to that by deciding that they would start the next morning, at the earliest.

Jake tried pouting just to see if it would make any difference but all that earned him was a deadpan look and a shake of Cougar's head. Completely worthless, in other words. Still, Jake was only momentarily deterred before his excitement returned. Staying longer gave him more time to go through the database – which was huge, naturally – and take notes on what he needed to bring next time. Not even Jake was enthusiastic enough to think that this had been anything more than a trip to gather necessary data.

Just stuffing the glass bottles into his backpack would be downright irresponsible and Jake was not going to ruin the opportunity they had been given by being careless. No, they would return to the settlement, he would talk to Jess and they would figure out how to transport the glass bottles in a way that would make sure they didn't break or were exposed to moisture. They might have been given an entire vault filled with viable seeds but it was not an unlimited resource; they still had to be careful.

Jake was secretly pleased that Cougar had accepted that they would be going back to the settlement without arguments, which hopefully meant that he had every intention of following all the way. And preferably to stay afterwards too.

Jake made a distracted, halfhearted attempt to help Cougar with the preparations for the night but was shooed off within minutes, which was probably Cougar's way of saying that he gave Jake permission to continue geeking out in the vault. They would be sleeping in the first room just inside the big gates since it offered protection against the wind and uninvited guests, but Jake wasn't looking forward to how hard and cold the concrete would be.

Mirage still preferred to remain outside but she had curled up into a barely detectable ball of white fur rather than standing at attention, allowing herself some rest now that they would remain on the same place for a slightly longer period of time.

Jake's exuberance kept him going until he practically collapsed from exhaustion, sleeping like the dead despite the somewhat lacking sleeping arrangements. There was only so much their blankets and tarps could offer in terms of comfort when the surface was as unyielding as the floor they were lying on, but Jake seemed to have grown surprisingly used to it in the two weeks that had passed since they left his settlement.

Waking up was a significantly more satisfying affair, mostly because he did so snuggled up against Cougar which, all things considered, was definitely not a bad thing. He knew that Cougar had to be awake – it was rare for him not to be – but he didn't seem to mind the fact that Jake had yet again burrowed his face into Cougar's grey scarf, this time even going as far to have slung an arm over his middle as well.

Jake was totally okay with this development.
Something was picking at the back of his mind, telling him that he should probably think twice about that but Jake batted the thought away before it even gained hold. He wanted to be able to just feel content for once, no special exceptions or hidden clauses.

Cougar seemed perfectly fine with this, judging on his lack of complaints.

Jake hummed contentedly and fought the urge to go back to sleep. As much as he wanted to – and he really, really did – it would be better if they got an early start. Cougar wasn't doing him any favors though by seemingly accepting Jake's lazy ways. Cougar usually didn't but perhaps he was in the mood to indulge too.

In the end it was Mirage who got them going when she came trotting in through the door they hadn't bothered to close, only to start snuffling and licking at Jake's cheek. He groaned and tried to push her away but that only made her more determined to slobber him with drool. It wasn't until Cougar reached out and started scratching her behind her ear that she stopped and then it was too late to pretend that they weren't awake and totally aware of the fact that they were stalling.

When Cougar extracted himself from the marginally warmer cocoon of blankets – clearly being too responsible to do otherwise – Jake shot Mirage a betrayed, sullen glare. Mirage looked like she didn't understand why on earth he would be upset with her.

"I hate you," Jake whispered vehemently, to which Mirage replied by licking his face again, this time not sparing his glasses. Jake's spluttering flail was more undignified than usual but he didn't really care. Bloody dogs.

But in all honesty Mirage had done them a favor. Jake wanted to get back as soon as possible and unless he wanted to stay another day it was better if they got going in the early hours of the morning.

Cougar packed their things while Jake made sure to secure and lock all the doors again. The outer one proved difficult to close with nothing but their brute strength but they managed eventually and Jake carefully made sure that everything was in order, wires protected and panels screwed back in place.

Jake was definitely not looking forward to the long journey back but considering their success he had a variety of new subjects to discuss which would keep them busy for days if he so wished. And he kind of did since he was finally beginning to realize – when he thought back on the previous day – that he might in fact have kissed Cougar. And rather clumsily at that.

Jake would have been mortified if he had allowed himself to think about it but he forcibly pushed the thoughts aside, willingly engrossing himself in explaining to Cougar, in detail, how some of the machines they used in the greenhouse worked.

As always Cougar didn't voice any complaints.

It wasn't until they stopped for the night that Jake was beginning to feel a little lightheaded from all the talking but Cougar, who seemed to have picked up on Jake's need to keep his mind occupied, smoothly engaged them in another Spanish lesson. Jake's goofy, thankful smile wasn't involuntary per se, but it wasn't a conscious choice either.

Cougar was gracious enough not to mention it.

Jake wasn't sure if it was his fault or something else but it was obvious that they let their guard down. For some reason Jake hadn't even considered that they might run into complications on the way home. It had always seemed like the way there would be more difficult, even if it was
technically the same road and the threats along it hadn't changed.

Jake didn't see it coming at all.

He was turning around from having fastened the tarp over the snow pit, ready to answer Cougar's question – hopefully in less atrocious Spanish than at the beginning of his lessons – when Cougar froze. The look on his face was one Jake would find it difficult to forget. It was just stunned incomprehension at first, for a brief, breathless second, before Cougar seemed to snap to attention and that expression – the one he always wore when he was potentially out to harm someone – slipped into place with horrifying ease.

Jake jumped when Cougar pulled the gun from wherever he was keeping it and whirled around in one smooth motion, aiming out into the darkness lurking around them. Jake wanted to ask what was going on but a flicker of red – a thin red line cutting between the trees – made him swallow the words. He glanced down, heedless of his growing fear.

The tiny, red dot at the centre of his chest stood in stark contrast to his dark clothes.

Jake wasn't sure what to do. He didn't have time to reach for the hunting bow or any of his gadgets. The bright red dot might not be a confirmation that he would get shot but the threat was there and it felt like a physical pressure against his chest, making it difficult to breathe; like one wrong move could potentially kill him.

Cougar's posture was all sharp lines and deadly precision but Jake didn't feel comforted when shadows began to distinguish themselves in the dark – people moving towards them. He saw right away that they were outnumbered and the warning dot on Jake's chest didn't waver. The crunch of footsteps in the snow seemed to come from all around them and Jake realized with a pang of dread that they were surrounded.

The moon and stars were the only source of illumination they had and even if his eyes were adjusted to the lack of light it took until they were practically upon them for Jake to recognize one of the men.

"Well, this is a surprise," the man – Wade, Cougar had said that his name was Wade – drawled. He held an assault rifle in his hands but the barrel was pointing downwards, leisurely almost, despite the fact that Cougar was aiming at the spot right between Wade's eyes. Perhaps Wade expected that the threat of Jake getting shot would keep Cougar from pulling the trigger.

Jake couldn't quite determine how many other Raiders there were but estimation landed somewhere around too fucking many. The ones Jake could see all had their guns raised but there were probably more out there, blending with the shadows. The one with the laser scope was too far away to see so even if they by some miracle managed to overpower those nearby Jake would still end up with a bullet in his chest.

Jake tried to push back the instinctive flare of panic but he couldn't stop the chilling numbness that spread through his body. This couldn't be happening. It shouldn't be happening. Jake's brain was trying frantically to catch up but it didn't make sense. How could the Raiders possibly find them here?

"You're one slippery little Engineer." This was clearly directed at Jake but Wade was eyeing Cougar when he said it. Jake didn't like the look in his eyes – one that was unsettlingly calculating for someone who was clearly not overly intelligent outside of his chosen field of occupation.

"How did you find me?" Jake had to ask. He didn't understand how they could have pulled that off.
Wade's grin sent a shiver down Jake's spine.

"You're practically in our backyard. But I'm guessing he didn't tell you that."

Jake didn't understand. It took him seconds to fully grasp those words and when he did his thoughts seemed to screech to a sudden, mind-numbing halt.

"What?" His voice was so weak it barely even carried far enough to reach the other man, disbelief and apprehension making Jake's voice crack. It didn't make sense.

But Wade was either not listening or didn't care about Jake's desperate question. He was looking at Cougar.

"I have to say I'm impressed that you got him to come here on his own." Wade mostly sounded taunting though, perhaps with a hint of triumph. "But you always were one sneaky fuck."

Jake couldn't see Cougar's face. He wasn't entirely sure if he wanted to or not. Jake had no idea what was going on but it felt like the red dot on his chest was pushing and clutching, squeezing around his heart, until the beats were frantic enough to hurt. Jake's blood was roaring in his ears and there was a cold spreading with it, like burning, liquid ice crawling through his veins.

This couldn't be happening. He had to be dreaming. A nightmare. Everything was going downhill so fast and he could only stand there, helpless to stop it.

It felt like someone punched a hole through Jake's chest when Cougar's posture relaxed and he lowered the gun. As if there was no threat. As if everything was as it should be.

No. Not that.

*Please, not that.*

Jake couldn't make a sound. He was speechless, unable to vocalize or breathe around the sudden lump in his throat. He could feel himself trembling.

It wasn't true. It couldn't be.

But when Cougar half turned to look at him there was none of the warmth Jake had come to associate with Cougar. He didn't look guilty or apologetic – he didn't even look resigned – he just cocked an eyebrow as if to say that Jake was being the idiot for not picking up on it sooner.

Jake felt as if the ground was swaying under his feet and bile was rising at the back of this throat. Had he really been that stupid? Had all of it been a lie? The laughs, the casual touching, and the talk about trust and faith – and, God, the kiss. Jake's stupid, bold kiss that he hadn't even been aware of having given until hours afterwards.

It was all a lie. Everything on Cougar's end was a lie.

It was like something frail shattered inside of Jake. It felt like thousands of tiny, sharp shards of glass was digging into his chest, leaving him raw and exposed.

Cougar had lied to him.

Out of everything Jake could have done in that moment it was obvious that no one expected what he actually did do. The sudden flare of anger was something he had never experienced before in his life. It seemed to engulf him, rushing through his system like a poison.
Jake didn't care about getting shot. He didn't care about the burning, crumbling remains of his trust or the fact that his heart seemed so fragile that it *hurt*. He lashed out, quicker than anyone had expected – especially Cougar by the looks of it – and punched Cougar in the face. Jake didn't hold back. He swung with all of his strength, pouring the suffocating feeling of betrayal, hurt and panic into it. He wanted to throw at least a fraction of the pain back at Cougar.

It came as no surprise that Cougar stumbled – actually staggered back and almost lost his balance – from the sheer force of the blow. Cougar seemed disoriented but not nearly enough not to turn and face the sudden threat Jake posed.

"I'll kill you," Jake snarled, voice sharp, menacing and so utterly cold that he didn't even recognize it as his own. He ignored the shouts around them, his gaze boring into Cougar's while taking a step towards him. "I'll fucking kill you."

Hands grabbed him, pulling him back before he actually reached his target, and while he struggled against it he wasn't frantic or panicked. The calm that had settled over him was drowning out everything else except the harsh, burning fury that so desperately needed an outlet. He didn't shout or scream. He just kept glaring at Cougar, righteous hate curling through him.

Cougar stared back, looking both surprised and something else Jake couldn't quite place.

A feral snarl cut through Jake's anger and the very next second one of the surrounding men screamed in pain; a garbled, chilling sound that could have come straight from one of the horror movies Jake liked to watch.

"What the fuck is that?" someone shouted, the sudden spike of fear almost tangible in the air.

"It's huge!"

Jake knew. The chaos that erupted couldn't hide Mirage's vicious growls as she attacked, just like she was trained to do. Jake couldn't believe that he had forgotten about Mirage.

"Kill it!"

The brief flash of triumph at her intervention was quickly exchanged for panic. The first shot rang out while Jake was still trying to fight his way free and at least catch sight of where she was. There were too many men, even for her.

They were shouting at each other, trying to pinpoint her location, but Mirage slipped between them, a white ghost against the pale snow. Jake could hear another man's choked scream for help get cut off as Mirage no doubt dug her teeth into his throat.

Jake was struggling against the two men holding him, kicking out to make a third lose his balance when the Raider aimed to hit Mirage. She was trying to help him but Jake knew she wouldn't be able to, not without sacrificing herself and Jake wasn't ready to see that happen, not even to save his own skin.

"Mirage! Stop!" he shouted over the clamor coming from the Raiders. "Fall back!"

He wasn't sure if she heard him – he still couldn't see where she was – and there was a chance that her instincts to protect him wouldn't allow her to follow the command. Dogs had always been known to be selflessly loyal.

"Give him a rifle!" Wade's order was barked loudly enough that even Jake heard it and to his horror he realized that the Raider leader was pointing at Cougar.
Of course he was; Cougar never missed.

"No! Cougar, please!" Jake didn't care about pride at that point, his voice wavering from the fear clogging his throat. Someone handed Cougar one of the assault rifles, that would give him a longer reach than the handgun he was already carrying. "I'm begging you! Please, don't shoot her! Cougar, please don't!"

For a brief, aching second it seemed like Jake might have gotten through to him. Cougar paused, looking straight at Jake with something close to hesitation flashing past in his eyes, but it was gone so quickly that Jake later realized it had to have been his imagination. It was replaced by a slight frown, one that seemed to suggest that Jake was being a terrible inconvenience.

When Cougar eventually raised the gun Jake was about to shout another desperate plea, only to find that Mirage wasn't the intended target. The butt of the rifle slammed into Jake's temple, making his head snap back, and suddenly there was only darkness.

Jake came to with a splitting headache and his muscles stiff from the cold. He refused to open his eyes at first, quietly taking stock of his situation instead.

He seemed to be lying on the floor – the chill from it seeping through his clothes and into his bones – and he calmly counted the number of still functioning limbs. He could feel no injuries besides the headache and soreness and no shackles or restraints to speak of. It was a slight relief, however relative. There were still other things that pointed to the severity of his situation.

He wasn't wearing his boots.

Which meant that he had been taken prisoner. There was no better way to discourage escape attempts than to remove someone's shoes, since no matter if they managed to break free they would undoubtedly freeze to death before they got very far.

Jake kept his breaths rhythmic and precise but when the events of the night – last night? – came back to him it was difficult to hold back the burning sting behind his eyelids. Cougar had betrayed him. Mirage might be dead. Jake was captured and Cougar – God no – knew about Jess. Cougar knew the way back to Jake's settlement. He knew everything about the greenhouse, the seed bank and what Jake and Jess could do. Cougar knew everything.

How could Jake have been so stupid? He should have listened to Jess. He shouldn't have let himself be swayed by Cougar's lies. But it had seemed so real. It had seemed like Cougar was his friend and Jake had so desperately wanted a friend.

Jake had to press his hand against his mouth to hold back the broken, half-choked sound he almost let slip. He was an idiot. A trusting, pathetic fool who should have known better. He wanted to curl up into a ball and just give his anguish free reign. He wanted to hide from whatever was going to happen next because the feeling of grief burning in his chest left him breathless and shaking.

But he couldn't do that. He knew he couldn't, not when Jess, Beth and the rest of his settlement
might be in danger.

It took some effort but Jake was able to swallow back the sobs swelling in his throat and after a
couple of blinks his eyes cleared enough that he was able to see properly. He rolled onto his back,
stared up at the ceiling and tried to look at the situation as objectively as possible.

Jake felt the unmistakable lack of his vambraces so he knew they must have searched him and
taken every piece of technological equipment they could find on him, making his odds of being
able to fight his way free practically non-existent. They had let him keep his glasses and the
mittens though, probably because they knew that he needed both to be of any use to them.
Allowing his fingers too fall off due to frostbite wouldn't exactly do them any favors because an
Engineer without hands was essentially useless.

He breathed in and out, slow and patient while running through the facts in his head.

Cougar had betrayed him. Cougar hadn't mentioned anything about their route taking them close
to the base where Max and his Raiders resided. Jake assumed that was where he was now,
judging on the room he had been dumped in, with its barred windows and thick steel door.
Cougar had mentioned something about a fortress so possibly an old prison or an army base –
something that gave off the impression of being impenetrable.

Jake still couldn't figure out how Cougar had managed to trick him for so long.

It hurt to even think about it – trying to be clinical only dulled a fraction of the pain – but it was
impossible to keep his thoughts from straying in that direction.

He guessed Cougar could have found a way to contact the other Raiders when Jake had let him
borrow one of his computers. He had never tried to monitor what Cougar had been doing and if
they were indeed in some kind of old, abandoned base there had to be remaining technology too.
Max might be looking for Engineers but some could learn to operate computers without fully
grasping the mechanics behind them. Cougar could easily have sent them some kind of message.

And now here Jake was.

He didn't allow himself to feel the crushing weight of Cougar's betrayal. He couldn't afford it.
Somehow, despite the odds stacked against him, he had to find a way to get out and return to his
settlement to warn Jess. Jake might not have met this Max but he was fairly certain that two pet
Engineers were even more appealing than one. Jake couldn't let that happen. He couldn't let Jess
and Beth get into trouble because he had been foolish enough to trust a Raider.

He shouldn't have. All those stupid, childish hopes of finding a friend had been a weakness that
Cougar had so easily exploited and now Jake's entire settlement would pay the price.

Jake pushed it all back. He shoved whatever innocence he had left into the deepest, darkest parts
of himself, where it would be swallowed by his hopelessness and never see the light of day again.
He brushed away the shattered pieces of his trust – his heart and his happiness – until the only
thing he had left was unyielding, ruthless resolve. He would focus on nothing but what needed to
be done.

He lay there staring up at the ceiling, calmly locking the fragile, unwanted pieces of himself away.
He couldn't let anyone touch them again; to use them against him to get to him or his family. He'd
rather not have them at all. They made him weak and vulnerable and he had always known that
they had no place in their world. Jake couldn't leave himself open.

He didn't want to feel the pain of betrayal and hear the quiet, heartbroken questions of why that
kept being whispered inside his head.

Why had Cougar done it? Why had he betrayed him? How could he have acted the way he had, only to reveal that it was all a lie?

But in the end it didn't matter. Jake kept repeating that to himself until the guards came to get him, and by that point he was able to believe it.

Cougar had betrayed him, end of story. Nothing would change that and Jake had to let it go. He had to focus on escaping and warning his family. That was all that mattered.

He would just have to forget about Cougar entirely.

Chapter End Notes

... yeah, sorry. But those of you who have read my stories before know that I do this a lot. Then again, this cliffhanger could have been A LOT worse. Like, if I had stopped right after JJ lost consciousness. Also, yes, this was possibly the worst first kiss in the history of ever, but that's Jensen for you.

ANYWAY! The next chapter will be an interlude chapter from Cougar's POV, so stay tuned for that ;)

My beta, CarpeDentum, had a few choice things to say about this chapter, but I better not forward them xD
It actually took a while for Cougar to recognize the man being lead into Max's office. There was no spark in his eyes and no excited spring in his step so while they wore the same face it looked nothing like Jake. Cougar almost thought they had captured the wrong person.

Max, obviously, saw no difference.

"Have a seat, Jake."

Cougar had given them Jake's name and some of the other details they might need, like the fact that he was virtually blind without his glasses and how he, despite his sharp intellect and stunning potential, was in essence a fragile being. That last observation was something that Cougar was hastily reevaluating when he saw the blank look on Jake's face. It wasn't the blankness that came from being broken but the kind Cougar knew was on his own face most hours of the day; or at least had been before he met Jake.

Jake didn't reply to the offer to take a seat. He remained practically motionless except for his gaze which slowly moved from Max to land on Cougar instead. There was no flare of recognition or anger, just a steady patience – as if Jake was calmly biding his time before he decided to act.

If the silence hadn't been unsettling enough to make Cougar's spine stiffen that look in Jake's eyes certainly was.

It had only been a day since the ambush in the woods but something had changed. Jake wasn't the same person. Or perhaps he had always had this unshakable, steel core underneath the warm, bubbly exterior and Cougar had just been too quick to judge. This was a completely new side to someone Cougar had thought he had already figured out.

Not that it changed anything in the long run.

Jake was still Max's prisoner and had been brought to the unnecessarily luxurious office to finally get an explanation as to why Max wanted Engineers. Cougar and four other Raiders – Wade thankfully enough not being one of them – were placed strategically around the room so even if Jake would have had weapons and opportunity to make an escape attempt he wouldn't get far. Not that he was likely to try anything without his shoes.
If Cougar was to be honest he had no idea why Wade and the majority of the Raiders were still at the base. He hadn't lied to Jake when he had said that he thought that they would probably return within a couple of weeks, but it seemed like they hadn't. Cougar had heard whispers in the corridors, saying that Max was preparing for something – which was why no new groups of Raiders had been sent out despite having found the whereabouts of a suitable Engineer – but he hadn't gotten it confirmed. Cougar wasn't sure if he wanted to.

What he did know, however, was why he had been chosen to be one of the guards for this meeting.

During his short time in Max's employment he had never before seen the man but now, considering that he was the one who had brought Jake to them, Cougar's presence held value. It was meant to remind Jake of the obvious betrayal and to weaken his spirit. It would probably have worked on the other Jake – the smiling, innocent one that curled up against Cougar in his sleep and learned Spanish just for the beauty of the language and the knowledge in itself – but Cougar saw right away that it wouldn't on this one.

It would take a lot more than that to break Jake.

Not even Cougar was sure if he knew what it would require though. Because while Jake's family was the obvious choice there was a risk that it would make Jake furious rather than cooperative. In this case that would be a terribly bad thing.

It had come as a surprise to find that when Jake was truly and thoroughly angry he wasn't impulsive or careless. He became the complete opposite of his usual unorganized, flailing self. It was as if rage was the one emotion that could harness all of Jake's brilliant, intense energy and convert it into a focus so sharp that it was frankly terrifying to be at the receiving end of it.

Cougar had never thought that Jake of all people would be able to scare him but during a couple of seconds out there in the woods Cougar had seen nothing of the smiling, dorky man Cougar had gotten to know. During a couple of seconds Cougar had been the sole target of anger and hate so ruthless that it had left him paralyzed.

Jake could perform small miracles when he was happy but when he was angry – truly angry – he looked like he could bring the entire world to its knees. There had been a calculating calm to his actions that had made every single one of his movements seem so much more controlled than usual. It wasn't something Cougar was used to seeing in Jake. It didn't even compare to the time when Jake had threatened him with the screwdriver since underneath the fierce protectiveness there had still been fear – for himself and his family. There hadn't been a single trace of hesitation or weakness this time.

The look in Jake's eyes had said that he would stop at nothing.

That kind of determination was more frightening than loud threats could ever be and Cougar had clearly underestimated Jake's resolve.

"Well, I guess there's no use to waste time on pleasantries, is there?" Max said, calm and relaxed where he sat in one of the mismatched but still remarkably well-preserved couches. Those kinds of furniture with comfort rather than function in mind were uncommon in their day and age.

Jake remained silent but Max didn't seem deterred. He met Jake's blank stare with a smile that was not only false but unsettlingly detached. It was only on the surface that Max looked interested and alert, as if everything underneath was horribly deformed or perhaps not even alive to being with.

From the first moment Cougar had laid eyes on the man he had felt an instinctive need to keep a
"I want you to build something for me, Jake." Despite the deceptively polite tone there was obviously very little room for disagreement.

"What's in it for me?" It was the first time Jake spoke since entering the office and his voice was just as expressionless as his face.

"Well, I won't kill you for one." It was said off-handedly, like it hardly mattered in the long run.

Jake quirked an eyebrow at that but he didn't seem insulted or scared.

"You're going to kill an Engineer?"

Max got to his feet, leisurely – as if he had all the time in the world –, before smiling.

"You are valuable, Jake, but not \textit{in}valuable. There are other Engineers out there."

There came the first flash of emotion on Jake's face but it flickered past so fast that Cougar was probably the only one who saw it. Jake had to be thinking of his sister and just what would happen if Max got his hands on her. Jess, with her fierceness and fiery temper, would probably be deemed too uncontrollable to be of much use – unless they used Beth as a bargaining chip to keep her docile.

Jake didn't reply but once again Max didn't seem to see that as a requirement to keep the conversation going. It was difficult to say if he did it to wear Jake out or because he liked the sound of his own voice.

"I have a couple of ideas, you see, but for those ideas to become reality I need help from imaginative, capable people such as yourself."

Cougar didn't know how Max had come to have the power that he possessed – the means to hire Raiders to be his bodyguards and the luxury of pristine clothes and a heated office – but it was clear that he had every intention of using it for his own future gains.

"But," Max continued as he sauntered closer to Jake, "it's annoyingly difficult to find a person with the right kind of skill set. I've met several others of your kind, Jake, but they were ultimately unable to deliver what I asked for. Omelets and eggs and all that."

Cougar had not known that. He had only been involved in two excursions to find Engineers and the first had been unsuccessful. Cougar could see the ripple of shock and horror that passed through Jake at the implications. Max had had other Engineers as his prisoners but killed them once it turned out they were of no use to him.

It was so wasteful that it bordered on insanity.

"But you, Jake, you might just be the lucky one." Max stopped before he came close enough to Jake that it could prove an opportunity to lash out. Max was obviously unhinged but not foolish and seemed to prefer to let others do his work for him if the immaculate clothes he wore were anything to go by. "Wade told me that you were able to escape using weapons he had never heard of before. A sonic blast, was it? The inventions we found on you are quite ingenious despite their simplicity."

Jake didn't as much as flinch. Max smiled.

"And that just so happens to be what I'm looking for. I know that you're obviously good at what
you do, both the tinkering and the rest. I honestly never thought that anyone would be able to
break into the seed bank without destroying it. I've had some try but they always failed."

Those words made Jake's gaze stray towards Cougar, which it hadn't since the very beginning of
the conversation. Jake had been wholly focused on Max up until then and Cougar guessed that the
change wasn't entirely voluntary on Jake's part. Not considering the tightness of his jaw and the
dark look in his eyes.

"Oh, yes, your friend over there told us all about it, but so did the alarm," Max drawled, clearly
having noticed how Jake's attention had slipped, if only for a second.

"Alarm?" Jake frowned softly.

"A silent alarm. This base was once in charge of maintaining the vault's security so the moment
you broke in I knew someone of a particularly brilliant mindset had been able to get inside. Hence
my little welcoming party."

Cougar could see the moment Jake's brain finished absorbing that piece of information and the
rush of lighting quick deductions that followed. Jake's gaze flickered to meet Cougar's, but only
for a second. It wasn't enough to gauge Jake's state of mind but Cougar had to struggle to hold
back his smile. Max probably didn't know that anything he said in Jake's presence would be
recorded, stored and used for later ammunition if needed. Cougar had seen it happen with Jess –
when Jake had argued for the benefits of going to the seed bank – and it was a beautiful sight to
behold.

"Point being, Jake, is that I know that you can build things – your own things if necessary." Max's
pause wasn't so much to give Jake time to reply as it was some kind of misplaced attempt at
building up the expectation in the room. "I want you to build me an EMP."

Jake's shock was tangible.

"An-... what?"

"Electromagnetic pulse, Jake. I want you to build be a device-"

"I know what an EMP is," Jake snapped, finally losing his composure. Cougar knew that was a
bad sign even if he didn't know specifically what and EMP was for. "Are you insane?"

Max tilted his head to the side.

"Are you trying to avoid the subject? Because I doubt my mental state has anything to do with
your capability of building this thing."

"I'm not going to build you an EMP!" Cougar had never heard Jake raise his voice before – at
least not like that. But it wasn't just anger in there; it was fear and disbelief too. "I'm not going to
give you or anyone else that kind of a weapon. Do you have any idea how many people you'd kill
if you set something like that off? Everyone relies on electricity to survive and if you were to cut
them off entire settlements would die within days!"

"That's the general idea, yes," Max replied calmly, not at all affected by Jake's sudden burst of
fierceness. "The threat of extinction is an ideal motivator if you want to make people obey you."

Cougar had a hard time keeping his emotions in check. He had thought that Max was looking for
someone to strengthen his defenses, not build weapons. Max wanted Jake to build something that
could kill what little of humanity there was left. Cougar wasn't sure whether he was supposed to
feel relieved or worried that Jake would never agree to something like that. Both Jake and Jess
would no doubt die rather than let that happen considering how hard they had been struggling to achieve the complete opposite.

Jake and his sister wanted to help the world, not wreck it even further.

"Fuck you," Jake practically snarled, his hands clenched into tight fists at his sides. He obviously knew better than to lash out though. There were still five armed Raiders in the room with them.

"Is that a no?"

"I'm never going to build you an EMP."

Jake might come off as a bit weird and unreliable at times but in that moment Cougar knew that there was literally nothing that could make him change his mind. Not even threatening his family would make him agree since Jake, despite everything, was a good man. He would not bear the deaths of so many people, not even to save himself and his loved ones.

Max looked disappointed – not angry or insulted, just disappointed – as if Jake's refusal was nothing more than a small setback, and a momentary one at that. Possibly because Max considered Jake to be an expendable resource he could have killed if it fancied him. One flick of Max's wrist was all it would take for one of the Raiders in the room to put a bullet through Jake's skull.

Cougar's heart rate spiked while they waited in tense silence for Max's decision and he was barely able to hold back the sudden wave of uninhibited panic. Now was not the time to lose his grip on his emotions but it didn't exactly surprise him that it was concern for Jake that almost had him slip up.

"I have always been terribly bad at taking no for an answer," Max said eventually, almost distractedly, but the look in his eyes was hardening somewhat. "Tell you what, Jake, since I'm feeling generous today I will give you some time to reconsider my offer before I'll have you shot."

Jake bared his teeth.

"I'm not going to change my mind."

Cougar wanted to tell Jake to shut up and not make things worse.

"Call me an optimist but with the right kind of applied pressure everyone can change their mind," Max answered jovially. He nodded towards the two Raiders who had brought Jake to the room and they stepped up to escort him back to his cell. "We'll talk again, Jake, when you've had some time to assess your situation and realize that playing the hero really isn't such a good idea as you might think. Being a good guy is terribly unrewarding and few people would do you the same favor."

Jake seemed to bite back on whatever he wanted to reply and didn't give Cougar as much as a glance when he was grabbed by the arm and dragged none too gently towards the door. Jake's back was still straight – his broad shoulders firm and unafraid – and Cougar couldn't help marveling at how utterly wrong he had been about Jake.

Cougar had thought that he would have to see a stubborn but frightened Engineer get beaten to the ground – figuratively or otherwise – but what Jake had shown went beyond mere defiance. It was a kind of persistence and integrity that Cougar would have expected out of Jess but not the softer, kindhearted Jake. The siblings were apparently more alike than he had thought.

And Jake was far more capable than Cougar had given him credit for.
Cougar watched in silence as Jake was being led from the room, still standing at attention at his post, expression carefully maintained. He wasn't all that surprised when Max turned to look at him.

"Idealists always seem to mistake stupidity for courage, don't they?"

Cougar didn't answer; the question was rhetorical anyway. And while Cougar mostly agreed – bravery was never quite as noble or pure as the innocent seemed to believe – he was fairly certain that Max had never actually known a genuinely good person. Not someone like Jake who mended clothes for people he was supposed to hate, who trusted even though he wasn't supposed to and who could become so unbearably happy that he kissed people just to be able to show them a fraction of what he was feeling.

Those kinds of people, who offered a piece of themselves to those they cared about without asking for anything in return, weren't stupid. They were vulnerable, yes, and could be taken advantage of, but in the end they were the strongest, for being able to believe in things that others were too frightened to embrace.

They had faith. And, if the conditions were right, they could give it too.

Max might have been correct in his observation that few people would do what Jake had done – to risk their own life to save another – but there was an obvious flaw in it too, one someone as pessimistic as Max would no doubt never consider.

Sometimes you didn't need a few people. You only needed one.

And Cougar had no intention of losing what little faith he had left.

It was a full day later – just after the sun had set – that Cougar made his way towards the section of the base that housed the holding cells. He had been forbidden to be one of those to stand guard outside Jake's cell for the simple reason that no one actually trusted him not to betray them. But that in itself wasn't unusual; no one trusted each other in a place like this.

Not to mention that Cougar had done it before and would again.

It wasn't in his nature to waste time so as soon as he turned around the corner and got a location on the two guards flanking the thick steel door leading into Jake's cell Cougar raised his handgun and fired twice. The men barely had time to see it coming – much less raise their own weapons – before they dropped dead to the floor.

Cougar strode forward to the door, fishing out the keycard he had taken from the man in charge of the guards. They weren't foolish enough to leave it with the ones actually posted at the door but it hadn't taken long for Cougar to find out who had it. He wasn't sure how long it would take before someone found the man's body but Cougar guessed on when the blood from his slit throat started seeping out from under the door of the storage closet Cougar had shoved him into.

It wasn't very neat or stealthy as far as rescues went but it would have to do. Jake had already been locked inside that cell for practically two whole days and while Cougar was fairly certain
they hadn't started in on the torture yet he knew what could happen if Jake got bored. Sometimes leaving a person alone in a cold, barren room was worse than physical pain.

The door slid open with a slight hiss and Cougar had to fight his urge to rush in and just drag Jake out of there. They didn't have much time before someone would notice that Cougar had switched around the cables for the security feeds to leave this section of the base without surveillance. Cougar was far from sophisticated when it came to technology but having spent weeks listening to and observing Jake had taught him more than most people would learn in a lifetime.

Jake was sitting in the far corner, legs crossed and fiddling with his mittens – probably to keep his nervous fingers occupied. He looked up when the door opened though and was on his socked feet before Cougar had taken his first step inside the cell.

He could tell that Jake didn't miss the two distinctly dead bodies lying just outside the doorway but he made no move to step forward. Cougar calmly put the handgun away, knowing that it wouldn't help the situation if he was waving a weapon around. Jake remained in his corner, his back to the wall and eyes wary.

Cougar knew it was an understandable reaction. While Cougar had never intended to put them in this situation Jake obviously didn't know that. Cougar hadn't had the time to explain his choice before he had been forced to go along with Wade's assumption that he had lead Jake to them. They had been sorely outnumbered and it had been the only logical option if they wanted to come out of it alive.

Cougar could admit that as much as Jake's blank expression was uncanny to watch what hurt the most was the lack of recognition. Jake didn't even look angry, as if he had just cut his losses and forgotten that he used to smile as soon as he looked at Cougar. But that was before Jake was made to believe that Cougar had betrayed him.

Now he seemed to regard Cougar as a threat, which Cougar hadn't realized would feel so bad until he actually saw it. Jake wasn't someone who was meant to look at people like that.

"Come on." Cougar nodded towards the open door behind him but wasn't overly surprised when Jake didn't move.

"Why?" Jake's voice was flat and guarded.

He looked tired. He had dark circles under his eyes and was shivering slightly, which Cougar could understand. The air in the cell was raw and biting; not enough to be a danger as long as Jake kept himself alert and his circulation going but definitely enough to weaken him in the long run.

"We're leaving," Cougar replied, forcing himself to remain patient despite the insistent nagging at the back of his head reminding him that they were on a tight schedule.

Jake frowned which, while not a particularly positive emotion, was at least something. Cougar was desperate for any kind of sign that Jake wasn't entirely lost inside that cold, hard shell of his. Cougar wasn't sure if he would be able to forgive himself if that happened, never mind that it had never been his intention to make Jake look that way.

"Huh." Jake still didn't move. "Why?"

Cougar closed his eyes for a brief second before letting some of his frustration shine through.

"Now, Jake."

The snort Jake gave as both disbelieving and sad somehow.
"Yeah, no, I don't think so. I've seen Game of Thrones; I know that fake rescues can be used as pretty fucking horrible psychological torture when performed correctly."

Cougar had no idea what Game of Thrones was but he could admit that Jake wasn't wrong. To give hope and then snatch it away again was definitely cruel enough to classify as the kind of torture Max had hinted that he would submit Jake to if he didn't change his mind. Physically harming him was a risk after all since Jake needed to be capable in order to be of use.

"Jake, come with me." Cougar didn't plead but it wasn't an order either.

"I'm sorry if I'm a bit low on trust here, Cougar. You already sold me out once."

Cougar glanced over his shoulder but he couldn't hear any running footsteps which hopefully meant that no one had caught on yet. It was only a matter of time though.

"I never sold you out," Cougar replied through slightly gritted teeth. "We were surrounded."

"You hit me in the face with an assault rifle!" Jake shouted back while pointing accusingly at Cougar, who actually welcomed the show of emotion, even if it was anger.

Without hesitating Cougar turned around and retrieved one of the assault rifles from the fallen guards before holding it out to Jake. If there was one thing Cougar had learned about handling conflicts with Jake it was that most of the time the easiest way to win was to admit defeat. It was a paradox in itself – which suited Jake pretty perfectly if Cougar was to be honest – and was beautifully simple despite the obvious complexity.

It was when you fought back and refused to give that Jake's petty stubbornness kicked in. But to give Jake what he wanted – an admission of guilt or whatever it could be – always made him deflate and retreat, as if he just didn't have it in him to be angry for very long and didn't actually want to hurt your feelings by prolonging the argument. There was a risk of being submitted to childish teasing and smugness if you surrendered but it was better than the alternative.

Jake stared at the gun, then up at Cougar.

"What are you doing?"

Cougar shrugged.

"Hit me."

If Jake wanted an eye for an eye Cougar would give him that, but he knew that wasn't how Jake operated. Jake actually looked appalled at the suggestion.

"I'm not going to hit you with an assault rifle!"

Cougar caught Jake's gaze, holding it firmly to convey just how honest he was being.

"I *never* betrayed you." Cougar could see Jake swallow and how his tense shoulders hunched somewhat, making his posture seem more like the usual Jake's – the one that was big, goofy and perhaps a little awkward despite his obvious confidence. "They would have killed us."

"Okay, I can agree that if you did it to sneakily free me later it was a good plan, but you never told me that you'd take me close to their base in the first place! And how come they welcomed you back unless you were actually working for them? You killed your own – that Wade guy probably even saw you do it – and I'm not saying they're smart or anything but they have to be *pretty* stupid
to trust you after something like that."

"They don't," Cougar replied, the urgency making the back of his neck itch. They didn't have time for this. "They know me too well."

"What, you have a habit of killing your own so they just shrugged it off as no big deal?"

"Sí."

Jake blanched at that.

"What? Really?"

"Yes, Jake," Cougar snapped before throwing caution to the wind. He reached out and grabbed Jake's elbow and to his infinite surprise Jake didn't try to hit him or struggle against the grip. Perhaps it might be possible to salvage at least some of the trust that Jake seemed to have had in him. "We need to leave. ¡Vámonos!"

Jake didn't look convinced but after a quick breath he nodded.

"Okay, fine. But don't think I'm not pissed off at you."

Cougar only gave a sharp nod in confirmation before he was tugging Jake out of the cell, barely refraining from muttering profanities under his breath. He quickly led them down the corridor towards the more unused parts of the base. As large as Max's operation was he didn't have the resources to keep the entire building up and running.

They weren't far from the emergency exit when the alarm started blaring. Cougar wasn't surprised. They had passed several security cameras on their way and someone might have found the bodies Cougar had left behind.

"I'm guessing this isn't a part of your plan?" Jake shouted over the shrieking wail that echoed between the bare walls. The flashing red lights made the lenses on Jake's glasses flare.

Cougar shot him a dry look before stopping to open one of the doors to his left, reaching in just enough to pull out the lone backpack he had stored there. It wasn't their own gear and it had been impossible to get a hold of Jake's tools and tiny machines without raising suspicion but it would have to do. Cougar tossed Jake a pair of boots – once again not the ones Jake had arrived in but the priority was for him not to freeze to death as soon as they went outside.

For once Jake seemed to understand the importance of efficiency and tugged on the boots without any further comments. He did snag the backpack though and pushed Cougar to start moving again before he had time to object.

"It will just be in the way when you aim. I'll carry it."

Cougar couldn't argue with that, the assault rifle a comforting weight in his hands. He was able to zone out the high-pitched alarm as they sprinted the last two lengths of corridor to the emergency exit, his heartbeats steady and reliable despite the severity of the situation. They wouldn't be spared if they were caught fleeing.

The brief pause the door offered was enough for Cougar to pull out the handgun and hand it over to Jake, who accepted it without a word. Before Cougar was able to stop himself he reached out, his gloved palm settling against Jake's cheek and his thumb brushing over his cheekbone. Jake's eyes widened in surprise and something warm and shy that Cougar never thought he would get to see again – not after this whole ordeal. Cougar had to catch his breath before he was able to speak
"Stay close," Cougar urged. Jake had been brought to the base while still unconscious and had no idea what the surrounding area looked like. If they got separated he wouldn't know where to go. "You cover me. Understand?"

Jake swallowed and nodded. His eyes were so incredibly blue and it took everything Cougar had not to lean in and kiss him. He hadn't been able to stop thinking about it ever since the vault.

"Yeah, okay. Got it." Jake sounded somewhat dazed.

Jake had probably never been in a real firefight before and as much as Cougar knew that it might be frightening and traumatizing they didn't have time to worry about that. After a quick nod – and receiving a confirming one from Jake in reply – Cougar disabled the lock and pushed open the door.

The cold air rushed to meet them but it was easy to ignore. Cougar knew where the guards were supposed to be but they had most likely left their posts in response to the alarm and were off looking for Cougar and Jake. There was no time for hesitation and Cougar allowed himself to embrace the routine. To fall back on instincts to better avoid distractions and failure.

It was still significantly different from any other situation he had been in since he was trained to cause the kind of destruction he was about to unleash, simply because Jake was there. Never before had Cougar had someone with him that he desperately needed to protect and he could admit that it threw him a little the first couple of seconds.

His heart jumped in fright – something it hadn't done in years – when the first shot aimed at them rang out and it was only through sheer force of will that he held back the urge to glance at Jake to make sure that he was still okay. It was unnerving to care so much for someone else in such a dangerous situation but he couldn't let his focus slip. That, if anything, would get them both killed.

It turned out that Jake could handle himself just fine.

Cougar didn't have the opportunity to count or confirm if all of Jake's bullets actually hit their intended targets but he was clearly systematic and precise in his firing. No shots were outright wasted and while Cougar was picking off most of the guards that came after them Jake held his own, especially considering his inexperience.

Snow crunched under their feet as Cougar led them to one of the weakened spots in the steel fence surrounding the base. It was possible to squeeze through one of the gaps with some effort, which was definitely a better alternative than the heavily guarded front gate.

"Is this why it took you two days to come get me?" Jake asked as Cougar helped pull him through the hole in the fence. They were both a little breathless by then and Cougar could see that Jake's hands were trembling. His eyes were still alert though and he seemed to have lost none of his eagerness to talk, which was probably a good sign.

Cougar just shot him a quizzical look before trying his best not to break through the top layer of snow without slowing their pace too much. It was a delicate challenge where running could make them sink but walking would give their pursuers time to catch up. It might be dark outside but they were clear targets against the white snow and would be easy to spot in open areas.

"You've been planning pretty much every step of this escape, haven't you?"

Cougar shook his head.
"Not this one."

And that was unfortunately true. He had been able to account for everything inside the base but outside it was more difficult. Max had enough vehicles to send out a small convoy if needed and Cougar and Jake could never outrun that on foot. Even now shouts echoed through the air – orders to follow and catch them – and Cougar ducked instinctively when guns were fired in their general direction. There seemed to be very little aiming involved however, which was definitely in their favor.

"Are we going through the woods?" Jake asked, nodding towards the line of trees.

In any other situation it would undoubtedly have been the safest way since it made it impossible for vehicles to follow and the trees offered obstacles to any bullets fired at them, but it was unfortunately common knowledge. And as such it was easy to counteract.

"Booby trapped," Cougar replied tightly with a shake of his head. And they didn't have time to be wary of each step they took.

There was a road – or at least what passed for one in their day and age – that lead from the front gate but it was heavily guarded at several points along the way to avoid people coming and going without Max's expressed approval. It was still their best shot, all things considered.

Jake grabbed Cougar's arm but didn't stop running.

"Is that a lake?" he asked between pants, but he didn't actually wait for Cougar's answer. "Was the sun out today?"

Cougar shot him a confused look but nodded. His confusion morphed into frustration when Jake pulled hard enough on his arm to make them both stumble and almost lose their balance.

"Wait! What kind of vehicles do they have? Cars? Trucks? Snowmobiles?"

"Jake, come on," Cougar snapped, not in the mood to humor Jake in the middle of a situation that could very well prove lethal for them both. There were distant rumbles coming from the base, meaning that said vehicles were coming their way.

"No, listen, we go across the lake."

Cougar was shaking his head before Jake even finished the sentence.

"Too open. We-"

"Trust me, Cougar. They've only got ones with wheels, right?"

Cougar nodded somewhat reluctantly.

"Then we'll be fine," Jake promised with a brilliant grin but it didn't quite reach his eyes. Cougar still allowed himself to get dragged along, even if he knew what a bad idea it was. The lake was big enough that the other side was just a faraway, thin line of jagged, black treetops and every single one of Cougar's instincts told him not to go that way. But he had faith in Jake.

Trust wasn't something that came easy to Cougar but Jake had his, whether he tried to earn it or not. He was just so genuine and sincere that it was nearly impossible not to believe in him.

That didn't mean that Cougar was happy when people started firing at them again and the roar of engines told him that they were indeed being pursued by things they couldn't possibly outrun.
They were clear targets out there on the snow covered ice and Cougar would have turned around and fired back if he had thought that it would actually serve some kind of purpose. Right now it seemed like a better idea to just keep running.

It wasn't until Jake barked out a delighted laugh that Cougar realized that the sound of cars wasn't getting any closer. Jake was grinning triumphantly as he continued to run but he took the time to point backwards. The cars seemed to be idling just off the shore of the lake when Cougar glanced over his shoulder.

"They're stuck in the slush," Jake explained with another laugh, this one giddy. "It happens in summer. The sun melts the snow on top of the ice and you get a layer of water underneath. It looks solid but really isn't, not for big, heavy things."

The words were barely out of Jake's mouth before Cougar's foot sank unexpectedly, breaking through the snow. It almost threw him completely off balance and he had to grit his teeth when ice cold water rose, soaking his boot and great deal of his calf.

"Shit! Pretty much like that, yeah, but you really didn't have to demonstrate, Cougs," Jake said with a slightly hysterical giggle. "Come on, they might still be follow us."

With a sharp tug Jake helped Cougar pull his submerged foot out from the hole he had just made, followed by a slight nudge to get him moving again. Cougar was definitely not enjoying the sensation of being wet while out in the cold evening air – no matter how small part of him it might be. The risk of frostbite and hypothermia increased significantly but they didn't have time to worry about that now. The angry voices of their pursuers were distant but the crack of firing guns could still be heard and more than once Cougar felt a bullet whistle past.

Cougar suspected that Jake wouldn't be able to run much longer – not since he probably hadn't been fed properly during his imprisonment – but Cougar would let Jake decide when they needed to slow down. They were still too close to the people on their heels and far from the other side of the lake.

But if Cougar allowed himself to be optimistic – which he rarely did – he was willing to say that they would actually make it, no matter how unlikely it had seemed when they started out.

Cougar's head snapped to the side when he caught a movement in the corner of his eye, a grin spreading on his lips at the sight of pearly white fur glowing in the moonlight. Mirage changed her course until she was running alongside them, fluid and graceful to the point that her big paws barely seemed to touch the snow.

Jake's choked laugh at the sight of her sounded suspiciously like a croaking sob but Cougar wasn't going to judge. All he cared about was the brilliant smile Jake managed despite their breathless run, and the fact that they had somehow managed to escape from a fortress full of Raiders.

Cougar almost felt like laughing too.

Chapter End Notes

I love writing Cougar. I just do. It's trickier than JJ for some reason but I love doing it. And I might also be enjoying Max's nefariousness because, seriously, he seems to do
bad things just for the sake of doing bad things. I like the simplicity of that.

And yeah, I didn't have the heart to kill Mirage. I seriously wouldn't be able to live with myself if I did. CarpeDentum even threatened me with no birthday presents if I hurt or killed Mirage in some way. Good thing it was never a plan of mine xD
The first thing Jake did when they had at least momentarily lost their pursuers and found time to catch their breaths was to tackle Mirage and bury his face in her fur. He had been too afraid to ask Cougar what had happened to her and he wasn't ashamed to admit that he was pretty fucking close to crying when he saw that she was alright.

The fact that she grumbled at the rough treatment but eventually allowed it – even went as far as to curl protectively around him – didn't exactly make him less sentimental.

Jake heard Cougar's quiet chuckle but didn't move, desperately trying to piece himself back together again. It wasn't just seeing Mirage alive or the fact that the adrenaline from their escape was still making his hands unsteady and heartbeat race; it was what Max had said – what he tried to force Jake to do –, and Cougar's betrayal that wasn't actually a betrayal and, finally, the fact that Jake had killed more people the past two hours than he had his entire life.

It was a little too much to handle in his sleep deprived, mildly starved state.

Cougar seemed to realize rather quickly that Jake wasn't just being lazy where he lay half on top of Mirage and was gracious enough to wait a couple of minutes before he crouched down next to them, placing a light hand on Jake's shoulder.

"I'm fine," Jake mumbled before Cougar actually had time to say anything. He raised his head so that his next couple of words weren't muffled against thick, white fur. "Thank you for not shooting her. I know you must have missed on purpose."

Cougar's smile was achingly soft and his hand moved to curl around the back of Jake's neck instead. He didn't say anything but he honestly didn't have to. Jake understood what he meant anyway and smiled back, no matter if it happened to tremble around the edges.

Jake cleared his throat and looked around. They had made it a fair distance into the woods but it was difficult to see much further than a couple of feet ahead of them, the trees obscuring most of the view.

"I have no idea where we are," he declared rather matter-of-factly. "But when I think about it, that's not exactly news, is it?"
Cougar chuckled before straightening, offering a hand to help Jake to his feet. Jake accepted and held on to Cougar a little longer than strictly necessary. Long enough that Cougar paused and tilted his head in a silent question.

"I just... thanks for getting me out." Jake was still shaken and not quite sure what was up or down, but he did know that Cougar had risked his own head to get them out of that base. So maybe he could accept that Cougar probably had nothing to do with why they were caught in the first place.

Jake remembered what Max had said about the silent alarm at the vault, which was actually a more reasonable explanation to how they found them than Cougar sending out secret messages two weeks before they even got there. Or maybe Jake was just being gullible and too trusting again.

He squeezed Cougar's hand before letting out a breath that was more of a sigh than anything else.

"We should probably get going. We need to find some kind of shelter so you won't freeze your foot off." While Cougar hadn't said anything it was obvious that the longer he waited before getting out of the wet – or possibly half frozen – boot and sock the higher was the risk of him getting frostbite.

Jake might be exhausted but they couldn't linger, not when they were most likely still being followed. Max didn't strike Jake as the kind of person who would just accept that his captured Engineer escaped from right under his nose. They might have slowed them down by taking the route over the ice but the Raiders could still follow on foot.

Cougar smiled and didn't actually let go of Jake's hand – not at first at least – and instead used the grip to tug Jake along in the direction they were apparently heading. Mirage got to her feet, shaking the snow from her fur before following, trotting next to Jake as if she didn't quite want to let him out of her immediate reach. Jake took that as a sign that she had missed him.

They had to let go of each other's hand soon enough, if nothing else so that Cougar wouldn't be restricted in his aiming if they ran into further trouble. Jake had tucked his gun away since he knew that he probably wouldn't be able to hit anything anyway what with it being dark and his eyesight as poor as it was.

He missed his vambraces. They might not be as effective as a gun but he still preferred them over real weapons, if nothing else because he had built them with his own two hands. Jake felt strangely bare without the weight of them on his arms but he could understand that it hadn't been a priority of Cougar's to find and retrieve them. It would have been too big of a risk to steal them and free Jake, especially since he could technically build them again if he found the appropriate materials.

Jake didn't try to figure out where they were going and instead followed Cougar's lead. It unnerved him a little, he could admit that, because he had spent two days thinking that Cougar had betrayed him and it was difficult to just wipe all of that away. It was hard to trust him explicitly but Jake would still rather take his chances with Cougar than be forced to build an EMP for Max.

Jake shuddered at the thought of what would happen if something like that was unleashed on their world. Bullets and guns were scary but they frankly paled in comparison to something that could knock out what little electricity people had.

Sure, Jake could undoubtedly build one if he wanted to but there wasn't a single fiber within his being that did. No person could be trusted with that kind of power and especially not someone like Max, who had shown just how little he cared for human lives. It made no sense why someone
would want to cause that kind of damage to what little there was left of civilization, but Max hadn't exactly seemed to be an entirely stable being.

Jake was so caught up in his thoughts that he almost missed the moment Cougar slowed his steps and would have bumped into him had he not heard Mirage's low, threatening growl. It snapped Jake back to the present with enough urgency to make him slightly dizzy.

Taking stock of Cougar's tense posture and Mirage's instinctive reaction Jake knew that someone was close by. If they were lucky it was nothing more than some nocturnal animal but Jake doubted it. Mirage was bristling a couple of steps ahead of them, her head and body lowered in a clear warning that she was ready to attack if necessary, which was not her reaction when she smelled game or other predators. Whoever was out there had to be human.

Jake didn't allow himself to hesitate. He quickly pulled the gun from where he had kept it but made sure to keep it angled towards the ground. The slight but approving nod from Cougar told him that it was a wise decision. Jake's chest felt tighter with each breath he took and adrenaline was making his hands and heart unsteady, but he still kept firm, glancing around them even if Mirage seemed to detect the largest threat straight ahead. That hopefully meant that it wasn't the Raiders at their heels, but it was better not to take chances.

The subtle shift in Cougar's posture was the only outer sign of unease that Jake could detect and it wasn't until he saw the approaching shadow amongst the trees that he realized that Cougar had moved to better shield Jake from whoever it was. He didn't know exactly what to feel about that but Jake could prioritize, choosing to stay in the present rather than allow his brain to wander off on tangents.

The tension in the air dissipated only marginally when the shape ahead of them turned out to be a woman, and then only because she wore clothes unlike the uniformed Raiders. She was definitely not a part of the group following them. She could still be a threat however and as Jake allowed himself a cursory inspection he quickly came to the conclusion that she definitely was.

She moved with the same kind of loose grace that Cougar did and while there were no visible weapons on her there was no doubt that her practical and durable clothes could hide a fair few. Her dark gaze was intelligent and calculating, to the extent that Jake had to fight and impulse to inch closer to Cougar. Mirage was still growling, the loud, deep rumble causing her entire ribcage to vibrate.

During a couple of seconds nothing happened. It seemed like all of them were waiting for someone else to act. The woman had stopped some distance from them, clearly wary of Cougar's assault rifle and Mirage's warning snarl, but she looked intrigued rather than afraid. Jake was waiting breathlessly, prepared to give Mirage the command that would have her sink her teeth into the woman's neck at a moment's notice.

It was, somewhat surprisingly, Cougar who finally broke the stalemate by raising his hand and performing some kind of series of gestures with his free hand, the other still maintaining a firm grip on his weapon. The woman's eyes widened in surprise before she gave them a crooked smile and offered what Jake assumed was the same gesture in return.

"A Nomad," Cougar mumbled softly, his voice so low that Jake couldn't be certain that he had actually heard it. The hand gesture suddenly made a lot more sense. Settlements might have tattoos to signify where they belonged but he had never heard about what Nomads did to distinguish friend from foe; or other Nomads from the Raiders and Settlers for that matter.

"How come you know the Nomad's secret handshake?" Jake whispered as discreetly as possible.
As far as he knew Cougar had lived at a settlement before he became a Raider, not with Nomads. Jake wasn't entirely comfortable with how little he seemed to know about Cougar and the questions that kept popping up surrounding both his past and present.

Jake's question was ignored in favor of the woman, who chose that moment to speak up. It took Jake a second to realize that while her lips was moving he didn't quite understand what she was saying, save for a word here and there.

She was speaking Spanish.

Jake had never felt as useless as he did in that moment, nor quite as helpless. While communicating with Cougar had always been somewhat simplified and involved a bit of guesswork it was another thing entirely to not understand entire sentences. Cougar had no problems of course – it was naturally up to him to reply to whatever the woman was saying – but for the first time in his life Jake felt stupid. The fact that he had no way of determining what was going on made him nervous and uneasy in a way he had never experienced before.

The fact that Cougar was speaking fast, confidently and at length only served to make Jake feel even more excluded. In a matter of seconds Cougar had said more than Jake had ever heard him speak in one instance before and it made his heart clench to know that he didn't understand more than a couple of words of it. But the woman did. The very pretty woman, with her dark skin, sharp eyes, high cheekbones and smooth jaw line.

"Her name is Aisha."

Jake actually jumped at the sudden shift to English. Cougar wasn't looking at him though; he kept his gaze fixed on the woman.

"A Nomad scout."

Jake felt a childish urge to snap that he didn't care, but it would have been a lie. He did care because it was obvious that their odds of managing this on their own were depressingly low. Cougar might know in what direction they needed to travel but unless he wanted to lose his foot to frostbite they had to find some kind of shelter soon. A group of Nomads could at the very least show them where to look, as long as they offered them something in return.

"She can help," Cougar continued, translating for Jake's benefit. Hearing Cougar revert back to his stiff, curt way of talking left a bitter taste at the back of Jake's mouth. It was only part jealousy though. More than anything he felt a squeeze of guilt for forcing Cougar to speak a language he clearly wasn't comfortable with. Jake's shoulders hunched under the weight of that knowledge and he couldn't help wondering just how much Cougar even listened to him when he spoke.

"At a price." Cougar was clearly unaware of Jake's internal crisis, his attention still focused on Aisha. Jake forced himself to school his expression and push back his pathetic insecurities.

"Do they need an Engineer?"

Cougar finally graced Jake with a quick glance, his expression a mix of thoughtfulness and caution. Jake felt a flare of indignation at that look. He knew that revealing himself as an Engineer could be a bad idea – there were no guarantees that the Nomads wouldn't betray them somehow – but they didn't have many options left. They had less supplies than when they started out and Cougar would soon freeze his toes off. They needed help if they wanted to come out of this in one piece.

"We need something to bargain with," Jake persisted, his annoyance bleeding through and making
his voice sharper than usual. The way the woman tilted her head curiously to the side made something dark and twisted curl in Jake's gut. He didn't even feel bad about glaring at her. "Even Nomads must have technology I can repair and we need their help."

Jake calmly – and subtly – pocketed his gun again while Aisha watched, probably aware of his movements but not threatened by them. It was better not to wave weapons around when they were trying to settle things peacefully.

In an attempt to diffuse the situation further Jake gave a short, shrill whistle. A second later Mirage obediently returned to his side even if she was still bristling somewhat. He let his gloved fingers sink into the soft, white fur before turning his gaze towards the woman again. She was eyeing Mirage with unusual fascination, especially considering that most people reacted with fear first. If anything Aisha seemed intrigued but respectful.

The next words she spoke seemed distinctly cajoling.

Jake didn't like it one bit because 'dog' was one of the few words he actually did know in Spanish. The way Cougar gritted his teeth was all the confirmation Jake needed.

"She wants Mirage." Jake didn't even bother to phrase it like a question. Cougar gave a tight nod and Jake took a slow, deep breath. He didn't like what he was about to do but he knew it was better than the alternative. "Tell her she can't have her. Mirage is trained to respond only to people she's familiar with and she's too old to be handed over to someone else. If she's willing to wait a couple of months she can get one of the pups from the next litter though."

Cougar started translating even before Jake had finished talking and Jake carefully studied Aisha's expression during it. She clearly wasn't pleased to hear that she would have to wait for her payment – it would give anyone ample time to back out of a deal – but there wasn't much Jake could do about that. Mirage would never obey them if he gave her to the Nomads, not to mention that he didn't want to.

After a couple of rapid fire sentences in Spanish of supposed bargaining Jake felt his patience run thin. He placed his free hand on Cougar's shoulder and stepped up next to him instead of standing shielded behind him.

"One of our dogs is payment enough but if you're worried I'll back out I can offer to repair whatever technology you have and build new, as long as you supply me with materials." Jake kept his back straight and voice firm. "But in that case we get to travel with you. We need to return to our settlement as quickly as possible and you might know faster routes for us to travel."

Not to mention that they probably had more food, better shelter and more protection.

"Jake, she doesn't-"

"Yes, she does," Jake interrupted bluntly, catching Aisha's gaze and holding it. "She knows English. She just enjoys the advantage of pretending not to know."

During a fraction of a second it seemed like the air stilled, Jake's accusation hanging between them in the tense silence, but it shattered the moment Aisha grinned. Her nod was annoyingly graceful, even if it was her accepting defeat.

"What gave it away?" There was a slight accent to her words but it was less prominent than with Cougar.

"You timed your expressions and reactions wrong. Most of the time you had already reacted to the things I said before Cougar translated them."
Jake wasn't looking at Cougar, feeling an unreasonable and downright petty urge to ignore him at least for the time being. It hurt to know that Cougar would probably never speak as freely and easily with him as he did with Aisha. Cougar might not even want to and that felt like a particularly hard punch in the gut. Jake knew it was just silly, childish jealousy but he couldn't help it.

He wasn't used to people actually wanting to spend time with him and felt a need to cling to one of the few who did. Even more so because Cougar had, despite his admirable patience, very little reason to inconvenience himself in that way and a part of Jake feared that if Cougar got the chance to realize just how much easier it would be to find someone else to talk to he would leave Jake in a heartbeat.

"Fair enough," Aisha conceded. "So you want to travel with us?"

"Yes." Jake decided to take over the negotiations. "I'll offer my assistance with any piece of technology you have and once you've brought us to our settlement you'll know where to return once you want to claim your pup."

Jake felt a slight flinch at calling it 'their' settlement because he knew that Cougar might take offense, but it was the better than telling Aisha that he was a Raider. Possibly ex-Raider.

"Two people require a lot of food," Aisha remarked, clearly trying to point out just how much Jake was asking for. But he had no intentions of lowering his demands.

"The dogs we breed and train are one of a kind, good for hunting, offense and defense," he replied evenly, stroking Mirage's fur when he felt her vibrate with tension underneath his hand. "And just how often do you run into Engineers willing to help you?"

Aisha had an impressive poker face but it was nowhere near as effective as Cougar's, so if Jake could read him Aisha was no match at all. She seemed to understand that while Jake and Cougar might prove to be a liability and a burden what they offered was definitely worth it. She and her group of Nomads would gain more than they lost on the deal.

Then her expression changed, going from almost vacant thoughtfulness to slightly wary suspicion.

"Who are you running from? No one is in such a hurry as you are unless they have someone after them."

The question stumped Jake somewhat since he wasn't sure what to reply. She already knew that he was an Engineer so technically it wouldn't hurt them to admit that he was being targeted by a maniac who wanted to rule and ruin the world – not necessarily in that order –, but the added danger could make her less prone to agree to their conditions. She and her fellow Nomads might be put at risk.

Before Jake had time to fully think through his options Cougar spoke up.

"Max."

Jake blinked in surprise when he saw the shift in Aisha's expression. Cougar's description hadn't exactly been detailed but it didn't seem like they would need to elaborate; Aisha clearly knew who Max was. Perhaps he was something of a celebrity in these areas?

"What does he want?" she practically snarled, her face twisted in anger and something that could, if Jake was a bit creative with his interpretation, be grief.
"Want?" Jake asked, feeling Cougar tense beside him.

"Why is he hunting you?" Her voice was sharp like a lash.

"He wants me to build something for him. A weapon," Jake replied honestly, knowing that lies wouldn't be in their favor. Aisha was too agitated, which might have been why Cougar seemed more cautious than he had just mere seconds ago.

"But you refused?" she demanded to know.

Jake nodded.

"And then he helped me escape." Jake inclined his head in Cougar's direction.

Aisha seemed to consider this, her posture deceptively relaxed considering the razor sharp intelligence in her eyes.

"So it would be more beneficial for me to return you to him instead of helping you escape. Getting in the way of a man like that is a bad idea," she said, rather ominously.

It was pure reflex to tighten his grip around Mirage's fur and reach out to grab the back of Cougar's coat with his other hand. It wasn't to restrain him – Jake wouldn't be able to if Cougar honestly wanted to attack Aisha – but it was enough to hold him back for a short moment. Cougar's fierce protectiveness was clearly urging him to react to the obvious threat. But Jake knew better.

"Unless you want to get in his way," he replied without pause. "And you do, don't you?"

A tense second followed before Aisha barked out an abrupt laugh. She didn't look happy but not angry either. She nodded before taking half a step back.

"I think we'll get along beautifully." Her voice was smooth and inviting, Jake hated it. "Right this way, gentlemen. We'll see you returned home and as a bonus make sure that Max won't catch you."

Jake had no idea whether it was wise or not to trust these Nomads but once again he would rather take his chances than be captured and brought back to Max's lair. Aisha's hate for Max had seemed genuine and even if Jake didn't know the reason behind the anger it had to be something serious considering how it had tipped the scale in his and Cougar's favor. In having a common enemy they were ensured at least momentary loyalty and that would have to do.

That didn't mean that Jake felt particularly happy when he moved to follow her deeper into the woods, supposedly to where the rest of her caravan was. And when she delivered another one of those rapid sentences in Spanish that Jake couldn't understand and Cougar's response was to smile – a bright, sudden smile that seemed to twinkle with laughter – Jake felt his chest constrict.

Cougar's reply was short but brimming with emotions Jake didn't even try to categorize. He didn't want to know. He wished he hadn't heard it at all because Cougar had never spoken to him in that tone of voice and it made that dark, ugly thing in Jake's chest fester and grow.

He had to swallow back the jealousy and sting of self-loathing, gathering it all up into a tight, aching ball. He pushed it away until his ribs began to hurt and it felt like his chest might just cave in on itself. It was stupid – pathetic even – to be jealous, but Jake honestly wasn't at his best when he was still half starved, tired and emotionally drained. He just wanted to collapse and spend a couple of minutes feeling sorry for himself. He was pretty sure he had earned that by now.

Cougar caught his gaze but Jake quickly looked away before Cougar had time to see more than a
flicker of what Jake was trying to hold back. He just needed a couple of seconds to get it all under control. He chose instead to take comfort in the grip he had around Mirage's fur; her presence at his side was a constant he could rely on.

Jake knew that he should be happy. They had found allies – of sorts – that could offer food, shelter and protection on their way back to the settlement, but he just couldn't get over Cougar's smile. It got to the point that Jake had to fight an urge to flinch out of reach when Cougar touched him for no reason, poorly disguising it as urging Jake to keep going. Jake gritted his teeth against the tightness in his chest and ignored the teasing look Aisha gave him. All he could think about was the fact that Cougar would never be that enthusiastic to talk to him and that he had never smiled like that at Jake – especially not after just a couple of minutes of acquaintance.

They had been dancing around each other for a while now but maybe that had just been in lack of better alternatives. Aisha was probably a better alternative. She and Cougar spoke the same language and seemed to have a lot in common. What did Jake have to pit against that?

Not much at all, was the painful but honest truth.

Despite his foul mood Jake could appreciate the wonder of being shown another part of the world he had yet to experience. He had only ever seen Nomad caravans from afar before and it was completely different to suddenly be in the midst of one.

Jake stayed close to Cougar and kept a firm grip on Mirage's fur while Aisha spoke to the others in her caravan, supposedly explaining the situation and what they would be offered in return for their help. Jake couldn't quite follow the conversation since it seemed to be a jumbled mix of English, Spanish and something else he couldn't even identify. It was enough to make his head spin.

There were some grumbled protests but since Aisha seemed to be the leader of this particular group of Nomads they submitted to her will eventually. The fact that Mirage and Jake was right there for her to point out seemed to help. Mirage in particular was impressive with her size and pearly white fur. Jake didn't enjoy the attention but endured it, knowing that Cougar needed this to be resolved as quickly as possible for the sake of his foot.

Once the other Nomads were convinced of the benefits of allowing Cougar and Jake to stay a flurry of activity followed. It was in the middle of the night but none of them seemed to find it odd that they were suddenly ordered to break camp and get back on the road.

Jake would have liked to stay and observe the proceedings – how efficiently everyone worked when they got things going, rousing the animals and moving the sleds into a formation fit for traveling – but he and Cougar were quickly ushered into one of the sleds that looked more like a miniature, portable house than anything else. Jake could understand the benefits of keeping them out of sight, both to protect them from Raiders and to avoid being in the way, but he would honestly have preferred not ending up in an enclosed space with Cougar. A mixture of jealousy, guilt and shame was tumbling around inside him and Jake didn't want Cougar to see it.

Mirage somehow managed to jump in with them and immediately found a spot where she could keep an eye on both her charges and the door. As calming as her presence was Jake was feeling
everything but composed when it came to Cougar.

Jake decided to ignore his own conflicted emotions at least for the time being. It was more of a priority to thaw Cougar's foot and manage some kind of haphazard sleeping arrangements amongst the crates and other equipment surrounding them. It was clearly some kind of storage for food and other supplies and it could have looked like any other room had it not been for the fact that it was smaller – Jake had to bend almost double if he wanted to stand on his feet –, lacked windows and was rocking ever so softly because they were in motion.

Aisha had tossed in a couple of blankets before disappearing out of view but otherwise left Jake and Cougar to their own devices. For the first time in a long while Jake felt uncomfortable in Cougar's presence but kept himself busy rearranging the boxes to allow some place for them to sleep. In the meantime Cougar was finally able to get out of his boot and sock. Jake kept Cougar in the corner of his eye, watching as Cougar went about checking and slowly warming his foot back to an acceptable temperature.

"Everything okay?" Jake had to ask. Just because he felt raw and aching at the mere thought of how easily Cougar had accepted Aisha it didn't mean that he had stopped caring.

"It's fine," was Cougar's short and concise reply.

Jake swallowed back the slight sting of hurt and nodded softly.

"Good. That's... good," he mumbled, keeping his gaze on what he was doing, resolutely not looking in Cougar's direction.

"Jake?"

It took a couple of seconds before Jake was able to reply, glancing briefly – guiltily – in Cougar's direction.

"I'm just tired. Sorry." It wasn't even a lie. The last remnants of adrenaline had finally subsided and the events of the past two days caught up with him with such ferocity that he almost swayed, despite the fact that he was already kneeling.

He heard Cougar moving towards him and couldn't quite muster up any surprise when the blanket was pulled from his trembling grip. The hand at the back of Jake's neck was gentle and Jake soaked up the affection he was shown in that simple gesture. But for some reason it didn't make his heart feel any lighter.

"Sleep, cielito," Cougar murmured, his thumb rubbing against a tense spot on Jake's neck. "You will feel better tomorrow."

Jake nodded mutely even if he was pretty certain that Cougar was wrong.

It felt like his world was crumbling.

It turned out that Cougar was at least partially right; sleeping for a full night offered some much
needed rest and a fresh perspective in the morning. Things didn't feel quite as hopeless but they were still far from perfect. The situation with Max would have been enough and even if Cougar promised that he had in fact not told anyone about Jess' existence or her being an Engineer Jake was eager to get home all the same. Max would undoubtedly come after him and the settlement had to be warned before that happened.

Jake still felt ill at ease when alone with Cougar.

It could be lingering doubt considering how long Jake had been lead to believe that Cougar had betrayed him but he wasn't an idiot. He knew that it was mostly jealousy and a feeling of being replaced. Not that he knew if he had ever had any kind of claim on Cougar but Aisha's presence – the ease with which Cougar not only talked to but behaved towards her despite the threat she posed – made Jake feel pathetically insignificant in comparison. He just couldn't help it.

Jake was lucky that travelling with the Nomads offered him so many new things to learn since it was a distraction from everything else he was feeling.

They were wary of him at first when he emerged the first morning, jumping down to walk along the caravan to stretch his legs. Cougar was had probably been awake for hours already and Jake tried not to read too much into that or the fact that neither Cougar nor Aisha wasn't anywhere in sight. Mirage remained with Jake, trotting next to his side while a couple of children ran giggling and screaming up ahead, throwing curious glances in their direction but still too cautious to dare to approach.

The Nomads were trying to put as much distance between them and Max's Raiders as possible and Jake appreciated the effort, even if no one seemed interested in talking to him about it. It wasn't until Jake had started checking, repairing and improving what little technology the caravan owned that people became more sociable. As soon as he could he started asking curious questions, wanting to know as much as possible about the Nomads and their customs, how they lived and travelled and what knowledge they might be willing to share. Most of them knew English to some degree, which Jake was grateful for.

He found that Nomads were probably the kindest of all the groups he had met so far. While Raiders were known to be brutal and Settlers were hesitant to share what they had the Nomads made room for Cougar and Jake with surprising ease. It wasn't done without complaints or a fair share of suspicion but it was clearly not a foreign concept either.

The caravan wasn't big – at least not by Nomad standards, Jake was told – but the ages ranged from small children to the elderly and there seemed to be no indication that they came from the same place originally. There were twenty-four people in total and just about as many animals but despite the size of their sleds the pace they managed to maintain was impressive. Perhaps not as fast as two people on foot would be able to travel but Jake was fairly certain that they knew of shortcuts that not even Cougar might have picked up on.

It was no surprise that time passed quickly once Jake got caught up in his work. After the first day when he had been given tools, a small space heater for warmth and several pieces of equipment to think with Jake barely took note of the fact that they were pretty much always on the move – at least during the day. He spent most of his time tucked inside the storage sled he and Cougar had shared the first night, repairing the small but efficient generators the Nomads used to power their heaters when they made camp for the night.

Jake was incredibly fascinated by their way of living; how easily they could uproot everything and travel for days on end, but also settle down for weeks if necessary, their sleds and thick tents much better equipped to deal with the cold than anything Jake had ever seen before, save for an actual house. It was efficiency at its best and Jake tried to learn as much as he possibly could.
It was also incredible to see so many different types of people blend together into a functioning whole, and just how well they survived despite the limitations they faced. Nomads traded to get most of their food and supplies but had learned how to store them in ways that prolonged their durability. They had also perfected the designs of several tools and pieces of equipment to make them smaller and more portable but no less efficient.

It was a lifestyle that Jake probably wasn't suited for himself but could definitely learn from all the same. Not for the first time he mourned the lack of communication between the settlements and Nomads, seeing just how much knowledge was being lost when everyone just kept to their own, refusing to expand their borders beyond cautious trade routes. The Nomads in particular were in possession of traditions and expertise that couldn't be found anywhere else.

Jake heard at least two more languages being spoken during the first day with the caravan and had never seen as many different skin colors in his life. One particularly talkative girl explained that Nomads were used to picking up the stray survivors from Raider attacks or those they ran into on their travels, which was why they were so diverse.

Jake couldn't help wondering if that was what had happened to Cougar, who clearly had spent time with Nomads before. If things had been different Jake might have asked but the truth was that he had been avoiding Cougar ever since they joined up with the Nomads.

It was partly that Jake was kept busy with all the repairs and his curiosity to learn as much about these people before he was inevitably forced to leave them, but more than anything it was because he just couldn't bring himself to stop sulking. While a part of him wanted to be incredibly childish and demand Cougar pay attention to him and no one else he knew how horrible that would be. The fact that he instead ended up being unreasonably cranky and short with Cougar whenever they did see each other probably wasn't any better but Jake was too much of a coward to face it head on.

While he was certain of Cougar's loyalty by then – Cougar had never betrayed him and had saved Jake at the risk of his own life – this was another matter entirely. This involved things Jake had so little experience of that he didn't know what to think, let alone do. And whenever Jake started thinking that maybe he was overreacting he remembered the smile Cougar had given Aisha and the fact that Cougar had never brought up the kiss Jake had given him.

Granted that it was a poor excuse for a kiss but if there had been something between them shouldn't Cougar have reacted with something else than silence?

Jake hated it. He hated the insecurity and the growing feeling of despair whenever he saw Cougar and Aisha talk to each other. He knew it was partly his own fault because if he really wanted to Cougar would no doubt spend most of his time at Jake's side, but the question was what Cougar wanted, and he didn't seem inclined to tell Jake that. Jake had no intention of forcing Cougar into doing something he didn't want and that included spending time with Jake when he'd rather be with someone he could actually feel comfortable talking to.

It was a vicious circle where Jake's self-pity fed some kind of need to be a masochistic martyr and it really didn't suit him. Moping never had. And while the simplest solution would be to just blurt it all out – to tell Cougar that Jake was feeling awfully jealous and lonely and could they please try that kissing thing again, just to see if it was better the second time around? – he didn't have the courage to do it. He might be impulsive and forward in many aspects of his life but this clearly wasn't one of them.

He was afraid that Cougar would laugh at him. Or pity him enough to go along with it which, in all honesty, would be even worse. Jake knew just how annoying he could be and he still didn't
know why Cougar had put up with him for as long as he had.

Jake wasn't a person worth knowing.

So Jake did his best to immerse himself in his work and stay away from Cougar. And if that happened to be the complete opposite of what he actually wanted, well, that was another matter entirely.

Chapter End Notes

I think it would be difficult to imagine what it has to be like, to have lived isolated with one group of people your entire life and then suddenly meet someone new, who is completely different. How would you know if that person likes you or not? JJ's experiences with social interaction are, when you think on it, severely limited. Probably more so than Cougar's, for once. So yeah, of course he's getting nervous and insecure.

CarpeDentum beta'ed as always and she is convinced that JJ should relax because - and I quote - "he [Cougar] lurves yooou!". So that's my beta's word of wisdom. Also, remember when I said that I live in a pretty cold place myself? Well, yeah. It snowed sometime during the night and there is now white everywhere. Welcome, winter.
Traveling with the Nomads was overall a rather comfortable affair. Jake wasn't trusted to help with the actually straining parts of making and breaking camp and could focus entirely on his tinkering. It felt good to finally have something that could keep both his hands and the majority of his attention occupied after weeks of inactivity. Jake barely even noticed the passing of the days except from when the caravan stopped moving in the evening and picked up again in the morning.

He was completely engrossed in his work and since people brought him food Jake barely had to step outside the supply sled if he didn't want to. He still did from time to time, to stretch his legs, get some fresh air and see where Mirage had gone off to, but it wasn't often.

Mostly because Jake wasn't left without company even when he hid inside the storage sled. More than once one or two of the children would climb inside, eager to hear stories or tell some of their own. After a couple of days some of the adults would join as well, intrigued by the things Jake could do and keen to watch his progress. Jake had learned to work while half of his attention was elsewhere so he didn't mind.

Sometimes Mirage curled up in one of the corners to keep an eye on him but she had always preferred the open air and spent the majority of her time outside with Cougar.

Things were still terribly awkward between Jake and Cougar.

After the first night Jake had kept a certain distance between them, which wasn't even difficult most of the time since Jake was busy with the tasks the Nomads gave him and Cougar spent his time walking alongside the caravan with Aisha. It was during the evenings that things became tricky since none of the other Nomads wanted Jake and Cougar in their immediate presence – they might trust them while awake but asleep was another matter entirely – and they were given a small but functional tent to share.

The second and third night Jake made sure to return only when he knew that Cougar would already be asleep and the following three evenings after that he took to sleeping in the supply sled where he worked, curled up with Mirage amongst the pieces of machinery he was repairing. Cougar never said anything about it or seemed to find it odd, so Jake assumed he either agreed with the decision or didn't care enough to notice.

Neither was a particularly flattering option.
It actually seemed like Cougar might be avoiding Jake too, considering how he never came to the sled even if he knew that Jake spent most of his time there. Then again, Jake hadn't exactly made Cougar feel welcome so he had no right to mope about being lonely. While Cougar was all kinds of badass he was also strangely considerate when it came to personal space, especially when someone showed that they wanted him to stay away. Like Jake had.

So when the seventh night rolled around Jake felt momentarily confused when the one slipping inside the covered sled wasn't one of the kids, Aisha or the other two Nomads Jake had taken to talking to, but Cougar. It was hours since they had stopped for the night and Cougar should have been asleep like the rest of the reasonable part of the caravan. Jake was still awake though, as was his habit, busy sneakily mapping out the construction of one of the portable generators the Nomads had.

Mirage raised her head, instantly alert, but when she realized that it was only Cougar she settled down again with an audible sigh.

"Hi, Cougs," Jake mumbled around the screwdriver he held between his teeth, trying not to show how he stiffened at the mere sight of Cougar. Jake kept his eyes on his work, sitting cross-legged on one of the thick animal furs that had been spread out on the wooden floor of the sled, with the compact generator in front of him.

Jake's gaze flickered nervously when Cougar, without a word, took a seat on the floor next to him. Not opposite or even some distance away but right next to him, so close that their knees touched. Jake swallowed and pretended that he didn't notice but his heart was beating faster than usual and he felt something quite similar to shame burn at the pit of his stomach. He was such a coward.

"What are you doing?"

The question was innocent enough and Jake managed a small smile after having plucked the screwdriver from between his teeth.

"I'm trying to figure out how these generators work, just in case I ever want to build one myself. It's tricky though since these were built from scratch by another Engineer and I'm more familiar with old ones that have been remodeled." Jake let his fingers wander over the cold, smooth metal before continuing to search through the wires he had exposed by taking off one of the panels.

"These generators are a work of art. Not that I'm surprised considering where they're from."

"Who built them?"

Jake chuckled.

"The Nomads won't tell you if you ask – trust me, I've tried – but I think I know anyway." He had spotted the discreet but noticeable mark on the inside of the panel he had removed. There were only so many Engineers out there who were bold enough to sign their work. Even fewer with the initials 'TS' and the skills necessary to build the generators Jake was examining.

He cleared his throat.

"Most Engineers know how to use the Internet and it was only a matter of time before we ran into others likeminded while out there." He gave Cougar a cheeky grin. "We network, which is how I know that me and Jess are the only Engineers close to our settlement. But I've talked to others from all over the world."

"How?" Cougar seemed surprisingly curious but also a tad bit doubtful.
"It took some work what with the language barrier, until we were able to create one of our own." Jake shrugged before tapping his finger against the generator. "The one who built this lives east from here. I've chatted with him a couple of times and frankly, if there's one person out there who can make me feel inadequate when it comes to technology it's him."

Cougar's dubious expression was actually quite flattering, as if he refused to believe that someone could possibly be better at technology than Jake. He couldn't help grinning like an idiot at the praise.

"Anyways, I'm trying to figure out how to replicate them but it's trickier than expected."

As tense as Jake was in Cougar's presence he still couldn't help but relish in how good it felt to have his attention again. The lack of it the past couple of days might be Jake's own fault but that didn't mean that he couldn't appreciate it once he had it again.

Silence lingered during a couple of seconds, giving Jake time to return to his work, but perhaps he should have realized that Cougar hadn't come there just to sit quietly at his side doing nothing. Not when they had barely spoken in two days.

"What did I do?"

Jake froze, blinking twice before he looked up at Cougar against better knowledge. Cougar's expression wasn't exactly open but it was far from blank, the soft frown making him look confused rather than angry. Cougar's eyes seemed darker than ever in the light from the lone lantern standing on one of the crates next to Jake. The soft, yellow glow made Cougar's skin look golden.

"What?" Jake croaked, mouth suddenly dry. His fingers clenched around his tools as if that would help ground him somehow.

"You ignore me." Cougar's voice was painfully subdued but his gaze didn't waver. "What did I do?"

Jake's throat seized up. How could he possibly respond to that without sounding like a complete asshole? The shame seemed to burst brighter than ever and he quickly looked away, nervously clearing his throat.

"Nothing. You haven't done anythi-"

"Jake, please," Cougar interrupted carefully but firmly. Jake shut his mouth with a clack.

It took a second before Jake was able to breathe but he still couldn't look Cougar in the eye. He stared down at his hands instead, rolling the screwdriver between his fingers.

"I'm not lying," he managed eventually, feeling embarrassment burn through him together with the shame. "You didn't do anything, Cougar. It's just me being stupid." He swallowed around the hurt and self-conscious fear, knowing that he'd probably never admit what was actually wrong, at least not the full extent of it. "And I'm sorry. I just... figured it might be better that way."

The silence that followed felt awkward and nothing like the easy, comfortable ones Jake was used to having between the two of them. And it was all his fault. His stupid jealousy and his stupid mouth. Jake pushed his glasses out of the way so that he could rub his eyes. He should probably go to sleep soon unless he wanted to overexert himself. There was a sting behind his eyelids.

Since he didn't know what else to say he hunched forward, trying to mask his growing discomfort as wanting to get a better look at the generator.
"I grew up in a settlement. Like yours."

Jake stopped breathing for a second, the flutter of excitement momentarily overpowering his feeling of unease; he had always wanted to know about Cougar's past and that sounded like a prelude to something more. But in the next second he remembered where all of this avoidance business had started and just how stiff and unwilling Cougar was when it came to talking about himself – especially in English and especially with Jake.

"You really don't have to, Cougar," Jake said softly, trying to keep his voice from trembling. He shrugged casually but the way his knuckles were turning white as he clutched his tools gave it away. "I'm not trying to guilt you into anything. I know you don't like to talk about it and I don't want you to force yourself just because you think I'm trying to-"

Jake flinched and abruptly cut himself off when Cougar touched his arm. It was a reflex to look up even with if dread and unease was curling inside of him.

"I want to." Cougar delivered the words with such finality that Jake had to swallow.

What could he possibly say to that?

Jake was pretty certain that he could feel the warmth of Cougar's hand even through the thick layers he was wearing and now that Cougar had been able to catch Jake's gaze he didn't seem inclined to let it go. The look in his eyes was as close to pleading as Jake had ever seen it and he wasn't sure exactly what to feel about that.

"I... okay," he managed feebly, uncertain whether he spoke loud enough for Cougar to hear his reply. The way Cougar relaxed said that he had however and his smile was soft around the edges.

"Will you listen?"

That was a sentence Jake had never thought that he would hear from Cougar and he nodded numbly, too caught up in his own surprise to react beyond the simplest of cognitive functions. Since they were sitting practically pressed against each other it wasn't difficult at all for Cougar to reach out and gently correct the position of Jake's glasses. The fact that his fingers brushed against Jake's cheek seemed to be less of an accident and more of a calculated side effect.

And, being the hopeless, hopeful person that he was, Jake couldn't help surrender to it. Despite everything he had been through he still wanted to believe. He still wanted to trust Cougar. It was a yearning that might have been tangled up with a completely different kind of need – one that filled his stomach with butterflies and set his blood on fire – and Jake was getting tired of fighting it.

Jake knew, in that exact moment, that he would have a hard time denying Cougar anything.

"Raiders attacked," Cougar began softly, lowering his hand.

Jake opened his eyes, unaware that he had closed them in the first place. Cougar had leaned back again and was staring at the lantern rather than Jake, his gaze distant. By the looks of it Cougar hadn't thought about his past in quite some time.

"They killed my family. They killed everyone." The monotone quality to Cougar's voice sent a shiver down Jake's spine. It was as if Cougar was just reciting objective facts instead of a traumatizing event he had lived through. "Everyone except the young men."

Jake swallowed. He didn't need to ask what had happened to those young men. Raiders had a habit of forcibly recruiting new members and it was better to take those that they could shape from
a somewhat early age. Especially if they had nothing left to live for – no family to speak of or home to return to.

"How old were you?" Jake was almost afraid to ask, carefully placing his tools on the floor next to the generator. Cougar deserved his full attention.

"Sixteen." Cougar met Jake's gaze, his own blank and unreadable. "They taught me how to fight. To kill. Trained me to be a Raider – to be like them."

Jake nudged Cougar's leg to catch his attention, hand settling on his knee.

"But you never were. I know you're not like them." Jake had noticed that from the very beginning and while there had been doubts he was sure of it now. Cougar was nothing like the other Raiders.

Cougar's smile was derisive and Jake felt a sting of sympathy, his nail scratching against the fabric of Cougar's pants when he tried and failed not to fidget.

"I killed a lot of people." It was said almost like a challenge but Jake didn't look away. It wasn't news of any kind. Eventually Cougar seemed to realize that and a small smile spread on his lips, but it seemed void of any actual happiness. "I killed the Raiders too. Once I was good enough."

"The ones that trained you?" Jake asked somewhat unnecessarily. Cougar nodded and Jake allowed himself a deep breath. "So that's what you meant when you said you had a habit of killing your own?"

Another nod, this one firm – as if Cougar had no regrets for taking lives on his mission to avenge his family. Jake had no intention of condemning Cougar's actions since he couldn't say for certain that he wouldn't have done the exact same thing.

"It happens often." Cougar shrugged. "Not just me. Raiders are used to it."

Jake's smile was crooked and somewhat judging.

"You Raiders are such a lovely bunch, have I ever mentioned that?" he drawled dryly.

Cougar's only reply was an amused snort.

"So it was after that you stayed with the Nomads? I know you must have."

"Sí. For a while. They taught me better English."

Jake was on his way to ask another question but choked rather unattractively when Cougar's hand landed on top of his, squeezing gently. Jake hadn't even realized that he was fiddling with the inside seam of Cougar's pants and that his fingers might have unintentionally wandered from Cougar's knee up along his thigh, to the point of indecency.

Jake could feel his cheeks heat but when he tried to snatch his hand back Cougar only tightened his grip, refusing to let go. Instead Cougar moved their joined hands to rest against his knee – which was definitely safer territory – and enough to show that while the placement might have been somewhat inappropriate the touch itself wasn't unwelcome.

The way Cougar's thumb brushed over Jake's knuckles in a gentle, tender caress removed any lingering doubts Jake might have had.

Jake cleared his throat, both awkward and giddy at the same time. It wasn't cold in the sled with
the space heater Jake had borrowed but Cougar's fingers still felt warm against his, to the point that Jake could feel small bursts of heat prickle under his skin.

Then again, that could have an entirely different explanation.

"How come you went back to the Raiders?" Jake asked after a couple of seconds of silence. He couldn't quite bring himself to look Cougar in the eye but it had nothing to do with evasion tactics this time; he just couldn't seem to tear his gaze away from their linked fingers.

"Lack of faith," Cougar replied, voice low and raw. He squeezed Jake's hand. "It was easier that way. Demanded less out of me, because following blindly is-..."

Cougar trailed off and Jake looked up, almost shyly.

"Uncomplicated?" he suggested softly. Cougar nodded, gaze still distant and sad.

"Religion was important to my settlement. It gave us hope – something to fight for." Cougar seemed to be speaking without reflecting on the fact that his sentences were growing longer and that he had probably never said as much in one go in English before. "But also rules. Do not lie, do not steal, do not kill..."

That alone explained a lot about Cougar and the issues he had concerning his faith. Not that Jake knew what happened if you broke the rules but Cougar clearly had, more than once. Jake couldn't imagine what it had to be like to follow someone else's ideas and decisions like that – especially since they didn't even know the one who had given them – and then allow them to dictate how he lived his life. But he assumed that if he had been raised to believe in them he too would have found them to be as important as Cougar seemed to.

"So you figured it was too late? That you might as well continue being a Raider since the damage was already done?" Jake couldn't help the slightly dubious hint to his voice. Cougar didn't seem like the kind of person who would give up, ever.

Cougar's chuckle came as a surprise; the lack of joy in it was however rather expected.

"Sí. Since we believe in Heaven." Cougar patiently elaborated at Jake's confused look: "A place after death, where all is forgiven. Our loved ones are there. No pain or suffering. People are happy."

Jake thought that sounded pretty weird but he knew better than to question it, mostly because he could understand the appeal. There was so much death in the world that believing that your family and friends went to a happier, better place had to offer relief in times of grief and help you through the rough days. Heaven seemed like a nice place and Jake could understand just how important it had to be to Cougar. Things like that – things you were raised to believe in – never quite disappeared.

"But if you sin you won't reach Heaven," Cougar explained in a monotone. "You go to hell. There you suffer for eternity."

Jake swallowed, inching closer to Cougar and clutching his hand just a tiny bit tighter. If he could Jake would do just about anything to wipe the pained look from Cougar's face.

Jake didn't like it when Cougar looked sad.

"Can't you, I don't know... fix it? Ask for forgiveness? We all make mistakes. They can't possibly expect you to never make mistakes."
Cougar's smile was indulgent and unmistakably fond; his eyes warm in the glow of the lantern.

"We can, but I had too little faith. I didn't care. Heaven seemed too far away."

There was a slight pause – one loaded second – before Jake was able to make his tongue work again.

"And now?" Jake had not missed the fact that Cougar had used past tense.

Something seemed to ease within Cougar. His shoulders lowered and the tension within them disappeared slowly but surely. His smile was unlike anything Jake had ever seen and he had a hard time placing the expression at first.

Serene. That was the one.

"No need for it."

Jake swallowed, his throat dry.

"Why?"

"I already found it," Cougar replied without hesitation. Like he had never been surer of anything in his entire life.

Jake couldn't say why but his heart was beating faster than usual; a rapid tattoo thundering away in his chest. It could be the fact that they were sitting so close that Jake could feel Cougar's warmth or the way Cougar was looking at him, expression tender and sincere. But it could also be Jake's thirst for attention or a combination of all three. What he did know was that he was almost shaking from the tension and he could only stare in mute, breathless silence as Cougar raised Jake's hand to his lips and gave his knuckles a soft kiss.

"Cielito means 'little heaven'."

Jake had always thought that the saying of one's heart stopping for a beat was just an exaggeration. It couldn't possibly be true and Jake had scoffed at the ridiculousness of the statement – until that moment. For the first time in his life he understood exactly what people meant. Jake had to remind himself to breathe and even then it felt like his lungs were too small and his heart was trying to break out of his chest.

A part of him wondered if he was jumping to conclusions but really, how many ways could those words be interpreted?

Heaven.

Cougar called him little heaven; that weird place that Jake might not fully grasp but Cougar must have fought his entire life to find, and now claimed that he had.

In Jake.

Several different thoughts flashed through Jake's head – ways to react and things to say – but in the end he acted purely on instinct, leaning closer without wasting his time on fumbling words. Cougar didn't seem surprised and framed Jake's face with warm, careful hands as the last couple of inches between them were erased, pulling him in as much as he was holding him afloat.

The kiss was mind-blowing.
There was no hesitation or confusion, no awkwardness or second-guessing. It was as if there was nothing else either of them could possibly want in that moment.

Cougar kissed with an overwhelming kind of intensity that made Jake feel like he was the single most important being on earth. It was deep and unhurried and left Jake lightheaded and heady within seconds. Warmth was spreading through his veins, settling like a burning, fluttering fire in his gut and if any sounds happened to slip free Cougar didn't seem to mind. Jake couldn't help pushing closer, chasing after the sensations with a single-mindedness that was definitely not uncharacteristic but had never felt quite as urgent before.

Cougar seamlessly braced for the extra weight, his fingers curling around the back of Jake's neck, holding him firmly but gently. Jake's thoughts were spinning but for once he felt no need whatsoever to cling to them. He let them rush through his fingers, harmless and unimportant, focusing entirely on the kiss and Cougar's warmth, his taste and the way Jake's shaking hands closed around Cougar's coat, partly to pull him closer and partly to keep himself steady.

Jake moaned softly, trying his best to ignore that he might have to breathe sometime soon, far too busy relishing in the curling pleasure in chest and the sparks igniting under his skin. He wanted to cherish it – to indulge and never let go – but not even he could defy the laws of nature.

When he pulled back he barely gave himself enough space to suck in a sharp breath, his lips still brushing against Cougar's, as if he couldn't stand the thought of moving further away. He wasn't entirely sure when or how he had ended up straddling Cougar's legs but since it only improved the angle he decided that it was unimportant. He kissed Cougar again, fingers aching where they clenched around Cougar's coat, holding on almost desperately. Jake wanted so much but he had no idea how to express it all – how to make Cougar feel even a fraction of the joy, elation and bliss Jake was experiencing.

But maybe he didn't have to.

The tenderness in Cougar's hands as they wandered through Jake's hair and the way Cougar's breath hitched – just a little – when the kiss deepened spoke its own clear language. Jake couldn't help the dorky grin that spread on his lips, forcing them apart. Cougar didn't seem to mind. As Jake laughed against his lips – a giddy one, almost closer to a giggle than anything else – Cougar only smiled and kissed the corner of Jake's mouth, lingering and sweeter than Jake could ever have imagined.

He closed his eyes, reveling in the closeness; Cougar's breath against his cheek and the slight tickle of his beard. His chest could barely contain the happiness growing inside of it and Jake surged forward, wrapping his arms around Cougar's neck and holding on in a clumsy but heartfelt embrace. Cougar returned it, his arms slipping around Jake's waist, one of his hands coming to rest against the very centre of Jake's back. It was a solid, comforting weight that made Jake relax and slump ever so slightly against Cougar, boneless and relieved.

Cougar's hat had fallen off at some point and Jake's glasses were askew but neither of them seemed to care.

Finally, after weeks of tension and outright denial, Jake could let go. He was tired of hiding. He wanted Cougar, upbringing and sense be damned, and he had finally reached the point where his yearning trumped his trust issues. He could trust Cougar. He knew he could and he knew that it was worth the risk.

*Cougar* was worth the risk.

Jake took a couple of stabilizing breaths, nuzzling against Cougar's temple despite the brief flare of
shame he felt. "I was jealous." Jake didn't quite manage to raise it above a humiliated mumble but the way Cougar momentarily stiffened showed that he had heard.

Jake wanted to struggle against the hands that gently pushed him back until he was sitting in Cougar's lap, legs on either side, back straight and eyes locked with Cougar's. The frown on Cougar's face seemed confused of all things; as if he couldn't understand how that related to anything they had talked about.

"Jealous?"

Jake awkwardly cleared his throat and scratched his neck.

"Well, yeah... I'm not proud of it, okay?" He tried to avert his gaze but Cougar nudged his chin, turning his head so that Jake would have to make a conscious effort to avoid eye contact instead of a casually subtle one. And he couldn't do that, not without making himself feel even more like an asshole for treating Cougar the way he had. "I ignored you because I was jealous."

It was quite amazing how Cougar only had to raise one eyebrow and that alone said just how stupid he thought Jake was being for having those kinds of doubts.

"Of Aisha?"

Trust Cougar to be attentive enough to figure that out mere seconds after being let in on the fact that Jake was jealous of someone. Jake nodded slowly, trying but failing to give an apologetic smile.

"You forgive me?" he dared to ask, fingers fiddling nervously with the collar of Cougar's coat.

Cougar didn't look angry but Jake had been a complete ass for no good reason and if Cougar wanted to keep Jake hanging he definitely deserved to do so.

"She talked about you."

Jake frowned in confusion, his hands stilling momentarily.

"Me? When?"

"Out in the woods, the night we came here," Cougar replied patiently, a slight smile teasing at the edge of his lips. "Just before we joined the caravan."

Oh. When Cougar had smiled that amazingly happy smile of his and Jake had developed a very sudden urge to murder anyone within sight. It was horribly unflattering to know that Cougar had caught Jake's inappropriate and unreasonable flare of anger.

Jake felt a swoop low in his gut, part embarrassment and part anticipation, when Cougar carefully placed a hand on Jake's cheek, his thumb running along his cheekbone.

"She said you were weird," Cougar murmured, voice soft. "But one to keep."

Jake swallowed harshly, unable to look away from the open – almost vulnerable – look in Cougar's eyes. He wasn't trying to hide this time and Jake had to struggle not to get completely sucked in.

"I told her I intend to."
Screw holding back.

Jake didn't even feel particularly guilty about the roughness of the kiss he pressed against Cougar's lips, nor the fact that it nearly made them topple over. Cougar was fumbling to catch up – a very rare moment when he was less than graceful – and Jake took a certain kind of pleasure in that. For having caused it.

He tried to pour all of his over-excited emotions into the kiss, hoping it could bleed over and show Cougar just how breathless, delighted and downright euphoric he made Jake feel. No one had ever said those kinds of things to Jake before and especially not with such certainty and conviction. For once in his life Jake didn't feel like an annoying, socially inept idiot people endured because he was a useful Engineer. Cougar made him feel treasured in a way Jess and Beth couldn't, simply because they were related to him and required to like him despite his flaws. Cougar, on the other hand, had no obligations except those he willingly shouldered.

It meant more to Jake than he could express in words.

The kiss didn't last as long as the other ones but Jake was still breathless when he eventually pulled back, lips tingling and Cougar's taste still lingering on his tongue. Cougar's smile was crooked but indulgent and Jake grinned a little sheepishly.

When Cougar reached up, once again framing Jake's face with his hands and pulled him down for a slow, tender kiss Jake followed, trusting and loose. He would never get enough of kissing Cougar.

"I forgive you," Cougar assured, his words as gentle as his touch; a soft whisper of words against Jake's lips. Jake couldn't help leaning into it, his eyes closing in reverence and pure bliss.

"Thank you."

"Always, cielito. Always."

Jake felt that he was fully within his right to grin like a complete dork. And Cougar's amused but heartfelt chuckle only made his grin widen.

As tempting as it might have been the supply sled in a Nomad caravan was clearly not the place to give expression to just how much Jake wanted Cougar. It seemed like a bad idea, partly because it wasn't their sled and there was a thing called decency – although Jake wasn't always particularly interested in it – but also the fact that it was still pretty cold even with the space heater.

Honestly though, even more so than that it was Mirage. Jake didn't have the heart to kick her out just so that he could get frisky with Cougar. He really wanted to, sure, and he wasn't known for being patient, but he could wait a while longer, until when they weren't surrounded by people he kinda trusted but still felt a bit awkward around.

It wasn't like what he got was particularly bad either. Snuggling up with Cougar to sleep the few precious hours left before they were going to break camp was pretty satisfying in its own right. Even if it had clearly been Jake's own fault for distancing himself from Cougar he had missed the
closeness. It always seemed so much easier to sleep with the firm weight of Cougar next to him, sharing both warmth and a kind of intimacy that left Jake feeling a tiny bit vulnerable. But he was also elated, for daring to relax around Cougar and for the fact that Cougar did the same.

Out of the two of them Cougar was clearly the more reasonable and cautious one but he trusted Jake enough to have them sleep next to each other – most often with tangled limbs because Jake was very cuddly when he was given the opportunity. It left a warm, comfortable feeling in Jake's chest to know that they could have this and that Cougar seemed to embrace it.

The fact that it was mutual meant the world to Jake.

The days continued to pass quickly, even more so when Jake wasn't as opposed to sleeping now that he could do it next to Cougar. Jake still spent most of his time working on his electronics – building his own when he ran out of things to repair – while Cougar helped direct the caravan in the right direction.

Jake was by then completely unconcerned by the amount of time Cougar ended up spending with Aisha, probably because he now knew that he had nothing to worry about. There were no doubts about Cougar's sincerity and as worried as Jake had been it had only ever been in his head. When he thought about it Cougar had given no indication that he was interested in Aisha, even less so when compared to how he was around Jake.

It was actually terribly flattering.

After eleven days with the Nomads Jake was told that they would reach his settlement the following afternoon. Jake was both thrilled and nervous. They weren't exactly late in returning – not by more than a day or two – but there was no telling how Jess would react when Jake told her what had happened and who the kind Nomads escorting him were. As long as she waited until after Jake had gotten to hug both her and Beth he'd be fine.

Jake was giddy with excitement as he started packing up all the tools he had used. As much as he wanted to keep some of them – since he had lost his when they fled Max's base – it would be terribly rude of him to steal from the people who so generously had kept both him and Cougar safe, despite the serious risks they faced. A part of Jake couldn't help but wonder how they had managed to avoid being found since Max definitely had the manpower to hunt them down if he felt like it, but Jake decided to be grateful for the unexpected lack of confrontations. The Nomads probably knew how to travel and remain undetected.

The sled rocked gently when the caravan came to a halt and Jake hurried to finish up, knowing that they had to be close to home if they were stopping. Even if the journey had been a success and he had learned a lot both from the Nomads and the records stored in the seed bank Jake was keen to return to his settlement. He knew that he would probably have to go back to the seed bank eventually, to fetch the seeds once he and Jess had figured out how to go about it, but he figured it would take a couple of weeks before they were ready.

Jake had every intention of enjoying the time he got to spend at home until then.

The slight creak of the door made Jake look up, a wide grin spreading on his lips when Cougar climbed into the sled.

"Hi! I figured that we-" His voice slowly faded once he noticed the look on Cougar's face. It was a mix between apprehension and worry. A stone landed in Jake's gut. "What? What's wrong?"

Cougar breathed in and raised his hands, as if to calm Jake down.
"Something is wrong. We can see-"

Cougar didn't get any further before Jake was pushing past him and stumbling down from the sled, completely ignoring Cougar's shout for him to wait.

They were meant to reach Jake's settlement today, within an hour or two, and if Cougar said that something was wrong it must have to do with his home. Jake didn't want to know – didn't want to confirm the ice cold fear that gripped his heart – but he had to. Something was wrong.

He had to blink a couple of times before his eyes adjusted to the brightness outside, but once it had there was no doubt what Cougar had been referring too. It was only a distant mass on the horizon, darker than the surrounding snow, but Jake recognized his settlement. Smoke was rising against the pale blue sky but it wasn't the grey ringlets of hearty hearths – it was a thick, black cloud of burning homes.

The distressed sound Jake made didn't even sound human but when he moved to lunge forward – in some desperate attempt to reach his settlement – hands grabbed him and pulled him back. Jake struggled against them, blind to everything but his panic and need to find his family. His chest felt like it might burst and he couldn't think beyond that ominous, black fog. His home was burning. His family might be dead.

"Jake! No!"

He ignored Cougar's words, still trying to fight his way free of the restraining grip.

"I need-... I have to-" Jake wasn't even sure what he was trying to say, choking on the fear that seemed to bleed into his very bones.

A second pair of hands joined Cougar's and Jake's breath was momentarily knocked from his lungs when he was wrestled onto his back against the cold, packed snow. He barely took notice of Aisha's stern face, instead reaching out to curl his fingers around Cougar's grey scarf, not quite sure if he wanted to shake him or just hold on until he stopped trembling himself.

"I can't-" Jake swallowed harshly. "I need to find-"

"I know," Cougar interrupted, covering Jake's hand with one of his own while the other reached out to smooth against Jake's cheek. "We will."

Jake nodded, feeling the desperation curl tighter in his chest. This wasn't supposed to happen. He couldn't lose Jess and Beth. He couldn't. He would forget how to breathe, let alone live.

Cougar seemed to understand this as he mumbled something Jake couldn't quite hear but it sounded soothing none the less. After a quick nod from Cougar Aisha was back on her feet, shouting orders while Jake tried to calm down enough that he could at least stand up again. It was a lot harder than it should have been.

"I can't lose them, Cougs." His voice was raw and hoarse, cracking ever so slightly.

"I know."

For once Cougar's calm didn't seem to have any kind of effect on him. Jake was left to battle down the suffocating panic on his own, barely feeling the cold against his back.

His settlement was burning. His family could be dead.

Jake was surprised that his heart somehow kept beating.
My beta HATES IT when I do this xD I mean, all the adorable, heartwarming fluff and then WHAM! - painful, heartbreaking cliffhanger. But I can't exactly say that I'm sorry either ;) Anyways! You got some of Cougar's backstory here (I figured it was time) and also some much needed kissing.

And yes, I totally just gave Tony Stark a kinda-sorta-but-not-quite-cameo, because if I ever feel like expanding this universe and write other fics in it I can. And, well, I'm a sucker for Steve/Tony.

On another note there's a snowstorm here and it's that annoying kind of snow that sticks to glass (yeah, I'm not kidding - it really does) so I can barely see what's outside my windows. Right now I can very much relate to the poor people in this fic.

CarpeDentum beta'ed - duh - and you can find me over at my Tumblr.
It felt like the Holden settlement all over again, only ten times worse since it was his own this time. Jake's heart was in his throat and he refused to look at either Cougar, Aisha or the other two Nomads who had volunteered to come with them. They had yet to spot any kind of movement and Jake couldn't decide whether that was good or bad. They dared to approach only because there didn't seemed to be any immediate threat, but that could also mean that no one was left alive. Either way there weren't foolish enough to head over there without being armed.

Jake's fingers were gripping the handgun tightly enough to make his bones grind.

Mirage was bristling, no doubt reacting to the smell of smoke – wary in the face of the destruction ahead of them – and stayed closer to Jake's side than usual.

Jake had no idea what to expect. His mind was just a jumbled mess of white noise, his thoughts tumbling over each other until he couldn't interpret a single one. A part of him wanted to rush through the gates and another didn't want to enter at all. He didn't want to face the death they would find there.

It was the sight of the gate – once they came close enough that Jake could see it properly – that snapped him back to attention. The gate wasn't just open; it seemed to have been smashed or blown apart by a ruthless amount of force. Jake wasn't the only one who paused at that, never having seen something quite that devastating.

"What the-?" Aisha muttered, frowning in both confusion and anger, as if the mere thought of something she couldn't explain frustrated her. Jake understood the feeling.

He kept walking, trying to brace himself for what was to come. He had no idea what had done the damage to the gate but it was obvious that whatever efforts had been made to strengthen the wall had been useless in the face of it. The people inside had probably been unable to do anything to stop it.

Jake swallowed around the thick lump in his throat, focusing on putting one foot in front of the other. He couldn't help freezing though, when they came close enough to the mangled gates to realize that ugly, black letters had been scrawled on the worn, soot-stained section of steel wall next to them.
"Welcome home, Jake," Aisha read out loud, distaste clear in her voice. "Well, that answers the question of who's responsible."

Jake wanted to throw up. Bile was burning at the back of his throat and his lungs were thick with panic and crushed hope.

A part of him had hoped that this wouldn't be connected to Max somehow. It could have been other Raiders or just an accident with one of the generators, but that message made it clear who had attacked the settlement. This could explain why they hadn't run into anyone on their way back; the Raiders had been focused on finding Jake's home settlement and destroying it.

"How did they get here before us?" Jake heard himself ask, tone flatter than he had ever heard it. Cougar shot him a concerned look that Jake ignored.

"A vehicle of some kind," Aisha replied, pointing at the wide tracks that lead up to the gate. She crouched down to look closer. "Not sure what it is though. I've never seen tracks like these, but they're fairly recent." She looked up, catching Jake's gaze. "Someone might still be alive."

Jake nodded numbly, unable to feel anything but dread. He doubted that there would be any survivors. If Max's Raiders had gotten inside and managed to figure out that it was Jake's settlement – probably from finding his room and all the tell-tale gadgets – they would have made sure to kill every single one inside the walls just to punish him.

It was his fault.

Jake felt frozen in place, not able to move further. He just stood there, staring at the blackened, broken gate and the smoke billowing above the settlement. Everything was so still and silent. Just like at the Holden settlement, save for the dead bodies in the snow. Jake couldn't see any so far but that probably only meant that they had been taken by surprise inside the wall instead of having had time to try and defend it.

"We can go inside first, if you don't-"

"No," Jake interrupted firmly, voice sharper than Aisha deserved. She was only trying to be helpful, he knew that. She was a lot more considerate than she looked, possibly because if there was one thing she seemed to understand it was grief. "Let's go."

When they started up again Cougar seemed to linger closer to Jake than strictly necessary but Jake decided not to get annoyed by it. He could understand Cougar's need to show what little concern and support he could. He had to have noticed that Jake was practically crumbling under the pain of seeing his settlement burned and broken like this.

Despite his unstable state Jake managed to climb over the remnants of the gate without stumbling. As soon as his feet touched the snow on the other side he got an insane urge to just turn around and run, but he knew he couldn't do that. Despite how fast and hard his heart was beating – echoing hollowly in his chest – he looked up, eyes sliding over what had once been his home.

Unlike the Holden settlement more damage had been done to the actual houses, a couple of them still glowing from lingering embers. The smell of smoke was thick in the air and Jake pulled up his scarf to cover his nose on pure reflex. Most things he did seemed to be on autopilot. He just didn't know how to function otherwise. If he allowed himself to really think about the destruction he would probably break down.

Mirage trotted a couple of feet ahead of him, her head whipping back and forth as she caught stray scents and sounds. Jake wondered if she could smell the blood.
The thought had barely crossed his mind before Jake finally registered what he was seeing and frowned in confusion. He stopped in his tracks.

"Where are the bodies?"

Jake didn't reply to Aisha's question, too busy confirming that he was seeing the exact same thing. There was no blood. No dead bodies. Unless the Raiders had gone through the trouble of removing them there seemed to be no one there.

It was only distantly that Jake registered that Aisha ordered the other two Nomads to remain close to the gate, just in case something happened. He was too busy trying to sort through the conflicting emotions whirling inside of him. To see his home ruined was devastating but it didn't compare to what it would have felt like to find his fellow Settlers – his family – dead. Material things could be replaced, even if it might take years; human lives could not.

In the next second Jake realized that there might be one other thing in his settlement that was nearly irreplaceable. Jake tucked his gun away and suddenly his feet were moving on their own accord, taking him past the first rows of houses towards the centre of the settlement in an ungraceful sprint.

He didn't see a single corpse.

There were several sets of footprints, crisscrossing and leading from one house to the other – as if someone had been searching for something – but there were no dead bodies. Jake held his breath, hope sparking in his chest for the first time since he had seen the black smoke against the blue sky. The silence and stillness was still palpable but as Jake made his way through the settlement towards his house he saw it for what it was.

Abandoned.

The settlement had been abandoned, not eradicated. The cars were missing, pieces of equipment were gone and the houses left untouched by the fire were empty and generators shut off. Everyone had left before the Raiders arrived.

Jake skidded to a halt in front of the remains of his house. He wasn't surprised to find that it was one of those hit hardest by the destruction. The Raiders had probably made sure that it would be. Jake felt a sharp stab, mourning the inevitable loss of his things – the computers, hard drives, wires, micro chips, precious metals and other junk he had gathered over the years – but it was secondary.

The sound of footsteps made him look over his shoulder, not surprised to see Cougar and Aisha come up behind him. Mirage was a white ghost glimpsed behind another row of houses but Jake figured he could let her wander. There was no immediate danger and she probably needed to come to the same conclusion that the humans already had.

"They were gone long before the attack," Jake said somewhat unnecessarily, receiving a quick nod from Cougar in reply. Jake sucked in a deep breath, not having noticed that he was almost panting until then. "I need to check the basement."

Cougar, who knew what was inside, simply nodded and followed when Jake tried to navigate the jagged, burnt mess that was his former home. The Raiders might have broken through the basement door and found the plants but if they hadn't Jake needed to make sure that everything was still in working order.

His thoughts were spinning and he feebly tried to calm his beating heart. Jess and Beth could still
be alive. They hadn't died in the Raider attack. They were out there somewhere, hopefully safe. Jake could cling to that knowledge for now, briskly sifting through the charred remains of the house to reach the thick steel door leading down to the basement. It was one of the few solid structures in their home, built with concrete walls to protect the entrance and whatever they decided to store inside.

Jake almost laughed from relief when he ducked under a low-hanging beam and found the door intact; burnt and scratched, yes, but intact. He didn't stop to look at Cougar – or Aisha who had followed them inside the smoldering remains – before he freed his fingers from his gloves and set about unlocking the door, turning the right wheels with practiced ease despite his shaking hands.

"Do I even want to know what's in there?" Aisha asked from behind them. Cougar replied something in Spanish and Jake didn't even bother to try and figure out what he had said. He was too focused on cranking the last handle and pulling the heavy, shrieking door open.

The air that rushed to meet them was warm and slightly stale but Jake couldn't quite determine if it was because of the heaters or the fire that had burned above the basement. He pulled down his scarf and took a slow breath before turning to look at Aisha.

"You can either stay up here or follow us down." Jake knew that he probably couldn't keep her from it without getting into trouble with the Nomads. Not to mention that he was pretty certain that he couldn't take her in a fight anyway. "But if you do come with you can't tell anyone about it."

She frowned, clearly not sure what to make of that. She was holding her own gun – one of those the Nomads apparently had for protection – relaxed at her side, but despite her easy posture Jake could tell that she would be able to snap to attention faster than he could blink.

He didn't wait for her answer before he took the first step through the doorway and made his way down the creaky stairs. Cougar was right behind him and for the first time since he had started fearing for his family's life Jake could draw comfort from Cougar's presence. He had been far too wired to do that before, not wanting to calm down or be coddled. But now that he knew that Jess and Beth might still be alive it was easier to embrace the show of concern.

He did appreciate the effort after all and made sure to give Cougar a quick, thankful smile when they reached the bottom of the stairs. Cougar, unsurprisingly, didn't reply with more than a nod and small smile in return.

Jake couldn't help holding his breath when he flicked the light switch. It was unusual for it to be dark down there but Jake assumed that Jess had done so to save power. It was more important to keep the heating going and even if it was impossible to say when Jess had left the plants could survive at least a couple of days without the artificial sunlight.

Everything looked fine. The rows of green seemed thinner than before but since Jake had been gone for a month that was only expected. The reason he had left in the first place was because they couldn't seem to prevent the plants from dying and needed new ones; the fact that some had died in his absence was no shock.

"You-... these are plants. Fresh plants."

Jake hadn't thought that Aisha was capable of sounding so awestruck and he couldn't help grinning at her where she stood a couple of steps above him on the stairs. She was staring at the frail, struggling sprouts with both surprise and wonder in her eyes.

"Yeah, my sister and I have this little project where we're trying to grow vegetables and stuff like that, but it's not going so well," he replied.
The cold air was sweeping down from where Aisha had left the door open but Jake figured it was better that way, just to make sure to get the oxygen flowing again after the fire must have swallowed the majority of it. He walked up to the first row of benches, gently looking over the meager gathering of plants they had left.

"Everything is supposed to be dead," Aisha mumbled, siding up with Jake despite her obvious hesitation. It looked almost like she was afraid of killing them with her mere presence. "How is this even possible?"

"Lots and lots of imagination and creativity." Jake glanced up at Cougar, feeling a smile tug at the corner of his mouth. "And an overabundance of faith."

Cougar's smile seemed almost involuntary, as if he couldn't stop it even if he tried, and it looked happier than most expressions Jake had seen him make. Jake quite liked that.

He snapped back to attention at Cougar's nod, indicating the far corner of the basement. Jake automatically complied and felt a delighted laugh bubble out of him at the sight of the neat stack of things placed on one of the unused benches. Jess had apparently had time to move a couple of things from his room before she left. His backup computers were there, as well as his tools, hard drives and a couple of his boxes full of delicate materials and wires. She hadn't been able to take everything of course – Jake's room was a chaotic mess of things of varying size and weight – but she had taken the most important ones.

Well, save for his favored computer. Then again, she might have brought that with her and for once Jake had no intention of complaining about that. Jess must have deemed it safer since she couldn't have known that the basement would be left standing, but had hoped it would, judging on the small supply of electronics that she had stored there. It was thanks to her that anything had survived the fire.

"What do we do now?" Aisha's voice rang out, just as Jake moved towards the treasure pile in the corner. He didn't stop but shot her a quick glance over his shoulder.

"I need to find my family. They're obviously not here, either because they knew the Raiders were coming or because... well, I don't know. They left, anyway, with the rest of the settlement and I need to find them."

"Do you have any idea where they might be?" Aisha asked.

Jake had started to sift through the tools and gadgets Jess had managed to save, putting some in a pile that he wanted to bring.

He wasn't stupid. He knew they couldn't stay in the burned down settlement and he couldn't bring everything, but some things were needed if he wanted to keep bartering with his services. He would just have to prioritize. Tools trumped his hard drives even if he pocketed the smallest one, just because he knew that he had a backup of all the blueprints for the greenhouse machines on it. That was one thing he had no intention of losing if he could help it.

"There aren't many places where such a large group of people could go," he replied distractedly. It wasn't until Aisha started tapping her foot against the concrete floor that Jake realized that it wasn't actually much of an answer. "The Gallagher settlement."

Aisha raised a dubious eyebrow and even Cougar seemed to pause.

"We have a deal with them. We keep their generators up and running and they offer us some of their supplies. But there's also this clause that if we're ever in trouble – threatened by starvation or
Raiders – we can seek shelter there." Jake shrugged off the backpack he was wearing and started shoveling his tools into it. "So that's were Jess would lead them. They know what our settlement crest looks like and would let them in, especially if she told them that she's an Engineer."

Jake was tired of trying to tiptoe around the fact that he and Jess were Engineers. If Aisha hadn't betrayed them yet she probably wouldn't now either, and least of all to Max. And if she still did Cougar would probably not be adverse to showing what a bad idea that was.

"They have room for that many extra people?" Aisha asked.

Jake could only shrug.

"I've never been inside the walls so I don't know, but from what I've seen I'd say so, yeah. The Gallagher settlement is probably the biggest one within several miles." With some effort Jake managed to slip one of his backup laptops into the backpack as well. "They have several huge apartment buildings at their disposal so they can probably squeeze in a couple of more people."

Aisha didn't seem convinced but didn't argue either. Jake looked at her as he shouldered the backpack again, clearing his throat.

"Our deal was only for you to bring us here, to my settlement, and you have. You don't have to help us anymore," he said, knowing that he and Cougar could make the journey to the Gallagher district on foot if need be and still be there just before nightfall.

Aisha pursed her lips.

"Does Max know about this?" She gestured towards the plants.

"No." Jake shook his head. "He wanted me for other things so I don't think he knows what we're trying to do here. Or, well, he knows that Cougar and I broke into a seed bank but we never told him why," Jake amended.

A short silence reigned before Aisha's dry chuckle echoed inside the basement. She was shaking her head and Jake felt a slight sting of disappointment. It wouldn't be impossible to travel on their own but it would be less protected. Max's Raiders were still out there somewhere.

"We'll take you to the Gallagher settlement."

Jake couldn't help blinking in surprise at Aisha's words.

"What? Really?"

She nodded, her smile crooked and eyes sparkling with amusement.

"I would rather not see you stumble straight into Max's hands."

The fact that she managed to make it sound as if he needed supervision in order to survive was a bit interesting and might have caused a slight bump on his pride, but he could take it. He didn't have much dignity to begin with. The relief outweighed it anyway.

"But we should get going as soon as possible," Aisha continued, already turning towards the staircase. "So gather what you need and meet us at the gate."

"Yeah, will do." Jake smiled crookedly. "And Aisha?"

She paused on the second step, glancing over her shoulder, silently prompting him to go on with a
delicately raised eyebrow.

"Thanks."

Aisha scoffed, shaking her head softly before continuing to walk up the stairs.

"Don't thank me yet," she called back over her shoulder and while she didn't elaborate she didn't exactly have to either. Jake knew that they might still get caught by Max or find that they were wrong to head for the Gallagher settlement, but he felt grateful for the help she was willing to offer.

As Aisha's steps faded into silence Jake allowed himself a deep, relieved breath. Cougar was standing quietly at the other end of the room, his expression calm but attentive. Jake smiled, unable to hold it back.

"You ready to keep going?" he asked, already knowing what the answer would be.

Cougar gave a simple, firm nod before he – to Jake's slight surprise – held out a hand for Jake to take. Jake didn't hesitate for a second, walking up and slipping his hand into Cougar's.

"We will find them." Cougar squeezed softly – reassuringly.

It took some effort but Jake was able to swallow back the lump in his throat.

"Yeah, I know." He licked his lips. "Thank you. For sticking with me."

Cougar's huff was decidedly amused – as if he couldn't believe what an idiot Jake was for ever doubting that – but he said nothing. He just tugged gently, leading them towards the staircase, and Jake followed.

The smile that lingered on his lips was almost embarrassingly dorky.

The journey to the Gallagher district was silent to the point of it being oppressive. Jake hated it. His thoughts were spinning and he had to constantly keep himself from second-guessing the decision of where they were heading. If he was wrong – and he told himself that he wasn't – he had no idea where else to look.

There had been no visible tracks besides whatever monstrous vehicle Max had at his disposal so it had either been days since the settlement was abandoned or they had put enough effort into it to cover them, to prevent people from following. Too bad that included Jake and the Nomads.

Jake opted to walk next to the caravan the entire time, simply because his nervous energy had to be dispelled somehow. Mirage seemed reluctant to wander off despite how familiar she was with the area and Jake was secretly grateful for that fact.

The Nomads – people he knew fairly well by then considering how long he had been traveling with them – kept giving him worried and sympathetic glances that only made things worse. It reminded him of how low the odds were of him seeing his family again. As much as he tried to keep his hopes up it was difficult to ignore that if the Gallagher settlement denied them entrance
Jake's fellow Settlers were pretty much doomed. Settlers, unlike Nomads and Raiders, didn't have the resources or knowledge to survive outside of the protective walls they were so used to having. There were simply too many variables for Jake to feel anything but vaguely panicked.

Cougar remained in Jake's peripheral most of the time but as always made no attempts to start a conversation. Jake wasn't even sure if he wanted to talk. It might help distract him but he was far too keyed up to manage anything but rudimentary comments, if even that.

The silence was unsettling not only for Jake but no one seemed to know how to break it either. Aisha was the one who finally did, when the city had become a looming giant on the horizon.

She sidled up next to Jake and nodded towards the towering buildings.

"We will drop you off at the outer edges of the city. Bringing the sleds further than that will be difficult."

Jake nodded and forced a smile.

"It's more than I could have hoped for. Thanks."

Aisha gave him a thoughtful look and Jake got the distinct impression that she was measuring him somehow. Jake was fairly certain that he would come up wanting.

"The tracks left by Max's goons led in a different direction but be careful, alright?"

She didn't seem worried per se – Jake had a hard time believing that she cared about his or Cougar's well-being in any other capacity than how it related to annoying Max – but he welcomed the show of concern either way, nodding firmly. She had given them more than most people would and even if she and her fellow Nomads had done it for payment they had been surprisingly accommodating.

"I can't say for sure when you can claim your puppy," he said without prompting, knowing that it was probably the next thing she would bring up. "With the settlement destroyed it might take a while before there'll be another litter and... I'm not even sure where we'll be."

Rebuilding it was an option but it would take time and with the broken gate they would be less protected than usual. That was, of course, if Jake could even find where the people from his settlement had gone. He tried not to think further than the immediate future.

"I'm sure we'll think of something," she replied with a surprisingly nonchalant shrug. Jake didn't doubt for a second that it was a bad idea to owe a woman like Aisha anything but he decided to take the out he was given. He had other things to worry about.

"I know that this is none of my business," he found himself blurting out, curiosity getting the better of him, "but what exactly is your deal with Max?"

He had refrained from asking about it because her reaction had been so instantaneous when Cougar had revealed who was chasing them but now, when they would part ways within an hour at the most, he was daring enough to pursue it.

Aisha gave him a dry look, head held high and lips pressed into a thin line, before turning her gaze towards the city.

"That is definitely none of your business," she replied curtly, which wasn't all that surprising. "But trust me when I say that I want him dead. He has taken far too many lives to be allowed free
"Alright. I can settle for that." Jake was still curious but for once knew better than to pry.

"Just focus on staying alive, will you?" There was always a slightly patronizing edge to Aisha's voice whenever she spoke to him but Jake didn't have enough pride to actually get pissed about it.

"I'll do my best," he assured her with a big, dorky grin that wasn't entirely honest. It was difficult to smile when you might have lost your entire family.

Aisha gave him an exasperated eye-roll and without another word left as smoothly as she had approached, probably to forward the orders to the other Nomads. Jake watched her retreating back for a couple of seconds before searching for Mirage instead, catching sight of her where she trotted next to Cougar a couple of paces behind Jake. He offered Cougar a fleeting smile but left it at that.

Within another forty minutes they were just shy of the low wall surrounding the city and despite how anxious Jake was to keep going and reach the Gallagher district as soon as possible he took the time to say goodbye to the Nomads. The children in particular seemed sad to see him go and he offered bone-crushing hugs to anyone who wanted them, adults and kids alike. He hadn't thought that he would feel as attached to them as he did but perhaps it was because they had offered shelter and protection when he needed it the most. Jake knew to value kindness.

Aisha was one of those that Jake didn't even try to hug because he liked his internal organs where they were, but he did give her a firm handshake and a grin. She actually smiled back, however crookedly, before exchanging some rapid sentences in Spanish with Cougar. Jake knew only by the look on Cougar's face – the amusement and wide grin – that he had been mentioned somewhere in there but decided not to ask about it. Aisha had probably insulted Jake's ability to survive on his own and asked Cougar to look after him.

Jake felt a twinge in his chest when he waved goodbye to the Nomads, watching the caravan continue its journey across the white wasteland surrounding the city. Mirage had already pressed her nose against the snow and was searching for foreign scents. Jake lingered a couple of extra seconds, just watching her as she went back and forth, her white fur blending almost seamlessly with the snow. He barely managed to hold back a snorting laugh when Mirage sneezed and light, fluttering snow rose up in a cloud around her head.

After a deep, cleansing breath Jake gathered what little determination he had left and nodded to Cougar to show that he was ready to start walking.

The silence between them lingered, only amplified by the gloomy, towering buildings. The paranoia Jake felt whenever he walked through the slowly crumbling city hadn't eased and even if he had company – both who were much better at detecting threats than he was – a chill crawled down his spine. It always felt as if someone was watching him from the gaping windows.

Mirage seemed equally unsettled, her movements cautious, and she stopped every now and then to sniff the air or stare down connecting streets, as if she could sense something just out of view. Jake tried not to let it get to him.

Only Cougar seemed unaffected but since that was his standard expression no matter if he was actually freaking out or not Jake didn't trust it all that much.

The majority of the journey passed without complications but Jake couldn't help stopping when they reached a street he recognized. He wasn't sure if he would ever forget it, especially not when he could still see the bullet lodged in the wall a couple of feet to his right. He barely managed to
hold back the reflex to run his fingers over the small crater.

"It feels a bit weird, doesn't it?" Jake asked, throwing a glance in Cougar's direction.

It felt terrifyingly familiar to see Cougar stand there, assault rifle in hand and hat pulled down low enough that Jake had to strain to catch his gaze. It wasn't the same gun and Cougar's posture was distinctly different but Jake could still feel a remnant of that fear curl in his gut.

The idea of Cougar trying to shoot him now was preposterous but back then they had been nothing but strangers and Cougar had done what he thought was best for his mission. Jake had dodged it only through sheer dumb luck. Literally.

Things could have turned out so differently if that bullet had found its mark.

"This was where we met," Jake murmured, almost to himself.

He wasn't quite sure what that said about them that their first meeting had constituted of Cougar trying to shoot him but he was still glad that it had happened. Not only for Cougar's knowledge about the seed bank but for everything else too, like the warm glow in Jake's chest, the slight hitch in his breath whenever Cougar's skin touched his and the unconditional devotion Cougar offered.

So much had changed since he met Cougar and Jake found that he didn't want to change it.

"Cielito."

It could just have been Cougar wanting to catch Jake's attention but it was, simultaneously, a reminder of just how much all of this meant to Cougar as well. That word was the only thing Cougar needed to say to express emotions that no amount of poetry or superfluous adjectives could make justice. It was simple yet efficient and so unbelievably sincere – much like Cougar himself.

Jake shook off the gloom settling on his shoulders and smiled at Cougar.

"Yeah, let's keep going," Jake agreed, even though Cougar might not have outright said anything on the matter. There was no use lingering on the past and what could have happened – not when Jake was already rather pleased with how certain things had turned out. If only he could find Jess and Beth again he would be fine.

There was a lurking anxiousness about what Max might be up to since he didn't seem like the person who would give up this easily, but Jake decided to take one thing at a time.

His family came first.

It was difficult not to be wary as they came closer and closer to the imposing steel wall surrounding the Gallagher settlement. Jake had never seen it up close before but he knew that it was higher than the one they had at his home. These people had more resources and manpower and had been working on improving and strengthening the wall for years. It looked near impenetrable.

Jake, Cougar and Mirage had barely appeared on the wide street where the gate was located before there was detectable movement on top of the wall. Mirage bristled and Jake ran a calming hand through her fur.

"Yeah, I know, girl. They've seen us," he mumbled, trying his best to sound comforting.

He was nervous though, even if he assumed that it was a good sign that the guards hadn't shot
them on sight. With the right kind of rifle and skill it was definitely possible considering what
obvious targets they made on the empty street.

Cougar's stiff posture was enough to show how much he disliked the situation.

Jake just kept walking however, stopping only when a sharply barked order from above told him
to do so. He was still several feet away from the gate but obediently stopped before holding his
hands out to show that he was unarmed. The fact that Cougar was probably only clutching his gun
tighter, well, that was another thing entirely.

"We're looking for sanctuary," Jake called back raising his hands a little higher, knowing what
would come next.

"Which settlement are you from?"

Jake could tell that there were at least three guards but only one seemed to be doing the talking. It
was quite difficult to distinguish any distinct features however with how high the wall was and the
limitations of Jake's eyesight.

"The Lancaster settlement." Jake tugged off his mitten on his right hand and pulled down his
sleeve, showing the tattoo on the inside of his wrist.

He could see one of the guards bring out binoculars to confirm that it was the right one, nodding
to his fellow guards soon enough. Jake swallowed when the guards started speaking to each other,
their voices far too low for Jake to hear. He shot Cougar a quick look, getting a somewhat tense
one in return. Cougar appeared deceptively at ease at first glance but Jake could tell that he was
everything but. Cougar didn't like being out in the open where practically nothing could stop the
guards from shooting them and while Jake understood that – he was right there with him – he still
had to try. If Jess and Beth had gone to the Gallagher settlement Jake needed to know.

Jake visibly jumped at the sudden shout from atop the wall.

"Open the gate!"

His heart was thundering, both from surprise and anxious anticipation. It only took a couple of
seconds before the gigantic gate started moving, metal groaning as the two sections slid wider
apart, opening a narrow gap. Jake barely dared to breathe but knew better than to rush forward
and attempt to get inside without express approval.

Jake could feel Cougar's shoulder brush against his own, just briefly – as if Cougar only wanted
him to be aware of where he was – while Mirage growled low in her throat, clearly not willing to
blindly trust whoever would come outside to meet them.

The man who did held himself with confidence and a sense of authority that Jake knew better than
to challenge, if only because he and Cougar were quite literally at this man's mercy. Three more
followed behind the first man, all of them armed, and Jake had to fight his instinct to recoil. He
had never liked being at a disadvantage.

"What about the other one?" the man asked, his voice firm and gaze sharp. His face was
weathered but it was difficult to say how old he was from that alone, except probably older than
both Jake and Cougar.

"What?" Jake had not expected that to be the first thing out of the man's mouth.

There was a slight huff, as if Jake was being unintentionally funny somehow, before the man in
charge nodded towards Cougar.
"Your tattoo we've seen – and you're free to pass –, but what about his?"

Ice settled in Jake's gut. They couldn't show Cougar's tattoo because he didn't have one. They would only see the burn on the inside of Cougar's wrist and probably shoot him on the spot. For all intents and purposes Cougar seemed to be a Raider but he wasn't. Not anymore.

Jake opened his mouth to reply but he couldn't think of anything that would suffice.

He flinched when Cougar nudged his side.

"Go, Jake."

"What? No!" Jake hissed under his breath, allowing himself a quick, angry glance in Cougar's direction. "I'm not leaving you here."

"But your famil-"

"Shut up!" Jake interrupted, obviously forcefully enough that Cougar couldn't help looking surprised. Jake swallowed and focused back on the Gallagher Settlers.

"He's with me."

The leader looked vaguely amused.

"I'm afraid that's not quite good enough."

Jake clenched his hands and was just about to open his mouth to argue his point when a fifth person slipped out from the opening in the gate. Jake knew that flash of blonde hair and he choked on his words with an ugly, pained sound. Jess hastily pushed her way past the surprised and disgruntled guards but she could obviously not care less.

"Jake!"

Somehow he got his feet moving. Somehow he remembered how to raise his arms and before he had time to answer she flew into his embrace, nearly knocking the breath out of him. He didn't care. He squeezed her as hard as he dared, burrowing his face against her neck and lifting her clear off the ground, unable to let go. She hugged back just as hard, her voice unstable as she whispered curses and declarations of love, alternating between the two as she saw fit.

Jake could barely breathe through the relief that suddenly slammed into him, making his knees weak. They were okay. If Jess was okay then Beth was okay and that meant that probably everyone else was as well. They were fine.

It was difficult to get a hold of himself, even just enough to lower Jess back onto the ground so that he could look at her smiling face. There were hints of worry underneath – harsh, pained lines on her face – but she looked happy. She was alright.

He swallowed, pressing a kiss to her forehead before pulling her in for another hug. He just couldn't help the reflex. He wanted to keep hugging her until his fluttering heartbeat settled and his brain could catch up and confirm that she was alive. His sister was fine.

"I was so afraid..." he whispered, his words barely above a cracked croak.

She hushed him softly before pulling back enough to frame his face with her hands. Her thumb brushed against his cheekbone and she was looking at him as if she just couldn't get enough – as if she had to stare her fill to make sure that he was actually there, safe and sound.
"That's my line, you idiot. You've been gone for over a month."

Jake wanted to point out that he had found their settlement burned and abandoned but he knew that now wasn't the time. Jess probably didn't even know about it considering that she had left before the attack. He would have to explain it later, when they weren't standing just outside the gates to the Gallagher settlement with four guards giving them various looks of amusement and impatience.

The leader seemed to lean towards the former, his posture slightly more relaxed than before.

To Jake's surprise Jess gave Cougar a soft smile and nod before she turned towards the guards, her expression morphing back into the stern one she often adopted when she was about to deliver orders that few dared to question. She still stood close enough to Jake that he could twine their fingers together and she let him, giving his hand a reassuring squeeze.

"These two are from my settlement." There was no waver to her voice as she said it; not even Jake could hear the lie she obviously told. But, then again, maybe it wasn't one – not anymore. If Jake had anything to say on the matter Cougar definitely belonged with them.

"Are they now?"

"Yes, they are. Do you have a problem with that, Clay?" There was an unmistakable teasing edge to his sister's voice that Jake wasn't entirely sure how to interpret but he couldn't deny that he appreciated how it seemed to be in their favor.

The man – Clay, apparently – scoffed before shaking his head.

"They will be your responsibility, like the rest of them." Despite the warning words the tone was calm, almost friendly. Jake had no idea if he liked Clay or not but he could settle for tolerating the man for now. As long as he let Jake, Cougar and Mirage inside so that Jake could find and hug his niece Jake could tolerate a lot.

"I know. They will behave," Jess assured, but not without a sharp glare in both Jake's and Cougar's direction. Jake nodded softly to show that he had understood, knowing that Cougar was probably doing the same.

"Well then," Clay drawled, nodding for the other guards to head back inside. "Welcome to the Gallagher settlement, gentlemen."

Jake allowed himself a deep, relieved breath, the tension pouring out of him as he clutched Jess' hand. His knees almost buckled from exhaustion when he could finally let go of the anxiety and panic, knowing that all of them were safe. He didn't know for how long but he choose to cling to what he had.

The fact that Cougar's hand brushed against his back as they made their way towards the gate – a brief touch of support and gentleness – only served to relax Jake further.

They were safe for now.
No, I wouldn't kill off Jake's entire family, just like I wouldn't kill off Mirage. Maybe that's cowardly of me but I happen to like my heart more or less intact, thank you very much.

Sometimes I can't help wondering if this is still interesting to all of you because, man, I barely even remember where this all started out and I'm the one writing it. This whole project became a lot more epic than I imagined and I know it will pass 100 000 words before I'm done. Epic. Oh yeah.

CarpeDentum is my awesome and tireless beta (seriously, the amount of pressure I have put on this poor woman).
To be able to hold Beth in his arms again was a bit like finally being able to breathe properly. Biologically he was her uncle but in every other aspect he might as well have been her father. There was nothing he wouldn't do to keep her safe and happy and having been away from her for so long – without knowing how she was doing – had been excruciating. He hadn't even known how much until he saw her again.

The relief was almost indescribable.

He hadn't taken many steps inside the Gallagher settlement before he heard her delighted, high-pitched squeal and caught sight of her running towards him. Jake wasn't sure if he consciously went to his knees or if they buckled on their own accord, but he didn't care. Beth almost knocked him over when she threw herself at him, her arms wrapping around his neck and squeezing with a desperation that was so innocent and childlike that Jake had to hold back a whimper. Her tiny shoulders were shaking under his hand and he held her as tightly as he dared, cradling her close as she curled up in his lap.

She didn't say anything but her hiccupping sobs were enough to break his heart.

He gently hushed her, trying to soothe away the tears, but it was rather ineffective when he could barely hold back his own. God how he had missed her.

Jake ignored everything else. He wasn't even curious about what the Gallagher settlement looked like on the inside or what the people around him would think. All of that paled in comparison to the feeling of Beth's warmth and the smell of her skin. It felt so good to hold her again that Jake had to take a couple of extra seconds to just breathe through the feeling of belonging and purpose.

Jake still pulled back enough to press a kiss against her cheek, mumbling softly against her skin.

"I've missed you, sweetheart."

Beth made a small keening sound and nodded, which Jake decided to interpret as the feeling being mutual. He hugged her tighter, relishing in having her close. It was only distantly that he heard Clay order Cougar to hand over his assault rifle and other weapons, understandably not keen to have an armed stranger inside their settlement. Jake assumed that Cougar complied – however reluctantly – and when they turned to search him Jake clumsily pulled out the handgun he had
before handing it over without a word or letting go of Beth. There was no use trying to keep it since he didn't want the gun in the first place. Once that was taken care of the guards were ordered to return to their duties.

Jake didn't move until Beth had stopped shaking and then only to rise to his feet, still with Beth in his arms. Her legs wrapped around his waist, her knees bumping into his backpack, and despite how his limbs were trembling with exhaustion he held on. Beth kept her face pressed against his neck while he turned to look at Jess. His sister was smiling, achingly, and her eyes were shiny with unshed tears. It took some effort but Jake was able to smile back.

Cougar was standing far away enough to offer a semblance of privacy but still managed to place himself in Clay's way, as if to prevent whatever threat he might pose to Jake and his family. Cougar didn't even seem entirely aware of it himself and while he was unarmed and should have come across as non-threatening his posture said otherwise. Amusingly enough Cougar seemed to be mirrored by Mirage, who kept a wary eye on Clay.

"Jess, we need to talk." As much as Jake wanted to stay in his bubble of blissful ignorance he knew that they didn't have time for that. Max was most likely on the move and she had to be filled in on what had happened to their settlement.

For a brief second it looked like Jess wanted to object – possibly because she saw how tired Jake was – but in the end she nodded before turning to Clay.

"Can we borrow the meeting room?"

"On the condition that I get to be there," was the reply – one that offered no room for negotiation.

Jake could tell that Jess didn't appreciate being given what was essentially an order, but considering that they were leeching off of the other settlement there was a limit to how many demands they could expect to have fulfilled. Not to mention that Jake understood if they wanted to know what was going on right under their noses.

"Fine," Jess replied tightly, her smile sharp and decidedly false. If anything Clay seemed amused by the show of defiance.

Jake slowly bent down and regretfully started unlatching the grip Beth had on him. She was reluctant to let him go but with some coaxing he was able to put her back on the ground and could look down at her pouting face.

"Don't be like that," he said, rubbing the last remnant of tears from her cheeks. "I need you to do me a favor, okay? Can you make sure that Mirage gets some food and water? And somewhere to rest?"

An eight-year-old wasn't supposed to be able to give such a deadpan, unimpressed look as Beth leveled him with in that moment, clearly aware of how he was trying to distract her with a menial task so that the grownups could talk.

"Yeah, I know. It's lame," he mumbled apologetically before pressing a kiss to her forehead. "But please, do this for me?"

Beth sighed and rolled her eyes – which Jake was also fairly certain an eight-year-old shouldn't be doing – before she nodded. Jake grinned and earned himself a smile in return.

"Brenda can help you with that," Jess said, nodding encouragingly. "You know the way so Mirage will follow you."
Jess placed her hands on Beth's shoulders to gently steer her towards the big, white dog, but Beth twisted away from the grip and took the steps needed to reach Cougar instead. Without a word she wrapped her arms around his waist, hugging him tightly.

No one seemed more surprised – or terrified – by the embrace than Cougar.

The look on Cougar's face was most easily described as panicked confusion, at least the first second or two before he managed to school it again. Cougar seemed to have no idea what to do about the tiny girl hugging his middle and stood frozen in place; as if he was afraid of accidentally hurting her just by moving.

"Thank you for bringing him back."

Cougar seemed to relax, if only just a fraction, and the soft, gentle smile he gave her made Jake forget how to breathe. There was something so incredibly innocent about it, as if Cougar for a brief second forgot about the suffering around them just to be able to smile at Beth like that – like nothing else mattered but her.

Jake wondered if that was how Cougar would smile at his own children, if he ever had any.

"You're welcome." Cougar apparently dared to place his hand on top of Beth's head, continuing to smile as Beth peered up at him.

"I'm glad you're back too," Beth announced somewhat unexpectedly and Jake was pretty sure that he wasn't just imagining the way Cougar flinched. Not in a bad way necessarily – he looked stunned, sure, but it was awe rather than fear or discomfort.

Cougar probably hadn't expected Beth to remember him, much less care about his well-being.

Beth gave Cougar's waist another quick squeeze before she obediently walked up to Mirage and started leading her away. She looked so small next to the gigantic dog and kept throwing glances back at Jake and her mother, but Jake knew that she would be fine. Jess would have protested if it had been unwise to send Beth off on her own.

Cougar still looked somewhat dazed and Jake couldn't help inching close enough to lean in and whisper fondly in his ear.

"You are doomed, Coug. Totally doomed."

The look Jake received was dry but not entirely unamused. Jake nudged Cougar with his elbow.

"Hey, it's not my fault that you're so susceptible to my niece's charm. She's the one who's got you all mesmerized."

Jake's heart stuttered when Cougar returned the favor and leaned closer, his breath a soft whisper against Jake's ear.

"Runs in the family."

It was virtually impossible to hold back the goofy, embarrassed smile that suddenly burst on Jake's face and the funny look that Jess gave him only made things worse. Jake could feel himself blush, the tips of his ears burning, while Cougar, the bastard, looked unmistakably smug.

"This way," Clay declared while gesturing towards one of the roads leading deeper into the settlement. He seemed either unaware of or entirely uninterested in the proceedings except from the much needed conversation that was soon to take place.
Jess was less discreet, her eyes narrowing suspiciously as she moved to follow Clay, barely taking her eyes off Jake. That was bad. Not that Jake had anything to hide – he had no intention of lying about what he and Cougar shared – but now was clearly not the time to drop that kind of bomb on his sister. They had more important matters to deal with first.

So Jake said nothing and pretended that he didn't notice his sister's inquisitive looks, instead taking the opportunity to glance around.

Like he had suspected the Gallagher settlement was much larger than his own and while it had been built to include several of the tall apartment buildings found within the city there was still a lot of open space between them. People could pass easily on the snow covered street and further down, round another corner, Jake was fairly certain that he could hint what looked to be a market of some sort. The settlement had to be very big if it required a separate place for its inhabitants to exchange wares.

The amount of activity on the street further confirmed that. Jake had never before seen so many people in one place and he knew that they weren't even at the centre of things; there would be even more the closer to the core of the settlement they got.

He tried to see as much as possible but there were limitations to both his attention-span and what their route allowed. The buildings looked maintained here, as opposed to those left forgotten and crumbling outside the walls, but Jake wasn't sure if he actually liked all the sharp steel and hard concrete. It offered shelter and could house a lot of people, that much as obvious, but it was all grey and muted – bare and impersonal.

Still, the people were colorful and seemed to be fairing rather well, if Jake was to be honest. There were still the same worn lines on their faces and a wariness in their eyes that Jake had found in pretty much anyone living in their harsh world, but the children ran laughing along the street and people stopped to talk to their neighbors. Jake could admit that they didn't quite have that in his settlement. They got by, sure, but they didn't thrive in the same way as the Gallagher settlement seemed to be doing. Most of the time they had to focus on their survival and there was little room for social events or the simple act of spending time with people just because you wanted to.

The people here could share the load in a way you couldn't in a smaller settlement.

The further they got the more Jake wanted to see but he knew he would have to wait before he could explore; if he would be allowed to do so at all. His curiosity was stirring but he could understand if the Gallagher Settlers wanted to keep them under surveillance. It had to be unnerving to have let in a group of strangers into their midst, even if you had the numeric advantage.

Clay led them to what seemed to be the very centre of the settlement, where a big, impressive stone building resided. A wide set of stairs lead up to the arched doors, white pillars holding up the protruding roof, and while it was worn by the elements it was still a sight to behold. Impractical, no doubt, with all that cold, white stone, but admittedly important-looking.

"It's the town hall," Jess explained helpfully as they started ascending the many steps leading up to the building. "The Gallagher settlement is run by a council and they hold most of their meetings and gatherings here."

Since Clay didn't seem to react Jake assumed that the information Jess was sharing wasn't secret or sensitive somehow.

"How many people live here?" he asked, not able to curb his curiosity.
"Around five hundred," Jess replied with a smile – one that only grew bigger at Jake's wide-eyed stare.

"What? Really?" He couldn't help that his voice was pitched a bit higher than usual, showing his disbelief.

"Really," Clay drawled while throwing them a glance over his shoulder. "You of all people should know that we wouldn't need so many generators unless we also had lots of space to maintain."

Those words made Jake hesitate and he shot Jess a concerned look. She nodded with a slight grimace, giving Jake all the confirmation he needed. Clay knew what they were, probably because Jess had been forced to tell him.

"Clay is one of six members on the council. His main job is security," Jess continued, her voice dry and laced with something Jake couldn't quite name but it sounded amused and taunting at the same time. "Which is why he's so commendably and annoyingly anal about rules and regulations."

"You certainly have a way with words," Clay replied, and while Jake might not have a clear look on the man's face he could hear the smile in his voice.

"Not to mention unbelievably nosy," Jess finished. Her smirk as she swept past Clay – who was holding the heavy doors leading into the town hall open – was crooked but teasing, which seemed to be very appreciated judging on the way Clay's gaze lingered on her.

Holy shit.

Was his sister flirting? With Clay?

Jake almost stumbled at the thought, grateful for how Cougar gently nudged him through the doorway.

"Jess!" Jake hissed under his breath, catching up to his sister. "How long have you been here exactly?"

It really wasn't any of Jake's business what – or who – Jess decided to do but he couldn't help being slightly alarmed. Jess gave him a deadpan look, as if she could read his thoughts which, yeah, she was known to do sometimes.

"Not that long," she replied curtly, her voice echoing slightly in the big, polished room they found themselves in. It was almost untouched by the elements with its high stone pillar and shiny stone floor. "Three days, more correctly."

Which would explain why Jess knew so many things about the Gallagher settlement. Someone had probably told her, especially if she served as the representative from their settlement.

Jake wanted to ask more but Clay's calm baritone directed them further into the building and Jake – wisely, judging on the look on his sister's face – chose not to push it. At least not while they were in semi-public.

There seemed to be few people within the actual building until Clay led them into a wide, heated room with several worn but functional desks, littered with papers and one battered, humming computer. The five people within the room all looked up but it was only one who smiled – a dark-skinned woman with a swelling belly.
"Nice to see you again, Jessica." Her voice was unhurried and calm and while Jake and Cougar were clearly strangers she didn't seem alarmed or surprised. It wasn't her being gullible though – Jake could see intelligence and firmness in her gaze – but rather a kind of certainty that they wouldn't be stupid enough to try anything. The only one who was noticeably armed was Clay, after all.

Jess nodded towards the woman with a warm smile but Clay was the one who spoke up.

"We need to borrow the meeting room for a moment, if that's alright, Jolene?"

"Certainly," Jolene replied, walking closer with some difficulty, her pregnant belly hindering her movements somewhat. "Am I to assume that this is your wayward brother? There is a rather striking resemblance."

Jess laughed – bright and unconcerned in a way Jake hadn't heard in a long time – before she nodded.

"Jolene, meet my baby brother Jake Jensen. Jake, this is Jolene Porteous, another member of the council."

It actually took Jake by surprise to hear his own last name. Most of the time he even forgot that he had one because his settlement was so small that they weren't necessary. People mostly just made sure to name their kids different things and that was it, but he could understand if it was useful in a settlement as big as this one.

Jolene smiled and nodded and in lack of any better ideas Jake returned the greeting.

"And this here is Cougar," Jess continued, gesturing towards Cougar who was standing surprisingly close to Jake – something not even Jake himself had noticed up until then.

"Just Cougar?" Jolene asked, somewhat curiously but without any kind of judgment. Cougar nodded in confirmation, tipping his hat.

"Just Cougar."

"Nice to meet you both." Jolene's smile was warm and welcoming but there was steel in her eyes and Jake had no problem understanding why his sister seemed to appreciate her company. They probably had a lot in common. "The meeting room is over there."

The other people in the room said nothing while Clay herded them in the direction where Jolene had pointed. Inside was a long table with worn chairs placed along its sides, dull, white walls and what had probably been a rather impressive projection system at some point but now seemed to be barely working. The Gallagher settlement had no own Engineers to fix it, after all. Using machines and electronics was relatively easy to learn – like the computer standing out in the main office – but to repair and maintain them was a different story entirely.

So Jake couldn't help that he was automatically drawn to the tiny black box standing on the middle of the table, but before he had time to actually inspect it Jess slapped his hands away with a disapproving frown.

"Not now, Jacob," she chastised and he momentarily debated whether pouting would be a good idea or not. "You had something you wanted to tell me?"

Right.

Clay closed the door behind them and Jake took a seat on one of the chairs after letting his
backpack slip to the floor. He felt almost weightless without it, having grown used to the constant pressure on his back. The room was much warmer than the outside air, to the point that it was almost uncomfortable, so he pulled off his cap and gloves as well.

The others seemed to follow his example, Cougar letting his hand brush briefly against Jake's shoulder before he took a seat next to him. Clay opted to remain a couple of feet away from the rest of them, either to avoid imposing or because it would give him a clearer shot if they tried anything.

"I... there's actually no easy way to say this," Jake began hesitantly, untucking his scarf before slowly removing it. Jess' gaze was hard and he could tell that she was bracing herself for what was to come next. Her hands were tightly clenched in her lap but only Jake, who sat right next to her, could see it. "The good news is that the seed bank was real. Is real. It's all there – everything we could possibly need."

The breath she let out was close to a gasp; just a tiny display of how earth-shattering those words were. She sobered up quickly however, back straightening.

"And the bad news?"

Jake swallowed, staring down at the scratched tabletop for a second before looking up at Jess. It was probably better to just get it over with. They would have to talk in more detail later – when Jake could explain more about the vault and how he wanted Cougar to be allowed to stay with them – but for now, when Clay was there watching, he would settle for what was most important.

"The settlement is... almost burned to the ground."

Jess' spine was so stiff that Jake thought it might break at the smallest movement. She didn't seem surprised though, only grimly determined with her jaws tightly clenched and eyes flashing.

"We thought that might happen," she replied eventually, tone disturbingly flat. "We left because we could tell that something was coming. We had been waiting for the Raiders for a while by then – you both said they might come back – and were diligent about scouting the surrounding area." She looked down at her white-knuckled fists. "Three days ago one of your silly transmitters went off."

She smiled at him, pained yet somehow proud. Jess had always thought that Jake's tiny gadgets were fairly useless but hadn't stopped him from putting up motion sensors in the woods and plains surrounding their settlement. Jake had mostly done it as an experiment to see if he could track animals for them to hunt but the security aspect had been a part of it too. If anything moved close to the transmitters they would send off a signal to Jake's laptop with approximate measurements, the speed of the object and how long it might take before it reached them.

"We couldn't tell what it was except that it was big – bigger and heavier than any Nomad sled – and it was closing in fast. We had less than a day, but we had already packed and prepared the cars, just in case. So after some deliberation we left for the Gallagher settlement."

Jake knew that couldn't have been easy. Most Settlers would rather die in their settlement than leave it, even if they knew that a threat was approaching. He reached out, unlatching Jess' hands to take one of them in his instead.

"You made the right choice. You would have died if you had stayed," Jake reassured her, glancing towards Clay just to make sure that he was listening to what he was going to say next. "I don't know what they brought but it tore through the gate as if it was nothing."
Jess looked up in alarm.

"What?" she asked in disbelief. Their wall might not be as strong as the one here but it was far from weak.

"Your guess is as good as mine, but it was quite literally blown apart." Jake squeezed her hand. "And once they got inside they burned most of the houses, but the basement is still intact. I checked it over and everything was fine when we left."

She seemed to understand that he meant both the plants, machines and the things from his room that she had stored there. He smiled at her, even if it felt tight around the edges.

"Where are the Raiders now?" Clay asked. Jake could tell that he was everything but pleased by what he had heard and Jake couldn't blame him. Housing Jake and his fellow settlers had suddenly become a much bigger threat than the Gallagher Settlers had been made to believe.

"We don't know. Their tracks didn't seem to lead in this direction but they do know of your settlement. They might come here eventually." Jake cleared his throat. "I'm really sorry about this. I don't know how much Jess has told you but I was targeted by this insane dude who-"

Jake fell silent when he felt Cougar's hand land on his shoulder, making some of the tension in him ease. He took a deep breath before turning to face him.

"I will tell Clay. You talk to your sister." Cougar's voice was low enough that only Jake could hear it, and despite the lack of a question it was still more of an offer than an order; an out for Jake if he didn't want to drag it all up again.

Maybe he was a bit of a coward but Jake would rather explain about the vault to his sister than inform Clay about the threat that might be coming their way. Cougar actually knew more about Max than Jake did anyway, so it only made sense.

"Yeah, thanks," Jake mumbled in reply and kept himself from leaning in for a kiss only because it would be rather inconsiderate towards his sister to do so before he had given her a fair warning. Cougar seemed to be of the same opinion since all he did was give Jake's shoulder a squeeze before he rose from his chair and headed over to Clay.

Jake couldn't help that his gaze lingered on Cougar, even when he started talking to Clay in too low a voice for Jake to overhear. Cougar nodded towards the door and after a moment of deliberation Clay seemed to agree, rising as well.

Jake wanted to smile, knowing that Cougar had probably suggested they step outside for their conversation, just so that Jake and Jess could get some privacy. He made sure to smile when Cougar threw one final glance in his direction, receiving a tip of Cougar's hat in reply.

"He follows you like a shadow."

"Huh?" Jake snapped back to attention, looking a bit wide-eyed at his sister.

"Cougar. You obviously don't notice – maybe he doesn't either – but he follows you like a shadow." Jess didn't sound concerned or judging but there was a slight crease between her eyebrows, as if she was trying to figure them out. "He's never more than a couple of steps away from you if he can help it. Well, until now, at least," she added with a slight twist of her mouth.

Jake swallowed, scratching the back of his neck a little awkwardly.

"I haven't asked him to-"
"No, I know, Jake. He does it instinctively." She squeezed his hand that she was still holding, patting it gently. "But you must understand that it leaves me with a couple of questions I'd like answered, because last time I saw the two of you he was polite but distant and now it looks like he would walk through hell to protect you."

It was just an expression to most people to talk about hell – one that probably remained from the time when religion wasn't as rare as it was today – but it meant more than that to Jake; especially when Cougar was involved. He couldn't deny that the thought of Jess being right caused a stir of warmth in his chest.

Jake took a deep breath and met his sister's gaze with a gentle but slightly worried smile.

"Where do you want me to begin?"

"How about from the start?" she suggested softly.

He nodded slowly, gathered up his courage and then told her everything.

Jess took it surprisingly well. Like the awesome sister that she was she was more upset with Max and his dirty schemes than the fact that Jake and Cougar might be getting a bit more intimate than a Settler and ex-Raider should. She was spitting curses at the end of Jake's tale and was pacing back and forth in the meeting room while proclaiming just how insane someone had to be to want an EMP.

Jake could only watch her with a tender smile playing on his lips.

*God* how he had missed her.

After that it had been too late to do much exploring, the night having fallen during his and Jess' conversation. So Jake was escorted by Jess to the tall building those from the Lancaster settlement had been housed in. She explained that they had a couple of floors at their disposal and that Jake would be sharing a small but functional apartment with her and Beth.

Mirage and the other dogs were curled up in the snow in front of the building, for once forced to wear leashes that prevented them from trotting around like they usually would. It tore at Jake's heart because he knew that they had to hate it, but this wasn't their settlement and there was a great risk that the dogs would attack one of the Gallagher Settlers if they were provoked – unintentionally or otherwise. It was for the best to restrain them, simple as that.

Jake still stopped long enough to offer them all some ear rubs and pats – especially Mirage, who rose to her feet as soon as Jake approached. She must have been waiting anxiously for him to return and he made sure to give her enough time to confirm that he was in no worse shape than she had left him.

A part of him also lingered because he had yet to see Cougar again. He seemed to have gone off somewhere with Clay and Jake couldn't help being worried. It was only Jess' word that had allowed Cougar to enter the settlement in the first place and in order to explain the situation Cougar would have to mention his previous affiliation with the Raiders. Jake had no idea how that
would go over with Clay.

Despite his wish to search for Cougar Jake allowed Jess to shoo him into the apartment they would share, mostly because she seemed to feel a rather expected urge to coddle and feed him. Jake had actually forgotten when he last ate something.

The apartment was relatively bare but warm and he was given a mattress on the living room floor to sleep on, which was more than Jake had hoped for. What Jake appreciated the most however was the opportunity to wash away the remaining grime from his travels and trim the rather heavy beard he was sporting at that point. It wasn't things necessary for his survival but it made him feel invigorated all the same.

Beth was delighted to have him back and barely let him out of her sight, curling up in his lap as soon as the opportunity was given and remained there until she fell asleep. Jake let her stay, one arm wrapped around her tiny body and the other typing – with some admitted difficulty – on his laptop. Like he had suspected Jess had brought it with her and Jake was very happy to be reunited with it.

Jake still hadn't heard from Cougar by the time he and Jess gently put Beth to bed in the only other room in the apartment save for the bathroom and joint kitchen and living room. It was obviously where Jess and Beth had been sleeping since they arrived.

The others would no doubt want to see Jake in the morning – they probably knew that he had returned, either because they saw him enter the building or because Beth had told them – but they seemed kind enough to give him one evening to settle in and calm down before they came knocking on the door. Jake was grateful for it.

When he wished Jess goodnight he couldn't help asking where Cougar would be sleeping. Jake's skin was itching and the worry was gnawing on him, making him restless and fidgety. They might have had their ups and downs but Jake wasn't comfortable being away from Cougar, just as little liked being separated from Jess and Beth.

Jess seemed to understand as much and explained that Cougar would probably be put in one of the smaller apartments two floors down. She couldn't say exactly which one though and Jake had to swallow down his disappointment. He wanted to see Cougar. But there wasn't much to do about that when Jake didn't even know where to find him, so he went to bed instead.

It probably shouldn't have surprised him that he couldn't fall asleep.

It felt weird to not have Cougar there next to him and Jake kept twisting and turning, trying and failing to find a comfortable position. The fact that the room was warm was a blessing he hadn't felt in a month's time but that seemed unimportant when he couldn't hear Cougar's breaths next to his ear or feel their tangled legs under the blankets. He could probably have convinced himself to fall asleep eventually out of sheer stubbornness, but he found that he didn't want to.

He wanted Cougar.

Jake climbed up from his mattress and shoved his feet into his boots – the ones Cougar had stolen for him at Max's base – and didn't even bother to lace them before he was heading towards the door. It opened soundlessly and it was easy to slip out into the dark, quiet hallway without alerting either Jess or Beth.

It was colder outside of the apartment but since he was wearing pants and a long sleeved shirt – as most had a habit of doing even when they were sleeping – the chill wasn't enough to make him turn around. His footsteps echoed hollowly in the stairwell as he headed downwards, soon
pushing open the door leading to the floor where Cougar, at least according to Jess, should be. If he had even returned, but considering that it was in the middle of the night Jake truly hoped so.

He hesitated as he looked down the corridor he found himself in. The doors were identical in the dark and since everyone was sleeping he couldn't very well go knocking on each one until he eventually found Cougar.

Maybe he should have planned this a bit better.

Jake weighted from one foot to the other, debating going back to his bed and sleep no matter how much he was missing Cougar. He could probably do it, with some work. It was definitely the wisest decision but Jake couldn't stop his feet from moving forward, walking along the corridor with hesitant steps, as if he would somehow be able to determine which door was Cougar's if he passed it.

He hadn't even reached the end of the hallway before he heard one of the doors he had walked by open. Jake held his breath and turned around, feeling his heart skip a beat when he saw Cougar in the doorway. He gave Jake a slightly reproachful but fond look.

Jake grinned helplessly, knowing that Cougar had probably heard his footsteps, nothing else, but it still felt significant somehow. As if maybe Cougar had been waiting for Jake to show up.

"Can't sleep either?" Jake asked, voice hushed in the cold, barren hallway.

Cougar huffed before shaking his head, his smile crooked. It looked like he had had time to clean up as well and was dressed similarly to Jake, for once not wearing his hat.

Jake wasn't quite sure what to do or say so he was grateful when Cougar just held out his hand in a wordless offer. Despite his urgency Jake didn't hurry as he walked up and slipped his hand into Cougar's, shivering at the feel of warm skin against his own. Jake followed easily when Cougar pulled him into the small apartment and was barely even aware of the door closing behind them.

He just couldn't stop staring at Cougar.

"Hi," Jake offered lamely.

Cougar rolled his eyes in reply before leaning in for a kiss. Jake complied happily, letting out a pleased sigh against Cougar's lips.

At once he seemed able to relax, the tension easing and leaving him exhausted. Jess and Beth were fine, the rest of Jake's fellow settlers were fine, Cougar was fine and Jake, well, he was still shaken and more than a little frightened but he would be fine too. He could finally stop worrying, at least for the moment.

The kiss came to a slow end but Jake lingered close, breathing in Cougar's scent and the stillness in the dark apartment. Cougar's hand wandered into Jake's hair, his thumb rubbing just behind Jake's ear, making him groan appreciatively.

"You should sleep," Cougar murmured, gently steering Jake to what he assumed had to be a bed of some sort. Jake didn't complain. There was something awfully wonderful about being pampered by Cougar. Jake knew how to take care of himself, sure, but every once in a while it was nice to have someone do that for him.

"Did everything go well with Clay?" Jake felt a need to ask considering that it couldn't have been a very fun conversation. The fact that he could barely keep his eyes open and was being pushed down onto a firm but comfortable mattress, well, that left no guarantees that he would be able to
understand the answer he was given.

"Tomorrow," Cougar replied firmly as he tugged Jake's boots off. Jake's glasses were plucked from his nose as well. "Now you rest."

Jake couldn't help the sleepy, dorky grin spreading on his lips as he reached out, fumbling slightly before he managed to get a hold of Cougar's collar and pull him down next to him.

"Only if you do it with me."

Jake could practically hear Cougar roll his eyes, but he didn't protest. Instead he shuffled around until they were lying side by side under the blankets, allowing Jake to hook his leg around one of Cougar's.

Unlike before, when Jake had been lying alone trying his damndest to sleep, he could barely keep himself awake long enough to snuggle up next to Cougar. He buried his face against Cougar's throat, for once not hindered by several layers of clothes, and breathed in the scent of him. If Jake hadn't been so tired he might have found ways to show just how much he appreciated that, but right then and there he could settle for the intimacy and comfort it offered.

He barely even noticed when he drifted off, that same goofy smile still on his lips.

Chapter End Notes

Some plotty bits and some cutesy bits. Because there can never be too much cute!

It was a weird change of pace for me by the way, to read this chapter this morning since I'm four chapters ahead of you guys, writing the very dramatic final battle thingie, where there's suspense, grief and more than one explosion. This was very calm in comparison. I'm going to continue writing today anyway, since I hope to finish this monster of a fic either this week or the next.

CarpeDentum beta'ed like usual - very enthusiastically, I might add, but that might have been because she wanted to read the next chapter as soon as possible.
When Jake woke up, slowly and drowsily, he immediately braced himself for the inevitable shiver that usually followed. It was just something he had gotten used to while traveling; his first thought every morning was devoted to how cold and miserable he felt, even with Cougar sleeping next to him.

It didn't come.

Jake felt warm. The air he was breathing didn't sting and tear at his lungs. That alone was enough to make him blink his eyes open, even if he didn't see terribly well without his glasses. Cougar's arm was a comforting weight around his middle and it took Jake a couple of seconds of blankly staring into the wall in front of him before his brain came back online.

They had made it back.

They were at the Gallagher settlement.

Jake had somehow managed to find his family and Cougar and him had been housed with the rest of Jake's fellow Settlers inside the safe walls of the Gallagher settlement. It almost seemed too good to be true after over a month's time of travel, being constantly out in the open, feeling cold, exposed and vulnerable.

Cougar was lying close enough to Jake's back that he could feel the movement of his ribcage, pushing against him at regular intervals as Cougar breathed. It was soothing enough to make Jake close his eyes again, just relishing in the feel of it. Jake's hand wandered in under the blanket they shared until he found Cougar's – the one draped over Jake's side – and carefully twined their fingers together.

The gentle squeeze he received told him that Cougar was awake as well, but neither of them moved. Jake didn't want to break the perfect stillness surrounding them. He almost held his breath, as if that would somehow mean that he could stay there, in that exact moment, for just a little while longer.

It was then, as he lay there hoping that he didn't have to move anytime soon, that he realized that he didn't actually have to. For the first time in a long while there was no reason for him to drag himself out of bed. There was no journey to undertake, no camp to pack up and no immediate
responsibilities or task he had to see to.

He could stay right where he was.

The lazy grin that spread on Jake's lips was possibly a little deranged, but he didn't care. He was too happy knowing that he could stay there and cuddle with Cougar if he so wanted – and boy did he want to. Jake had been too exhausted the previous evening to really appreciate the closeness they shared, but he had every intention of rectifying that.

"Slept well?" Cougar's words were nothing more than a soft mumble against Jake's neck, his ribcage rumbling as he spoke. It sent a delighted shiver down Jake's spine and he couldn't help grinning, wide and a little loopy.

"Yeah, amazingly well. You?"

The kiss Cougar placed against Jake's skin – on his neck, for once left bare without obscuring scarves or collars – seemed to be an agreement. A warm tingle spread from that point of contact, gathering in the pit of Jake's stomach like a coiling mass of pure delight. It was quite lovely.

It was slightly ruined however by Cougar's attempt to climb out of bed. Jake quickly clamped down, refusing to let go of Cougar's hand. He was prepared to physically keep him there if he had to.

"Don't ruin this for me, Coug. I'm not moving for at least another hour," Jake mumbled, pulling on Cougar's hand to make him lie down again.

He heard Cougar's amused scoff and even without seeing his face Jake knew what kind of expression had to be on it.

"No, I'm not being lazy," he therefore replied, before letting out a soft, pleased sigh. "For the first time in over a month there's no place either of us have to be, except right here." Jake smiled. "Think on it, Cougar. Just... right here."

There was a short moment of silence before Jake could feel Cougar settle down again, sliding even closer than before, until he was pressed against Jake's back and their entwined hands rested against Jake's chest. Cougar didn't say anything but his obvious compliance was answer enough.

If he hadn't been so pleased with the situation Jake would have said something smug about winning the argument, but now he'd rather not give Cougar a reason to pull back again.

Jake smiled instead, turning his head so that Cougar could press a kiss to the corner of his mouth.

"Jess and Beth?" Cougar inquired, voice low. If Jake had been any less accustomed to Cougar's way of conversing he might not have known what was actually being asked.

"They're fine," Jake hummed. "Jess will probably figure out where I am if they wake up and I'm not there."

Jess had seen Jake's restlessness the evening before – the way he had fidgeted and how he hadn't been able to hide his disappointment when she couldn't tell him where Cougar was. She would understand. She knew exactly what was going on between Jake and Cougar, even if Jake might have spared her some of the details that were best kept private.

Not that there had been anything particularly lewd to tell. They had been far too busy escaping from Max and then finding Jake's family to have time for something like that. Not to mention that being cold and miserable wasn't exactly conducive in the pursuit of sexual pleasure and Jake
hadn't felt properly warm and relaxed for weeks.

Well, until now.

Jake's eyes snapped open.

Was it bad taste of him to suddenly feel a rather delightful squeeze of want in his gut? He sure hoped not. Ever since that night in the Nomad caravan when they had kissed – for real, that was, and not that rushed one in the vault – Jake had been very diligent about curbing his urges. He couldn't deny that there were quite a few but, as said, it had clearly been the wrong place and time. Emphasis on been.

"What?" Cougar asked, as if he could sense some kind of shift in Jake. Or possibly just read his thoughts. Jake wouldn't put it past him.

For a brief moment Jake remained silent, debating his options, and for once he decided that maybe actions would speak louder than words. Cougar was attentive when it came to both verbal and non-verbal cues but there was certainly more satisfaction to be had in showing what Jake had in mind.

Cougar effortlessly made room for Jake when he turned on the bed, until they were lying face to face instead. He didn't need his glasses to see Cougar clearly on this distance and Jake couldn't help grinning, simply because of how unbelievably lucky he was to be where he was, snuggled up under the blankets with Cougar. An emotion Jake didn't quite dare to name yet was swelling in his chest as he reached out, fingertips trailing over Cougar's temple and down along his cheek.

There were so many things Jake could have said – loving, heartfelt and achingly honest things – but he couldn't bring himself to break the silence. His thumb ghosted over Cougar's lips and he smiled when Cougar's moustache made his fingertip tickle. Cougar said nothing and instead just lay there, calmly allowing the curious exploration. The expression on Cougar's face was open and trusting, and despite how vulnerable Jake knew that should have made Cougar feel he seemed perfectly at ease.

Jake couldn't believe how lucky he was. He was so fucking lucky to be lying next to this breathtakingly gorgeous man, who looked back at him with a warm and gentle fondness in his eyes. Cougar was so incredibly beautiful that Jake didn't know what to do with himself and the faith Cougar showed – the faith they both had in each other – made Jake's throat seize up.

It seemed like the only thing he could do was to scoot closer for a kiss.

It wasn't even a particularly deep one – not at first – but Jake had to find an outlet somehow. Cougar was warm and solid next to him, his presence so comforting and real that Jake let out a pleased sigh against Cougar's lips.

"Cielito?" Cougar mumbled, so softly that Jake barely even heard it. Cougar didn't sound worried but he seemed to understand that there was something Jake was trying to say.

Jake let his hand wander into Cougar's hair, fingers curling around the back of his neck, before he moved in for another kiss. This one was a lot deeper and Jake felt a swoop in his stomach, followed by a tingling that seemed to spread through his body; like a ripple of warmth under his skin.

He could admit that he was nervous. Jake didn't have a whole lot of experience when it came to these things and as confident as he felt when it came to everything involving technology this was maybe a tiny bit beyond his reach. But he could totally make up for that with enthusiasm and
Most of it seemed to come instinctively anyway, like how he arched closer, ever so subtly, as he continued to chase after the taste of Cougar on his tongue. The feel of Cougar's hand settling and sliding down along his side made Jake shiver; even more so when Cougar reached the bottom of Jake's shirt and slipped under it. His fingers were warm against Jake's skin and Jake couldn't help marveling at how something that simple could feel so good.

Cougar pulled back a little before he let his hand wander further though, catching Jake's gaze. He looked almost curious, his eyebrows raised in a wordless question. Embarrassingly enough Jake already felt a tad bit breathless and couldn't help grinning like the huge dork that he was. There was no hiding how giddy he felt – he didn't want to hide it – and probably no mistaking what exactly he was aiming for here. Jake could speak without words too, when he wanted to.

There was a slight flicker of emotion in Cougar's eyes when he seemed to catch on and a smile spread on his lips. It was a bit crooked – amused almost – but also unmistakably pleased. Cougar's hand slid along the curve of Jake's back, trailing up along his spine, the touch teasingly light but oh so delightful. Jake followed the movement, his back arching, and he couldn't help tangling his fingers into Cougar's hair as he let out a shuddering breath. That felt unbelievably good.

Their lips were so close that they were practically sharing breaths and Jake took that as an invitation to kiss Cougar again, perhaps a bit more boldly than he would have thought himself capable of. Cougar didn't seem to have any problem with that. He responded to the kiss with an almost annoying ease but since it was clearly Jake who benefited from it he knew better than to sulk. Cougar was a great kisser.

Or maybe Jake was just biased.

Either was he was having a wonderful time and didn't even care if he or Cougar was the one who moved closer, as long as he got to feel Cougar pressed up against him. It fell on Cougar to curb some of Jake's eagerness and even out the erratic bursts of intensity until it was more of a steadily growing, delicious burn. It seemed to spread just below Jake's skin, pooling in his gut.

Cougar easily took command and Jake was content to follow his lead, not fighting the movement as he was pushed onto his back. The blanket they had been sharing slipped lower but Jake hardly noticed, too caught up in everything else that was happening as long as it involved Cougar one way or another.

Having Cougar rise to his knees and in one smooth movement straddle Jake's hips was definitely one of the hottest things Jake had ever had the privilege of experiencing and he found himself speechless for a couple of seconds, heart pounding and mouth dry. When Cougar leaned forward, bracing one hand next to Jake's head for balance, Jake's only thought was that he was either extremely lucky or so out of his depth that he wouldn't know what hit him.

In the end he decided that it was probably a little bit of both.

Cougar's smile was that frustratingly attractive mix of teasing amusement and fondness. He looked like he knew exactly what Jake was thinking – as was his habit – and Jake's finally, to his own horror, remembered how to form words. And consequentially started babbling.

"Wow. Hi." He had to swallow but couldn't quite manage a grin, not when he was breathless with how utterly perfect Cougar looked. "You're amazing. I mean, really. You're so gorgeous it's actually a bit painful because-"

Jake fell silent the moment fingers touched his skin, sliding up along his throat – exploring and
reverent at the same time – until Cougar's palm settled against Jake's cheek, as if to hold him in place. Cougar seemed to be in no hurry whatsoever when he leaned forward and pressed his lips against Jake's; silencing any further words Jake might have thought of uttering. Jake opened his mouth to Cougar's tongue and couldn't quite hold back the way he trembled when the kiss deepened.

Cougar was relentless.

The kiss was so slow that Jake could feel every shift and taste all the little nuances, magnifying the sensations until it felt like he might just burst from it. Jake's moan seemed to rumble in his chest and vibrate through his body, his hands rising to tangle in Cougar's hair. It felt soft against his fingers as he gathered it at the back of Cougar's neck, holding it in place and out of the way. The kiss was still unhurried and toe-curlingly intense – but a different kind of intensity than Jake was used to.

This was all thick, molten pleasure that seemed to crawl through his veins, lighting him up one inch at a time. He barely even dared to breathe, afraid that he would lose it somehow if he did. All he could do was to cling to the steadily growing fire in his chest and raging burn under his skin. He wasn't sure if he had ever felt so sensual – or turned on – in his entire life, arching up from the bed in a desperate search for more.

Cougar obviously took pity on him, meeting the movement with a roll of his hips that rubbed their clothed erections together. Jake couldn't help gasping. But he also felt Cougar's shiver and took a certain amount of comfort in the knowledge that he wasn't the only one losing himself to this.

It made him bolder and one of his hands soon wandered down to settle on Cougar's hip instead, urging him to keep moving. The fact that they were still fully clothed made it slightly uncomfortable but there was a kind of perfection to it that Jake reveled in. The raw urgency of it all, despite the slow pace, made it so much better.

Not that Jake complained when his hand fumbled upwards, pushing Cougar's shirt higher in an attempt to reach bare skin, and Cougar obligingly pulled it off without further prompting. It was a brief pause but it gave Jake enough time to catch his breath, his gaze landing on the settlement tattoo on Cougar's chest. Without really thinking it through Jake sat up, hands on Cougar's back to help stabilize him after the slight shift in position, and kissed the inked skin. It seemed like the most natural thing in the world to do, but it only took a second for him to realize that he might unintentionally have crossed some line he shouldn't have.

Cougar only smiled though, when Jake looked up at him, his fingers running through Jake's hair. He looked amused again, as if Jake's fascination with the tattoo was endearing. Jake could totally live with that. He grinned and kissed it again, his fingers splayed across Cougar's bare back mostly because he wanted to feel his skin under his hands.

Jake's mouth soon moved on, offering teasing, curious little kisses before he leisurely licked Cougar's nipple. The shudder that earned him was so subtle that Jake wouldn't have felt it if he hadn't had his hands all over Cougar. Jake couldn't hold back a mischievous, pleased grin – one that resulted in a dry look from Cougar, but really, he could tell that Cougar was trying not to smile so it was all good.

A slight tug on his shirt was enough for Jake to get the hint and he quickly, somewhat ungracefully, pulled it off. The firm hand Cougar placed on Jake's shoulder pushed him back down against the sheets and Jake found that he didn't mind it one bit.

The view was spectacular.
His hands wandered over Cougar's chest but stopped briefly when they slipped low enough to brush against the still pink scar from the bullet wound Cougar had suffered almost one and a half months ago. It looked okay, all things considered, but Jake didn't like it. He didn't want to remember how close Cougar had come to dying and that Jake could just as easily have missed Cougar's presence when they searched the Holden settlement; which would definitely have lead to his death.

Jake almost flinched when Cougar caught his hand, carefully pulling it away from the scar he had been tracing. A kiss was placed on his knuckles, then another, before Cougar leaned down and rested his forehead against Jake's. Cougar's hair shielded them from the morning light shining in through the window and his smile was patient and soft.

"I'm fine," Cougar murmured, lacing their fingers together, palm against palm. "Cálmate, cielito."

Jake nodded slowly, looking up into Cougar's eyes and finding nothing but calm, gentle fondness. It was just that Jake didn't want to even consider what his life would be like without Cougar. It wasn't just the seed bank and how he had helped with that; it was what he had given Jake, as a person. The devotion and commitment.

Cougar chose him. Out of everyone he could pick Cougar chose him. Cougar chose to care for and protect him. It just blew Jake away to know that someone would actually do that, without any kind of obligation. Jake had no idea how he could be so lucky.

It was a bit of a struggle to hold back the words he wanted to blurt out; knowing that now might not be the time. Neither he nor Cougar might be ready. Not for that.

So what he did instead was to reach up with his free hand and pull Cougar's head down for another kiss. It would have to suffice and judging on Cougar's lack of complaints it did.

This one held a bit more urgency than the others and it didn't take long before Jake could feel the momentarily forgotten need flare up again. Their hands untangled in order to allow a more thorough exploration of the other's bared skin and Jake took great pleasure in mapping out all the dips and curves within reach.

There were quite a few scars mottling Cougar's skin but Jake never lingered on them too long – not even the large, horizontal ones across Cougar's back that had to have been caused by a lash or whip of some kind. Maybe one day Jake would ask about them and perhaps Cougar would answer, but now was not the time. Jake didn't want any more distractions.

The building tension was back and Jake embraced it wholeheartedly, letting his hands and lips roam where they pleased. To his own surprise he made few sounds beyond the occasional groan, gasp and moan – Jake would totally have pegged himself as being verbal in bed – but that could have been because he barely had time to speak between the heated kisses. At most he managed to give Cougar doopy, blissful grins before he was swept up by the growing feeling of want, want, want.

Cougar's kisses were still intense but he didn't try to keep it slow anymore. He seemed just about ready to devour Jake and anything he had to offer, leaving Jake panting and lightheaded while he tried his best to catch up. It was beyond amazing. It felt fucking brilliant and Jake was practically vibrating with need by the time Cougar stroked Jake's cock through his pants. Jake tipped his head back and had to bite his lip not to blurt out something embarrassing.

He hummed in pleasure when Cougar kissed along his neck and confident hands continued to fondle Jake's dick. Jake was so distracted by the blissfulness of it all that he didn't realize that Cougar was trailing lower and lower until he felt a teasing nip on his stomach. Jake's muscles
twitched in response and he sucked in a deep breath when he looked down, catching Cougar's gaze. His eyes were dark with desire and the devilish glint in them was enough to make Jake feel an almost alarming squeeze of yearning.

As Cougar moved even lower his hands started pulling down Jake's pants, his fingers stroking along Jake's hips while he placed hot, teasing kisses on Jake's bared stomach.

It didn't take a genius to see where this was going.

"O-okay. Wow," Jake gasped. As stupid as it might make him he hadn't quite seen this coming. "Sure. Yeah, I c-can totally roll with this."

Cougar chuckled, his breath a warm gust of air against Jake's trembling skin, before one of his hands reached up to catch Jake's. Their fingers entwined seemingly on their own accord and despite how delirious Jake was feeling – or possibly because of it – he smiled widely at Cougar.

Damn, Jake was so lucky.

Even more so when Cougar slid down that last remaining distance and Jake could feel Cougar's breath against his dick. It was enough to make him shiver so the moment Cougar actually took him in hand – his fingers wrapping around Jake's cock with no clothes in the way to dim the sensations – Jake slapped his free hand over his own mouth to stifle his moan. It was a reflex really; common courtesy born from having lived in close quarters with other people – his sister – during his entire life.

Cougar seemed to dislike it, judging on how he let go of Jake's erection – which might have caused a pathetic little whimper from Jake – in order to reach up and tug the hand away. Their entwined fingers remained as they were though, Cougar giving them a quick squeeze.

Jake licked his lips and swallowed.

"Never thought I'd be asked to be loud," Jake said breathlessly, without really thinking.

There was no reply from Cougar except the feel of his tongue licking the head of Jake's dick, which, all things considered, was beautifully eloquent despite the lack of words spoken. To stop himself from covering up his moans again Jake let his hand wander into Cougar's hair instead. It was something to hold on to and Cougar hummed appreciatively.

Jake would just have to remember not to tug too hard.

Which was easier said than done when Cougar set to work on turning him into a panting, quivering mess that knew neither up nor down. Cougar clearly only needed the one hand and his mouth to drive Jake to the brink of incoherency, their fingers still locked, resting against the sheets next to Jake. That point of contact added a layer of intimacy that only seemed to increase the desire licking up Jake's spine and he had a hard time lying still. Cougar was prepared for that however, keeping Jake's hips relatively stable with his hand while his mouth worked.

It didn't take long before Jake started babbling. He honestly wasn't sure what he said, too caught up in the moment and somewhat blindsided by the white hot pleasure gathering in the pit of his stomach. He could tell that Cougar liked it though, by how he lavished Jake with attention, his tongue doing frankly illegal things to Jake's dick.

It was everything Jake could have dreamed of. The feel of Cougar's hair, twisted around his fingers. The sound of his own ragged breaths and the occasional moan and stuttered phrases of praise and admiration. Cougar's mouth, his tongue and the warm splay of his fingers on Jake's hip. It was more than enough to drive Jake towards the edge, even if he would rather have postponed
it; stayed in this utterly perfect moment and just relished in how blissful he felt.

The pounding of his heart was loud in his ears and his skin seemed to be burning. Every breath was a struggle – in the best way possible – and for the first time in a long while he was completely free of stray thoughts and flickering focus. Every single fiber within Jake's being was tuned in to Cougar, holding on – clinging – to the sensations rushing through him. And it was building, mercilessly and relentless. Jake didn't struggle, letting himself climb higher and higher.

He tried to say something between his breathless pants but in the end all he managed was a slight tug on Cougar's hair, trying to warn him that he was close. Cougar clearly noticed but didn't seem to care. He only swallowed deeper, the pressure around Jake's cock increasing, and before Jake knew it he was gasping out his climax, helplessly swept up by the cresting pleasure.

It took a couple of seconds before he came back to his senses, his head still thick and cottony from his orgasm and limbs trembling. He sucked in a deep but faltering breath before looking down at Cougar, who was smiling smugly.

Jake finally untangled their fingers – the grip having been almost painfully tight for a second there – before using both hands to coax Cougar into crawling up along his body again. Jake helped, pulling almost frantically until he could place a kiss on Cougar's lips, breathing out in relief; which sounded more like a moan than anything else.

"You are amazing," he mumbled, peppering Cougar's lips with small kisses as his hands, trembling as they might be, roamed over Cougar's shoulders and back. "You are brilliant and amazing and I love you. Fuck, I love you so much, Cougs."

So much for not blurting that out before they were both ready.

Cougar didn't seem put off or startled by it though. He only smiled, achingly soft, and placed a lingering, sweet kiss on Jake's lips.

"I love you too."

Jake grinned – a little wobbly and a little weird – but there was no mistaking the happiness.

Fuck, he was happy.

"You gotta teach me how to say that in Spanish sometime."

He wasn't even sure if he was completely grasping the significance of this yet – of what they had said and what it would mean to them in the future – but that was mostly because his brain wasn't quite up to its usual speed. And there were more pressing matters to attend to.

Jake reached down between them, his fingers ghosting over Cougar's chest, stomach and hips as he went. There was a slight smile on Cougar's lips and Jake decided that he needed to kiss it; treasure it for how lucky it made him feel. Cougar obliged, returning the kiss with a definite hint of approval. There was a slight, barely noticeable, stutter to Cougar's fluency when Jake sneaked his hand in under Cougar's pants to wrap his fingers around his dick. Jake decided to take that as a compliment.

Cougar was bracing himself on his elbows to avoid leaning his entire weight on Jake, but they were still so close that Jake could feel the heat of him. Their skin brushed tantalizingly as soon as either of them shifted and Jake reveled in the closeness. Cougar moved in time with Jake's strokes, his breath coming out in shorter and shorter bursts.

Jake loved it. He loved the look in Cougar's eyes – the pleasure and the reverence – and he loved
being the cause for it. Jake had never thought that anyone would look at him the way Cougar looked at him now; as if he was irreplaceable, cherished and a miracle in his own right.

A slight twist of his hand managed to coax a frankly delicious moan from Cougar.

"There you go," Jake mumbled softly as he nuzzled against Cougar's neck. The words were slightly slurred since his own release was still thrumming through his veins, making him feel particularly loose and pliant. It felt fantastic.

The hitch to Cougar's breath was definitely something to treasure and Jake smiled, his hand continuing to stroke Cougar's dick as he brought him closer to completion. It felt so intimate, possibly because Jake was already sated and relaxed, but even more so for how Cougar was pushing against him, moving with every caress and giving himself over to the pleasure without hesitation. It made Jake feel both incredibly powerful and utterly blessed.

"Come on," he whispered next to Cougar's ear, feeling the tremble it caused as well as if it had been his own. Jake searched his memory for one of the many phrases he had translated on a whim the night before – when he was trying to pass the time in front of his computer – and sped up his strokes, just so. "Come, mi amor."

Jake couldn't even describe the sound that slipped from Cougar's lips. It was more vulnerable than anything Jake had ever heard him utter, but also filled with a raw and breathless kind of happiness that made Jake's heart squeeze in his chest.

Cougar shuddered as he came, his gasp barely audible, and Jake stroked him through it, not caring about the mess they were making. He was too focused on wrapping his free arm across Cougar's shoulders and holding him close while he – blissful and almost stupidly content – listened to the sound of Cougar trying to catch his breath.

Jake loved it.

He couldn't quite find it within himself to let go. He just wanted to stay there, for however long he was allowed to, and bask in this perfect moment. The kiss Cougar's placed on Jake's cheek and the way he wasn't struggling to move said that maybe Cougar wanted that too. They had deserved it, at least this once.

So they stayed.

Jake wasn't sure if it was Jess' way of giving her blessing or trying to scare the living shit out of them by sending Beth to fetch them for breakfast about an hour later. Granted that Beth was polite enough to only knock on the door and call out to them instead of come barging in, but it was a rather crude wake-up call none the less. Jess had to know what Jake and Cougar had most likely been up to.

"Uncle Jake! Mom wants you to come up for breakfast!"

Jake, who was enjoying some delightful cuddling under the blankets with Cougar, choked on his breath and would probably have tried to cover himself if it wasn't for the fact that he was already
as covered as he was going to get. And never mind that Beth was on the other side of the door.

"Alright, sweetie! I'll be right up," Jake called back, slightly more high-pitched than usual. He gave Cougar's arm a reprimanding slap to stop him from grinning so widely. There was a tinge of smug pride to that grin – as if Cougar loved the thought of being the one who had debauched Jake to the point where he got squeaky and embarrassed. It was a tiny bit endearing but not something Jake had thought he would ever see in Cougar. Himself, sure, but not Cougar.

Then again, Cougar was undeniably territorial.

"Not just you," Beth chirped with a bright laugh. "Mom said that Cougar should come too."

That made both of them pause. Cougar gave Jake a questioning glance that he could only reply to with a surprised shrug. Jess hadn't exactly been Cougar's biggest fan before they left for the seed bank and even if Jake might have told her about what had happened on their trip he hadn't expected her to change her mind so quickly. Then again, it had been over a month and Cougar had returned Jake in one piece, which was admirable considering all the obstacles they had run into.

"Sure thing! Tell her we'll be there in a couple of minutes." Jake was not going to say no to having breakfast with his three favorite people in the world. He might feel a vague sense of dread that Jess was planning something that could possibly include Cougar being submitted to bodily harm, but he'd play along for now.

"Okay!" Beth replied happily before Jake could hear her skipping off.

Jake let out a slow breath and gave his heart a second to calm down before he sat up, looking down at Cougar with a crooked smile. Cougar met his gaze but seemed perfectly content to remain where he was, lying on his back with one hand behind his head and his dark hair standing in stark contrast to the white pillow.

"I can't promise that Jess isn't trying to poison you," Jake began, "but at the same time I doubt she would do that in front of Beth. So we're probably safe."

Cougar looked amused, pointedly raising his eyebrow.

"Yeah," Jake agreed, "or maybe she's just trying to be civil. I guess we'll notice after we've gotten cleaned up and dressed."

Cougar nodded but he made no move to get up. It wasn't like Cougar to be lazy, but maybe Jake was a bad influence on him. Jake didn't exactly mind because Cougar looked absolutely delicious. In the end the temptation proved too great and Jake leaned down to steal a quick kiss. Which quickly bled into a second. And a third, because Cougar hooked a hand behind Jake's neck and refused to let go.

It was actually rather flattering that Jake seemed to trump Cougar's near flawless self-discipline.

All in all Jake wasn't surprised that it took him and Cougar almost fifteen minutes to get themselves presentable and relocate to the bigger apartment two floors up. Neither was he surprised by the flat, judging look Jess gave him, as if she knew exactly why they were late. And it was probably written plainly across Jake's face – not to mention that he had a huge hickey on the curve of his neck he hadn't been able to hide –, so yeah, she totally knew.

Jake couldn't help blushing and clear his throat a bit awkwardly. Even more so when Jess' lips twitched in barely concealed amusement.
Cougar looked calm and gathered like usual, the bastard. Sometimes Jake really envied how in control Cougar was of his facial expressions.

It honestly felt a bit weird to sit down for breakfast all four of them, but not necessarily in a bad way. Beth was a bit shy at first, still not entirely used to Cougar's presence, but seemed to forget about it soon enough. This time when she asked questions Cougar made an effort to reply and Jake couldn't help feeling his heart swell at that; it had to mean that Cougar intended to stay.

Before, during the time spent at Jake's settlement, Cougar had been distant towards Beth and always kept out of her way rather than engage in any kind of conversation, as if he knew that it wouldn't serve any kind of purpose because he was leaving soon anyway. But now he replied, if still a bit haltingly, and listened attentively whenever Beth spoke to him. Cougar was trying to get along with Jake's family and it was more endearing than Jake thought possible – more than he knew how to handle, too.

Jess kept giving them amused glances but there was no suspicion there, to Jake's great relief. There was no malice either, even if she couldn't seem to help giving Jake sly, teasing glances every now and then. As embarrassed as that made him Jake also felt incredibly happy, simply because she showed that she wasn't opposed to his and Cougar's relationship. Despite whatever hostility she had felt towards Cougar at the beginning he had obviously proved himself in her eyes.

So while sending Beth to fetch them for breakfast probably wasn't her way of giving her blessing the fact that they were invited – both of them, no less – was.

Jake reached out and caught his sister's hand, giving it a tight squeeze. She seemed surprised at first, when she looked into his eyes, but caught on soon enough. Jess knew him better than anyone so she had to realize how grateful Jake was when she was willing to give Cougar a chance and didn't condemn them both.

Her smile was warm and just shy of maternal, as was usually the case when it came to things such as these. Jake wanted to say something – anything to show how much her approval meant to him – but he couldn't quite figure out what. In the end he just nodded gratefully, but it was clearly enough to get his point across. Jess' hand was comfortable and familiar against his.

Cougar seemed to be watching them in the corner of his eye, even if the majority of his attention was still on Beth, and the smile on his lips said that he had probably understood what kind of exchange had just taken place. He didn't say anything, but it wasn't like he had to either.

Jake felt a soft nudge under the table and he automatically moved his foot, tangling it with Cougar's as if it was the most natural thing in the world. As if they always had to be touching somehow.

A grin spread on Jake's lips. Everything was coming together beautifully.

He knew that it was foolish to ignore the threat that Max still posed but Jake wanted to be allowed to forget, at least for a little while. He had been running from the man and his Raiders for a month and a half and Jake was tired.

And right then and there, with Jess' hand in his, Beth's delighted laughter ringing in his ears and his foot hooked around Cougar's, he knew he could relax. This was where he belonged.

He was so incredibly happy.
I am terribly sorry for the slight delay this week. I went to IKEA to buy stuff for work and have been busy pretty much all day. Buuuuuut I hope it was worth the wait ;) I don't write sex scenes very often and they're never explicit in nature, but hopefully this kinda sorta warm and fuzzy one will do.

And yeah, the shit will hit the fan in the next chapter. But I figured I'd give you a nice, calm chapter for once.

**CarpeDentum** is my beta - I didn't even need her to help me add dicks and cocks this time (I usually seem to avoid using those specific words for some reason).
Jake had rarely felt as popular as when he went to talk to the rest of his fellow Settlers after breakfast and found that pretty much all of them were happy to see him. Even Carol smiled at him, which was entirely unexpected but also quite heartwarming. It felt great to be home. While the physical aspects of their settlement was important it was the people that he cherished the most; so this was still home, even if their houses lay in ruin.

Cougar, understandably, chose to not be present for this. Even if Jess had accepted him it didn't mean that the others would – at least not yet – and Jake knew that Cougar would only feel cornered and agitated if he had to put up with all the mistrustful glares and whispered insults. So instead Jake handed over his backup laptop – incidentally the very same one Cougar had used before – and left him to his own devices.

To Jake's surprise he returned to the bigger apartment two hours later – when people had finally curbed their curiosity and stopped asking him questions about his travels – to find Beth perched in Cougar's lap where he sat with his legs crossed. The laptop was balanced on Beth's legs but Cougar helped hold it stable as she typed, his arms encircling her.

Cougar looked up when Jake entered; his smile so relaxed and gentle that Jake momentarily forgot how to move. He just stood there, staring at the two of them while trying to remember how to breathe.

If someone had asked him what he wanted most in life this, right here, came pretty close to being it. The only one missing was Jess, who was off discussing important business with the council, considering that Max might be at their door within the near future. Jake and Cougar had been excused on accounts of needing the day to rest, for which Jake was grateful.

When Jake finally managed to take a deep breath it trembled noticeably, but he felt that he was excused. Cougar had a knowing look on his face but he didn't say anything; he didn't have to.

Jake quietly walked over to the mattress Cougar and Beth was sitting on – Jake's mattress, actually – and sank down next to them. Beth grinned at Jake, her head bumping softly against Cougar's chin when she turned to look at him, but neither of them seemed to react. They were completely comfortable with the casual way they were touching. Beth had clearly gotten over her shyness. Cougar was the one who still seemed a tiny bit cautious, but Jake figured that had more to do with concern for Beth's safety and being unaccustomed to children than actual dislike.
"There's no Internet here, is there?" Jake asked as he glanced at the screen, ignoring the way he couldn't quite keep his voice level. Was it stupid to get emotional over how well his niece and Cougar got along? Jake sure hoped not because there was no stopping it now. The happiness was pulsing and growing in his chest, making him feel all warm and tingly.

Cougar shook his head to answer Jake's question, while Beth took it upon herself to explain what they were doing when surfing the web wasn't an option.

"I'm writing a story!" she chirped, before turning back to face the screen.

Jake couldn't help but smile at her innocent enthusiasm over something as simple as a word processor.

"Oh yeah?" He inched closer, until he could lean against Cougar's side and soak up some of his warmth. "What's it about?"

"It's a fairytale," she replied with a serious nod, her tiny fingers pushing the keys with so much intent and focus that it was endearing. "With dragons."

Jake grinned, letting his head settle against Cougar's shoulder.

"Of course," he agreed. "There has to be dragons in a fairytale. Can I read it?"

"When I'm finished," was Beth's stern reply. "So no peeking!"

Jake almost chuckled because he could clearly read what she had been writing so far, but obediently closed his eyes to rid himself of the temptation.

"Okay, I'll wait."

Beth didn't reply, probably too engrossed in her writing, but Jake could feel Cougar press a kiss against the top of his head. He had to fight an urge to curl up against Cougar; crawl closer until there wasn't even an inch of space between them. But that would disturb Beth and he didn't want that.

Jake settled for hiding his face against Cougar's shoulder, heedless of how his glasses dug into his nose and how it would look if anyone chose that moment to walk through the door. Cougar hummed softly, as if he understood what Jake was looking for, and raised his closest hand to let it settle against the back of Jake's head. The angle was somewhat awkward but Jake didn't mind.

"Te amo, cielito."

Jake didn't actually know what those two words meant, but the raw, heady emotions they were laced with gave him a clue. He understood what Cougar was trying to say.

"I love you too," he whispered.

While Jake could easily have stayed there with Cougar and Beth for the rest of the day he knew
he had to get up from the comfortable mattress when there was a knock on the door. They weren't expecting anyone to drop by but considering the hour it could be that someone came to ask if they wanted company for lunch.

Jake could feel Cougar's eyes follow him as he made for the door, no doubt wary of who would be on the other side. Cougar didn't get up thought what with having Beth in his lap, who was still typing on Jake's laptop, tongue sticking out in concentration.

Without giving himself too much time to hesitate Jake opened the door. He didn't recognize the person standing outside in the hallway and stiffened instinctively when he noticed the handgun attached to the man's belt. Jake wasn't sure how much Cougar saw but the clatter of keys stopped abruptly so either he or Beth – possibly both – could tell that something was wrong.

The man seemed to sense the change in the room and raised his hands, palms out to show that he intended no harm.

"Hey, don't worry – your sister sent me." He looked friendly and honest enough, Jake could admit that, but he didn't like to have guns anywhere near Beth if he could help it.

"Okay," Jake replied evenly, not trying to hide the suspicion he felt.

The man smiled but obviously made sure not to step closer or lower his hands. He was dressed in dark, durable clothes and while his brown eyes spoke of friendliness his posture was guarded.

"She and Clay figured that you might be interested in a tour of the settlement," the man continued calmly. "I'm here to give it, if you want it."

Jake felt a flutter of excitement. He really did want that, and so far no one in the Gallagher settlement had been outright hostile towards him – even if they happened to be armed, like this one. Jake wasn't surprised to feel his paranoia give way to curiosity but he didn't want to make any decisions without asking Cougar first. It was sort of implied that he would come along for the tour, if not because he wanted to see it too then to keep an eye on Jake. Jess hadn't been wrong when she said that Cougar had a tendency to hover close to Jake if he could.

Jake looked over his shoulder, just as Cougar helped Beth to her feet after having closed the laptop lid and put it on the mattress next to them. Beth inched to the side, so that she was practically hidden behind Cougar the moment he was standing as well. Something tight and anxious in Jake's chest loosened at that sight, grateful that Beth considered Cougar to be someone she could trust to keep her safe. Fact was that Cougar would no doubt fight just as fiercely to protect her as he would Jake.

"Do you want to go?" Jake asked, giving Cougar the final say.

Cougar hesitated for a second before he nodded. Jake wasn't sure if Cougar agreed because Jake so obviously wanted it or because Cougar himself did, but he was grateful either way. There was no doubt a lot to explore and learn.

"Alright, I'll be waiting downstairs then," the man said with a nod of his own, clearly understanding that his presence wasn't all that welcome. Everyone felt a healthy dose of paranoia when faced with strangers, even if they were supposedly amongst allies.

"We'll be down in a couple of minutes." Jake needed to make sure that Beth was taken care of before they left, and get dressed for the colder weather outside. He couldn't help calling out just as the man turned to leave however. "Hey, what's your name?"

He received a grin in return – one that was friendlier than Jake had expected.
"Just call me Pooch."

Jake grinned back but said nothing, watching Pooch leave before he closed the door and turned to face Cougar and Beth. The former was giving him a dry, level look.

"What?" Jake asked innocently.

It wasn't that big of a surprise that Cougar saw right through him.

"No cat and dog jokes," Cougar practically ordered.

"Aw, come on! How often do you think that I will get an opportunity to-"

Cougar was clearly ignoring him and Jake didn't even bother to finish the sentence. But he did make sure to pout.

Cougar ignored that too. The bastard.

It didn't take long at all to get ready. Beth would stay with the rest of the children, supervised by the other adults, and while she was utterly offended that Jake refused to bring her along she settled down somewhat when he promised to tell her all about it as soon as he got back. Apparently she and the other children had barely even been allowed outside of the apartment building, save for when Jake had arrived and Beth had wanted to come along and see him. It was reasonable caution if you asked Jake, but Beth clearly wasn't of the same opinion.

Jake gave her a quick kiss on the cheek before he and Cougar left to meet up with Pooch just outside the building. When they arrived Pooch was eyeing the pack of dogs somewhat nervously, but Jake couldn't exactly blame him for that. They might be wearing leashes and Pooch stood a fair distance away from them, but they were all observing him quietly – relentlessly –, as if just waiting for him to slip up somehow. It would have unnerved Jake too if he wasn't used to them.

As it was several tails started wagging when he arrived and he couldn't help stopping to get a couple of snuggles and slobbering kisses. The dogs were clearly getting more and more restless and Jake was willing to do whatever he could to make them happier, however small a contribution it might be.

Once again Cougar seemed to keep somewhat out of the way considering that most of the dogs weren't accustomed to his presence, but when Mirage walked up to him – stretching her leash as far as it would go – Cougar reached out with a smile and scratched her behind her ear. Mirage was clearly very attached to both of them by then.

"So you're one of Clay's men?" Jake asked once he turned back to face Pooch, trying not to fall over when the dogs kept headbutting him to gain his attention. They were big enough to get quite a lot of force behind their pushes.

"Yeah, I'm a part of the guard force – hence the gun – but also happen to be married to one of the council members. My wife and your sister hit it off, which is probably why I'm the one sent here, showing you around." Pooch shrugged.

"They ganged up on you, huh?" Jake asked with a grin, assuming that Pooch was referring to Jolene.

"That they did," Pooch confirmed with a nod, but he didn't look like he minded all that much. Jake kind of liked that. Pooch seemed to be a nice, decent person. "So, you two ready to go?"
Pooch waited for both of them to nod before he started leading the way through the settlement, explaining about the buildings and areas they passed. People were milling about on the streets and some curious looks were sent their way, but no one approached them. Jake suspected that Pooch's presence was what held back any signs of hostility and Jake was rather grateful for it. He didn't need the extra tension that came from being watched by unfriendly eyes.

Not all of the buildings in the Gallagher settlement were towering skyscrapers but they were all old. No new structures seemed to have been built even if modifications had been made to those that existed. It offered interesting contrasts to see the sleek, hard lines – characteristic of buildings from before the Disaster – mix with the slightly uneven, cruder ones that had been added later. It seemed more or less functional however and that was all that mattered to the people living there.

The streets were kept admirably cleared and what little snow that fell during the night had already been shoveled away to allow the people to pass unhindered. There was a sense of efficiency and purpose to the Gallagher settlement that reminded Jake a bit of the Nomads. It was an organized community that seemed to function so well mostly because everyone knew their responsibilities and what needed to be done. How exactly the tasks were divided was a mystery to Jake and he was admittedly impressed that anyone could manage so many people at once.

Jake had been intrigued by what little he had seen the day before and now let his curiosity run wild, asking as many questions as he could. Pooch had a remarkable amount of patience and answered to the best of his abilities, even if there were times when he resolutely refused, but only when it seemed to concern things that could prove a security risk. Jake hastily backtracked whenever that happened or outright apologized, since he had no intention whatsoever of making their hosts feel threatened.

Cougar remained silent pretty much the entire time, communicating with Jake only through looks, nudges and subtle cues. It earned them a couple of weird looks from Pooch, which eventually bled over to amusement, but he never outright questioned it.

Jake quite enjoyed Pooch's company. He was calm without being boring and seemed able to withstand Jake's enthusiasm even when it clearly grated on his nerves somewhat. He was just friendly, plain and simple, and Jake could appreciate that for how rare it was. He was glad that Jess and Jolene had decided to send Pooch to be their guide.

Pooch continued to take them to various places in the settlement; where the animals were kept – some of them being the ones the Lancaster Settlers had brought with them –; the apartment buildings were most people lived and to the very heart of it, where the town hall stood firm and proud in the midday sun. It was just as impressive as they day before but all of that paled in comparison to the market.

Jake loved the market.

It wasn't just because of his fondness of gadgets and trinkets, but the sound of talking and laughing voices that echoed between the grey, towering buildings. It seemed much more alive than any other place in the settlement, full of tables where people traded things they had made or didn't need themselves. Jake bounded between the merchant stalls, excited to see everything at once, but he never strayed far enough that he didn't have Pooch and Cougar in his peripheral.

He could feel Cougar's gaze follow him through the crowd and whenever Jake glanced back Cougar had an indulgent if slightly exasperated smile on his lips. Jake could only grin back, wide and dorky.

Jake was careful not to poke and prod too much since he didn't want to be accidentally rude, but he couldn't help picking up a pair of glasses that he found at one of the stalls. They were much
lighter than his relatively thick rimmed ones with just a thin line of metal wrapping around the round lenses.

Glasses were difficult to come by and usually one had to settle for what was at hand rather than something actually customized to ones' specific needs; like it had been before the Disaster. Jake was used to it by then but he still had a habit of trying on a new pair whenever he stumbled across them, on the off-chance that they were better than the ones he already had.

He looked at the middle-aged woman on the other side of the table and pointed towards the pair of glasses perched on his nose, still holding hers in his other hand.

"Uh-... can I?" He wasn't sure what the customary way to go about it was but the woman only smiled patiently.

"Go ahead." She had a beautiful, rolling accent. Jake had no idea where it came from but found himself smiling back before taking off his glasses and putting on the other pair.

They felt weird – much smaller and lighter than he was used to – and he couldn't help blinking in surprise when he noticed that a couple of things were actually sharper than before.

"They look good on you," the woman said.

Jake couldn't say much about that without some kind of mirror but he could do the next best thing. Cougar had caught up with him by then and Jake turned slightly to look at him, eyebrows raised in a silent question, asking if Cougar agreed. Granted that Cougar was probably a tad bit partial but he obediently took a couple of seconds to study Jake's face before he nodded, his expression softening with amusement and a fair share of fondness.

A grin spread on Jake's lips and he looked back towards the woman.

"They feel good too. I don't-... uh... I'm not sure if I have anything-"

"We can swap," she offered, pointing at Jake's thick rimmed glasses. "Maybe someone else will want those."

"Oh! Sure, sounds good." Jake handed them over, smiling gratefully at the woman. She offered a nod in return and put his old pair on the table where the other had been.

"I see you're already getting the hang of this," Pooch remarked amusedly from a couple of steps away. He seemed to know better than to stand too close to them, even if Jake suspected that it was Cougar he was wary of, not Jake.

"I have to seize the opportunity when I can. In my settlement we share food, supplies and what we make, but this is different." Jake moved away from the stall to give room for other people wanting to see the wares, Cougar following effortlessly. "I mean, this-" he spread his arms to indicate the market "-is just amazing. Things must circulate in an entirely different way. And not everyone have to help produce the food, right? Some can sustain themselves by exchanging their wares instead."

Pooch seemed to find Jake's awe rather entertaining.

"Yeah, something like that," Pooch confirmed. "We try to make sure that everyone has what they need but what they do with their supplies once they have them is up to them. Some barter for other things with each other and some just keep whatever the council gives them."

"It's amazing," Jake mumbled, gaze following the people passing them on the busy market street.
Pooch laughed and nodded ahead.

"Come along. There's still more to show you."

Jake was not going to say no to that, and after reaching out to grab Cougar's mitten-covered hand with his own he followed after Pooch, grinning all the while. Partly because he could see a lot of things so much better than before – it was actually somewhat of a shock and he couldn't help trying to look at everything all at once – but more so than that because he loved experiencing new things. The fact that Cougar was there by his side, squeezing his hand comfortably, made it ten times better.

Next Pooch took them to where the vehicles were parked. Jake suspected that this might be bordering on a security breach since it would be fairly easy to steal one if you knew how to hotwire the cars – which Jake did – but Pooch was clearly doing it for his own sake.

Where Jake was all about the technology Pooch was all about the cars.

It was actually a tiny bit adorable to see how excited Pooch was and when Jake started asking questions – technology and cars were tangentially related after all, meaning that Jake knew quite a bit about them – Pooch gladly engaged in conversation. A very thorough conversation.

It didn't take long at all before Jake was elbow deep in one of the cars, fixing a tiny but significant glitch that would make it run much more smoothly. Pooch explained that he and a couple of others knew how to maintain the cars and fix many of the issues that came up, but they couldn't risk experimenting with new solutions if they ever ran into problems they hadn't seen before.

The fact that Jake had the knowledge to fill in many of the missing blanks ensured him Pooch's loyalty and respect without any kind of preamble. Jake tried not to let it show just how insanely happy that made him.

Cougar watched it all with an amused look on his face, sitting on the hood of one of the nearby cars, his feet braced against the bumper. Like always Cougar was a quiet, grounding presence at the edge of Jake's awareness, so even if he didn't look up at him all that often he still knew exactly where he was.

It was obvious that Cougar had to be somewhat bored just sitting there looking at Pooch and Jake as they tinkered with the cars, but allowed them to keep working without any complaints. Jake was enjoying himself quite a bit and he suspected that was one of the reasons that Cougar didn't say anything. He must know just how excited Jake was at the prospect of not only getting new things to fix but actually discuss it with someone who was just as – if not more – knowledgeable.

It was difficult to say how long they were at it but when Jake's stomach growled, loudly and rather obtrusively, they decided to take a break for a long overdue lunch. Pooch brought them to the guard station by the front gate, which wasn't all that far from the underground garage where the cars were stored, and offered them some food.

There were other guards there, resting or involved in whatever duties they had when they weren't patrolling on top of the wall, and Jake tried to make himself look as non-intrusive as possible. It would have worked a lot better if Cougar had been on the same page, which he obviously wasn't. Not that Cougar was being outright hostile either, but whoever was stupid enough to stare at him got a firm, level glare in return. Even more so if they looked at Jake. It was, quite frankly, terrifying.

People quickly made themselves scarce.
Pooch seemed slightly fascinated by this – and just how close Jake and Cougar were sitting – but once again he said nothing, accepting it after a couple of moments of consideration.

Jake knew that he and Cougar made no sense to anyone observing them. It must seem weird that someone as silent and serious as Cougar would want to spend time with Jake, who was boisterous and talkative to the point of it being annoying. And that Jake, who was ultimately unimpressive and not very scary at all, had somehow earned the protection of someone as badass as Cougar. They were opposites in so many ways that it should be impossible for them to get along, but instead of causing friction it seemed to result in an effortless balance that just *worked*.

Once all the doubts and trust issues were handled Jake couldn't help feeling that they were rather perfect together, even if he still wasn't entirely sure what he had done to deserve someone like Cougar. It was clearly Cougar who got the shorter end of that stick.

Not that Cougar seemed to agree, which was one of the reasons that Jake felt extra lucky.

After lunch Pooch introduced them to the man in charge of the gate – a sufficiently terrifying man with a scar running across his right eye who preferred to go by his last name rather than his first. None of this kept Jake from introducing himself rather enthusiastically, which earned him a wry smile and an explanation that they had met before, if only briefly. Roque had apparently been at the gate when Jake, Cougar and Mirage had arrived.

The Gallagher settlement had a much more complex wall than Jake was used to and he was quite excited when Pooch lead them up the steps towards the top – with Roque's permission, of course. The wall was thick enough that two people could easily walk along it side by side, a railing on one edge – the one facing the settlement – and the chest high wall on the other. Anyone looking down on the street below was relatively protected unless someone with a particularly good aim took a shot at them.

The metal of the wall was smooth when Jake let his gloved hand slide along it, looking out at the city huddling beyond the safety of the settlement. The buildings still looked like gaping, crumbling skeletons to Jake and he held back a shiver. He had no idea how long he and his fellow Settlers would remain here but he wasn't sure if he would ever get used to being surrounded by the quiet, empty skyscrapers. They looked so menacing, towering all around them, with no other purpose than to slowly but surely succumb to the snow and ice. Jake couldn't understand how anyone would want to live in their shadows.

As amazing and brilliant as the settlement was the city surrounding it was still dead.

Cougar was standing next to Jake, their arms brushing, while Pooch looked out over the city.

"Sometimes I can't help wondering what it was like before all of this. Before the snow and ice..." Pooch didn't even seem entirely aware of having said those words out loud.

Jake let out a slow exhale while shifting closer to Cougar; as if there was just too much empty space between them.

"A lot more people, for starters," Jake replied. "And a lot more luxuries. Places where you could buy food, furniture and clothes, without having to make them yourself. In many parts of the world there was a surplus of most necessities." Jake's gaze was distant, even as he let it wander over the silhouettes on the horizon, his hand twitching slightly where it lay on top of the cold, steel wall. "I'm not sure if it was better but it was easier."

"Less violent?" Pooch asked, sounding both curious and a bit intimidated.
"No." Jake shook his head. "Just different. They might not have had to kill for food to the same extent we do but the weapons they had could murder so many people, all with the press of one button."

A silence settled between them, Pooch looking thoughtful for a couple of seconds. Eventually he turned his head to look at Jake.

"Isn't it worse, knowing what the world looked like before?"

Most people didn't. It was so long ago that they had only heard stories and even those were becoming less and less frequent as people tried to look to the future instead. Jake though, he had watched movies, documentaries and TV-shows. He had read books, articles and reports. With his computer he had been able to get a pretty clear picture of what it had been like before the Disaster. He knew just how far civilization had fallen and how close they were to extinction.

His smile was sharp around the edges.

"In a way, yeah." He met Pooch's gaze. "But someone has to, right?"

Without it they would forget how to use the technology they had. They wouldn't be able to find answers or move forward as easily. As much as it hurt to know what they had lost Jake could find so much information that could help their continued survival.

Feeling morose was a small price to pay in comparison.

"I'm sorry, man." Pooch sounded so heartfelt that Jake's smile softened.

"It's not so bad." Jake shrugged. "And I still get to look to the future too. I have things to be happy about."

Jake was a tiny bit surprised when Cougar's hand landed on top of his, resting on the wall for everyone to see. Cougar was usually more subtle than that, but Jake didn't exactly mind. Fact was that he felt a warm, grateful hum spread through his veins at the small but appreciated show of comfort. He flipped his hand, squeezing Cougar's.

"There's not much else to do, is there?" Pooch asked, but he seemed less sad than the words might suggest.

"No, there's not," Jake agreed. "And fact is that I'm actually kinda happy. Well, besides the fact that my settlement is in ruins and I have a megalomaniac maniac after me." He grinned at Cougar, who rolled his eyes at Jake's lousy attempt to lighten the mood. "But I'm not complaining."

Cougar scoffed but didn't object. Pooch gave them both a slightly exasperated smile before shaking his head.

"Yeah, I guess forward is the only way to go at this point," Pooch said, the look on his face making it rather clear that he was probably thinking of his wife and unborn child.

Jake merely hummed in agreement, clutching Cougar's hand a little tighter.
The tour was clearly coming to an end and even if Jake didn't mind spending a couple of minutes in surprisingly companionable silence with Pooch he was itching to get back to Beth. Jess had explained that she probably wouldn't be back until after dinner and Jake didn't want Beth to be without either of them for too long. Maybe he was babying her just a tiny bit or maybe he just wanted to reassure himself, now that he finally had her within a reasonable distance again. Pooch seemed to understand either way and Cougar would probably never question Jake's need to be there for his niece.

Jake wanted to tell Pooch that they could easily find their way back to the apartment building without him, but Jake suspected that Pooch wouldn't allow them to wander off on their own, mostly due to the security aspect. And it wasn't like Jake minded the company. Cougar was great and all but it was nice to have someone who replied to the things Jake said with actual words rather than just various facial expressions. Jake loved Cougar and every little quirk of his, but he wasn't the best conversationalist, simple as that.

They had barely finished descending the narrow stairs leading down from the wall before Jake was trying to convince Pooch to let him tinker with the cars again – or maybe even some of the tech Jake had seen at the town hall. A lot of it was outdated and basically falling apart, but some tender, loving care could work miracles and Jake was always eager to help. He might even be able to get the Internet going if they allowed him to locate the cables and transmitters for that, but he wasn't sure if they'd be willing to do that.

Pooch seemed hesitant, as if he just now realized how easily Jake could sabotage them if he wanted to. Jake wasn't insulted by it, even if he felt that it was a bit too late to get that paranoid, considering that he had already been fixing some of the cars.

He was just about to argue his point when a couple of indistinct shouts behind them caught Pooch's attention. They were just about to turn the first corner so the wall was still within sight, as was the quickly gathering cluster of guards on top of it. Jake couldn't see all that well, even with his new glasses, but it looked to him like people were pointing at something on the other side, while the shouts grew increasingly alarmed.

Jake felt dread lodge in his throat. That wasn't good. That wasn't good at all and he only needed to glance in Cougar's direction to see that he was thinking the same thing. Which was why neither of them hesitated before following Pooch as he ran back towards the commotion.

Jake's sense of foreboding only grew when they came close enough to hear the shouts echoing through the cold air.

"What the heck is that?"

"Is it coming this way?"

Some guards were milling about by the station on the ground, clearly waiting anxiously for some kind of orders, while those up high were looking both confused and vaguely frightened.

"Someone go get Clay!" Jake recognized Roque's growly baritone, now tense with anger as he shouted down from his position on top of the wall. Roque clearly didn't like being faced with things he didn't know or couldn't explain.

Two guards rushed past Jake, heading deeper into the settlement where they would no doubt find Clay in the middle of a council meeting. While Jake knew that he and Cougar probably weren't welcome he was no more than two steps behind Pooch as he started climbing the stairs next to the gate.
Jake needed to know what they were facing, because he was pretty sure who was behind it.

"What's going on?" Pooch asked once they reached the top, slightly out of breath from their run. There was no mistaking the apprehension in his voice; Pooch had a wife and a child on the way – of course he would be anxious when something unexpected happened.

"We don't know," Roque shot back, his gaze straying to Jake and Cougar. "What the fuck are they still doing here? Get them out of here, Pooch."

Jake decided not to take offense to the harsh tone, if only because there were clearly more pressing matters to address.

"What's coming? Where?"

Roque didn't answer except with a low, threatening growl, but one of the guards – a grim woman who looked more frustrated than afraid – pointed down along the street that lead up to the gate. Jake braced his hands against the chest high wall and leaned forward over the edge in an attempt to see further. He was nowhere near falling but he could still feel Cougar grab a hold of the belt wrapped around Jake's waist – on top of his coat – as if to keep him from doing it all the same. It was probably just a reflex on Cougar's part.

Jake had a hard time making out the shape of whatever was coming down the street but it was definitely big and moving faster than Jake was entirely comfortable with. Jess' words were still fresh in his mind. Something heavier and bigger than a Nomad sled had been heading for the Lancaster settlement just a couple of days ago – Jake had seen the tracks himself – and he didn't doubt for a second that whatever it was it had caught up with them.

He leaned back again, looking around before holding out his hand to the closest guard with a pair of binoculars.

"Give me." Jake wasn't even trying to be polite and the guard hesitated, throwing a cautious look in Roque's direction.

"I thought I told you two to get-"

"I can help," Jake interrupted, meeting Roque's furious gaze without as much as a flinch. Cougar was wary and tense beside him. "I probably know more about cars, vehicles and machines than most of you here. I might know what it is. Ask Pooch."

It was definitely not nice to put Pooch on the spot like that – especially since Roque was his superior – but Jake didn't have time to be diplomatic. Fact was that it wasn't exactly a skill of his to begin with.

"He's right," Pooch confirmed, jaw clenched tight and worry in his eyes.

That probably had more to do with why Roque waved to the guard to hand over his binoculars to Jake than what Jake had said. As tough as Roque seemed he had to care about his men at least a little.

Jake accepted the binoculars with a quick nod before turning towards the fast approaching vehicle. It didn't take more than a couple of seconds for Jake to identify what it was and he felt his heart stop dead in his chest at the sight.

"Oh shit."

He hadn't even known that those still existed – much less in a functional condition. Suddenly it
made perfect sense that the gate at Jake's settlement had been pretty much obliterated.

"What?" Roque barked, clearly not a very patient man.

"It's-" Jake's breath caught when he saw movement up ahead. "GET DOWN!"

Jake wasn't sure if he grabbed Cougar's arm first or the other way around, but they both ducked at the same time, Jake having enough presence of mind to drop the binoculars and tug Pooch down along with them. In the next second something impacted with the wall, the shockwave throwing Jake off balance. He fell backwards, colliding with Cougar before they both hit the ground. Someone screamed and Jake prayed that it wasn't because they had gone over the railing, but with how much the wall was shaking it was definitely possible. The metal underneath them creaked and groaned and Jake could smell something that wasn't quite smoke but made him think of the charred, broken remains of his home all the same.

Even when the quakes had settled Jake barely dared to move. Pooch was sprawled halfway across Jake's legs and even if he could feel Cougar breathe – his chest pressed against Jake's back – he twisted around as much as he could, catching Cougar's gaze.

"You okay?" he asked, voice trembling.

"Sí." Cougar's expression was tight with tension and something that could only be fury. Both of them knew that Max had to be behind this.

"Did it hold?" Jake blurted out, looking around them. "Is the wall still standing?"

It might be a stupid question considering that they hadn't fallen to their deaths, buried under the rubble, but he couldn't stop it either. The fear that gripped him at the thought of Max and his goons breaking through the wall – getting to Beth, Jess and all the innocent people inside – made Jake want to throw up.

"It's still standing," the same woman from before replied. She looked shaken. All of them did.

"What the fuck was that?" Roque demanded to know as he and the other guards struggled to get to their feet. Most of them had fallen over when the explosion shook the wall.

Pooch got up, holding out his hand for Jake in a wordless offer of assistance. Jake accepted, even if he stumbled a little as he was pulled to his feet. Cougar was far more graceful and Jake quickly reached out, grabbing Cougar's arm in a desperate search for something to ground him.

"A tank," Jake replied, the words slipping out of him in a breathless rush. Fear was slithering through his veins, making him shiver.

"A what?" Pooch asked, frowning. He seemed to be swaying slightly but otherwise okay.

"A tank," Jake repeated, swallowing down the thick lump in his throat. He had a hard time finding his words, even with Cougar pressed up next to him. "It's a military vehicle from before the Disaster. It's practically unstoppable thanks to the metal armor and it can shoot missiles and level entire buildings and-"

"Whoa, whoa! Slow down!" Roque ordered, for the first time looking everything but gathered. It wasn't fear – not quite – but definitely a healthy amount of caution. "What are you saying?"

Jake felt nausea burn at the back of his throat.
"I'm saying that we're fucked. If that thing has enough ammunition it can break through the wall. It might take a couple of tries but it... it can get through the wall."

Jake could barely breathe, his fingers closing around Cougar's hand and squeezing so hard it had to hurt.

Usually the wall was what saved a settlement from being run over by Raiders, but it wasn't without its downsides. Because if the enemy managed to breach it there was usually only one way to escape and that was through the gate – which at that point meant certain death.

This was no different. If the tank managed to break through the gate like it had at Jake's settlement they would all be caught inside with nowhere to run.

Jake could feel the panic rise but he tried to push it down, however unsuccessfully. He held Roque's gaze, even if he wanted nothing more than to look away and hide; to bury his face against Cougar's soft scarf like he had so many times before and just pretend that none of this was happening. But he couldn't. He had to face the fact that he might very well have signed all of their death sentences when he had refused to obey Max's demands.

Jake swallowed and tried to keep his voice steady, but everyone could probably hear it tremble.

"We're trapped."

Chapter End Notes

So this here is the beginning of the end. Only three more chapters to go, people! I can't believe that this will be over soon. It will feel weird when it is, won't it?

And yeah, I wanted to give Pooch some screen time because we need someone who's just genuinely nice. Also because I like him a lot. So there. And Beth and Cougar are adorable.

CarpeDentum is my beta and she's coming to visit this weekend! Woho! Mostly because it's my birthday tomorrow - happy birthday to meeeeee - and we need to do some snuggling. Take care, my lovelies!
Jake wasn't sure whether to be grateful or worried that no more missiles were fired. The tank still moved, rolling down the street until it came close enough to set its sights on the gate rather than the wall. It was usually an easier target; slightly weaker due to the fact that it needed to be movable. But besides that it was unnervingly uneventful, even if Jake couldn't help bracing for some kind of surprise attack.

A part of Jake knew that he probably shouldn't be standing there on top of the wall, watching the tank's progress, but he had no idea what else to do. Roque had ordered his men to spread the word of the approaching enemy to the other guards stationed around the settlement, and those that could be called in from other duties. It left the wall relatively unmanned, at least for the time being.

Cougar was standing next to Jake, staring down at the tank with his jaws tightly clenched and hate burning in his eyes. Pooch was pacing anxiously back and forth and seemed lost in his own thoughts. Jake didn't try to lighten the mood because he knew there was no way he would manage.

"Look."

Jake looked to where Cougar was pointing, not seeing anything but the deserted, snow covered alleys at first. But then there was a movement, followed by another. It was too far away to make out any details but the shapes moving between the buildings were inarguably human. A lot of them.

"Raiders?" Jake asked, his voice faltering somewhat. Cougar replied with a grim nod and Jake swallowed. "He brought an army?"

Another nod.

"Fuck." Jake rubbed a hand over his eyes.

Maybe that was why the tank hadn't gone to the Gallagher settlement directly after destroying Jake's home; it had met up with the Raiders arriving on foot. If they had marched from Max's base it would have taken slightly longer than for the tank.

"I'm sorry."
Jake blinked, looking at Cougar with a frown.

"What for? This isn't your fault. Just because you worked for the guy doesn't mean that you're responsible for his decisions."

It didn't seem to ease Cougar's guilt.

"I should have-"

"No, Cougar. Just no," Jake interrupted. He managed a small smile but it was weak and not quite as reassuring as he would have wanted. "I love you – you know I do –, and you can't shoulder everything. You didn't know. You said yourself that you had no idea about Max's plans and I believe you." He nudged Cougar with his elbow. "So instead of feeling bad maybe you could focus on helping me figure out how the fuck we're supposed to get out of this alive, okay?"

It took a couple of moments before Cougar nodded. He didn't look entirely convinced but he seemed willing to let it rest for now. They did have more pressing concerns.

"Is there anything we can do?" Pooch asked, obviously having returned to the present.

There were so many things Jake could answer to that and he had no idea which would be the truest and whether or not to lie just to make Pooch feel better.

"I'm not really-"

"Jake!"

Jess was climbing the staircase leading up to the top of the wall, Clay and Roque close behind her. She had probably insisted on coming along once she heard what had happened.

"Hi, Jess," Jake smiled faintly as she hurried over to him and Cougar. Without prompting he pointed towards the tank on the street below, knowing that it was what she would ask about next.

"Oh shit." Her eyes were wide in both surprise and dread. She had always been better at bigger machinery than he was, so he didn't stop her when she moved to get a better view of the tank. "I can't tell for sure what model it is. I never thought I'd actually see one for real."

"Does it matter?" Roque asked as he moved past Cougar and Jake, stopping next to Pooch.

"It does if you want to know how to destroy or incapacitate it," Jess replied archly. "That is what we're planning to do, right?"

The look she gave Roque was almost challenging and Jake wasn't sure whether to feel proud or worried. Roque didn't take the bait, at least not yet.

"What I want to know is how the hell they knew to come here. Or do they usually try to blast through the wall of random settlements?"

There was a big, ominous dent in the metal of where the first missile had hit, singed black from the explosion. Jake had tried not to look at it since he had a feeling that the gate wouldn't be able to withstand as much force.

"The first time I ran into them I was on my way back from checking up on your generators," Jake replied, voice softer than he had intended. "Even if I didn't tell them that was what I had been up to they found me here in the city – far from my own settlement – so they probably realized we had to be allies somehow."
Something in Roque's eyes darkened but before he had time to reply the tank gave off a high pitched beep, making them all flinch. Jake barely dared to breathe and he didn't feel the least bit comforted when a voice rang out, magnified through what he knew had to be speakers connected to the inside of the tank.

"Jake, wonderful to see you again." Even if there was a slight distortion it was clearly Max talking.

Cougar snarled something in Spanish and Jake didn't even have to guess that it was a curse of some kind. Jake obviously shouldn't have been standing there on top of the wall, in clear sight of whatever scopes the tank might have. Then again, it probably wouldn't have made much of a difference if he had tried to hide.

"I'm aware that you can't quite reply to what I'm saying, so I'll just go ahead and state my business," Max continued, his tone deceptively light. Jake ignored the concerned look Jess shot in his direction. "If you come out of that little hiding place of yours I promise that I won't level this entire settlement to the ground. I just want you, Jake, and I know that you value innocent lives, so I'm willing to give them to you in return for your cooperation."

Jake gritted his teeth, feeling more than one gaze stray towards him.

"And, since I assume that you might have a family to say goodbye to and things to pack, I'm willing to give you two hours. After that, well, you will have caused more deaths than I think your conscience can bear. So think long and hard before you decide, Jake. I'll be waiting."

There was no sound or telling click to indicate that Max's little speech was over but it was clear that he had stated his terms and was settling in to wait.

Two hours. Jake only had two hours.

Fuck.

Jake couldn't even look at the others, too busy holding back his panic and the torrent of guilt that welled up inside him. This was all his fault. How many more people were going to end up in the crossfire before he stopped being so selfish and gave himself over? He didn't actually have to build an EMP for Max even if he was captured. He could let them take him back to Max's base and then kill himself before they forced him to do anything. That could work, right?

"Well, it seems like the solution to our problem is pretty simple," Roque growled, making Jake look up at him. It was only then he realized that Roque had placed himself next to Jake – probably not by chance. "We just give them what they want."

Before Roque had even completed the motion of reaching out for Jake's collar Cougar was there, slipping smoothly between them to press a nasty-looking knife against Roque's throat. Cougar hadn't made a sound and moved so swiftly that it took a second before Clay and Pooch pulled out their guns, aiming at Cougar. Jake wasn't sure what to do and the click of a third gun being cocked – as Jess pressed the barrel against the back of Clay's head – didn't exactly help matters.

During a fraction of a second everything seemed to still. No one moved but it was obvious that hell would break lose the second anyone did. And in the middle of that stood Jake, unarmed and with his heart thundering in his chest.

"You're not supposed to have a gun, Jessica," Clay said, voice sharp but admirably calm considering that he was her target.
"Oops, my bad," Jess replied, voice dripping with sarcasm. Jake had no idea where his sister had gotten the gun from – she had obviously been required to hand hers over when she arrived – but he was a tiny bit grateful that she wouldn't just stand there and let them shoot Cougar.

Roque was glaring angrily at Cougar, but he held his hands angled away to show that he wasn't going to make a move that could potentially make Cougar follow through on his threat to cut his throat. Cougar was tense to the point that Jake could feel the hostility rolling off of him.

Pooch mostly looked uncomfortable.

"Don't. Touch. Him," Cougar gritted out. It wasn't even a warning; it was an order. One Roque didn't seem happy to be given but knew better than to object to.

"We won't," Clay said, clearly attempting to sound soothing, even if his aim didn't waver in the slightest. "We're not going to hand him over. From what I've heard about Max I doubt he would leave us alone even if we did." Clay was obviously ignoring the gun he had pointed at the back of his skull. "Stand down, Cougar."

Jake dared to reach out, his hand settling lightly on Cougar's shoulder.

"Hey, Coug, it's okay. You can let him go," Jake coaxed.

Cougar resisted Jake's gentle tug at first but the slightly stronger, second one made him back up. He was still glaring angrily at Roque but he removed the knife and let himself be pulled away. Pooch relaxed and lowered his weapon a couple of seconds before Clay did the same. Jess was the last to angle her gun away, and when Clay turned to face her with an almost reprimanding look on his face she merely cocked an eyebrow.

"What? I'm not giving it back," she said as she put the safety back on, before tucking the gun away in one of her pockets.

"We'll have words about this," Clay replied tightly.

"I'm sure we will," she shot back. She didn't seem the least bit remorseful.

Jake was still holding on to Cougar, almost childishly afraid that if he let him go something bad would happen. He knew that Cougar had reacted so violently in order to protect him but it was undoubtedly Cougar who would have gotten hurt if things had escalated.

"Where did you even get the knife from?" Jake found himself asking, not quite able to quell his curiosity. They had handed over all of their weapons when they arrived to the Gallagher settlement.

Cougar gave Jake a quick glance before flipping the knife over in his hand and holding it out to Roque, handle first. While Cougar's expression was blank there was a subtle threat and smugness to the fact that Cougar had used Roque's own weapon against him. Roque sure didn't look happy about it, accepting the knife with a grimace that was just one step below baring his teeth.

"Now," Clay began, "we have two hours to figure out how to handle this situation so I suggest we get to it." The command in his voice made Pooch's spine straighten and Jake almost fell in line as well. Clay's gaze flickered to the tank before turning to Roque. "Stay here and let me know if the situation changes."

Roque was clearly on the verge of protesting but one sharp look from Clay made him hold back, even if it seemed to take a lot of effort. Jake was grateful that Roque was given something else to do. Having him and Cougar in the vicinity of each other seemed like a bad idea right now.
"Come on, we'll use the mess room in the guard station." Clay turned and walked towards the staircase, clearly expecting the others to follow.

Jess did so without pause and Jake nudged Cougar to get him moving. Pooch seemed to hesitate – he probably wasn't high up enough in the chain of command to just assume that he was invited – but a nod from Roque made him fall in behind Jake.

Pooch seemed to have become somewhat of their personal bodyguard.

Despite the fact that they were clearly in a hurry Jake couldn't quite get his mind to start working on possible solutions. He was still caught up in the apprehension and fear, helplessly clinging to Cougar's hand.

Clay led them into the guard station which was empty of people, all of them having been sent out to fetch reinforcements from across the settlement. With an almost off-hand gesture Clay asked them to take a seat and even if Jake felt wired enough that he could barely keep himself from bouncing on the balls of his feet, he obediently sat down. He figured that he wasn't in any position to be difficult. Jess didn't seem to have such qualms, stopping next to Clay who remained standing, while Pooch and Cougar sat down at the same mess table as Jake.

"We need to take out the tank," Jess stated bluntly, arms crossed over her chest.

"No shit?" Pooch muttered, pulling his knitted cap off to run a hand over his shaved head. Pooch’s comment was gracefully ignored.

Clay turned towards Jess, looking about as forthcoming as she did. He was probably still pissed about her threatening to blow his brains out.

"Any ideas?" The tone was almost condescending and Jake cut in, if only to keep his sister from snapping something insulting in return.

"I can hack it."

Both Jess and Clay blinked, looking at him in surprise. Jake hadn't really thought of what he was saying and found himself somewhat intimidated now that he realized that he would have to explain his sudden outburst.

"I mean-... uh, it should be doable. It has an operating system like everything else and if I hacked it I could probably even steer it remotely."

There was of course a major flaw to that plan, which Jess wasn't late to point out.

"And how do you intend to get close enough to it?"

Jake licked his lips and scratched the back of his neck.

"I-... well..." He never finished the sentence, showing just how little thought he had put into the idea.

"I'm guessing there's no use trying to blow it up?" Pooch asked, but he sounded defeated rather than hopeful.

"No, I doubt you have the firepower it would require," Jess answered rather ruthlessly. It was probably only Jake who saw the underlying worry in her eyes. She was as close to panicking as he was but she was better at controlling and hiding it.
"And we can't run." Pooch closed his eyes, leaning his forehead against his palm. "And if we do nothing they'll just break through and storm the place."

Pooch had clearly also seen the Raiders on the other side of the wall, even if they had stayed back so far. They were no doubt there to function as foot soldiers if or when the wall fell.

The silence that settled over the room was suffocating. A part of Jake almost wanted to surrender, just to put an end to it all, but Clay was right: Max wouldn't leave the Gallagher settlement alone even if he did. They would probably be held at gunpoint to function as hostages to keep Jake from misbehaving, unless Max killed them purely out of spite.

"What do you need to hack it?"

Jake jumped slightly at Clay's question, looking up in surprise.

"Uh..." His gaze flickered to Jess but her expression was impossible to read. Jake swallowed. "Well, I'd need to gain access to its system somehow. Had there been some kind of Internet connected I could have gone through there but there is none, so I'd need like a cable or a USB with a remote-"

Jake fell silent, blinking twice. He shot up from his seat, excitement and hope flaring in his chest.

"I have that. I brought one. I took it from what little was left of my things back at our settlement." He caught Jess' gaze, seeing the surprise in her eyes.

"You have what?" Clay asked, clearly confused. Which was understandable since he probably didn't know much at all about technology.

"A USB-device that through a Bluetooth connection allows remote access and control-"

"English, please," Clay interrupted, holding up a hand.

Jake took a deep breath and started over, weighting from one foot to the other as he did, unable to stand still.

"A thing I can plug into another thing in order to take command over the second thing." Jake wasn't sure if he could put it any simpler than that and maybe he had managed just a little too well judging on the vaguely insulted look Clay gave him. Jake hurried to continue, "Bottom line is that if I can plug the USB into the tank I can use my laptop to remotely access the operating system and take over. And they're probably not equipped to handle the system beyond the controls, which I then could keep them from accessing. Everything is still based on electronics, even in such a big machine."

"But that still means that you somehow have to get close enough to plug it in," Jess said curtly, clearly not a fan of that idea since it would mean going outside the wall. That was precisely what they were trying to avoid.

"It might be the best idea we have so far," Clay countered, but he didn't exactly look happy.

"Then I suggest we think of something else," Jess hissed. "It's bordering on suicidal!"

"But it would cost less lives than the alternative," Clay argued. "We can't destroy it and while we have a lot of men at our disposal we also have innocent lives to protect – children, for heaven's sake. We can't risk a full-frontal attack. They have more firepower."

Jess stepped up into Clay's space, clearly getting more than a little agitated.
"Then who do you suggest should go out there to try and sneak up to the heavily guarded tank next to an army of Raiders, huh? Are you volunteering, Clay?"

"Jess, come on," Jake tried feebly, seeing how tightly clenched Clay's jaw was. "You can't-"

"I'll do it."

For a second Jake's heart stopped beating.

His gaze snapped to Cougar, who was resolutely looking at Clay and Jess, not Jake.

"I'll do it," Cougar repeated, making a heavy stone of ice cold fear land in Jake's gut.

"What?" Jake blurted out. "No! Absolutely not!"

The look Cougar leveled him with was both offended and chastising, as if Jake had no say in the matter. But he did. He absolutely fucking did.

"Don't look at me like that," he snapped. "They would shoot you on the spot!"

"If they catch me."

"And they might! Fuck it, Coug, yeah, you are very sneaky and incredibly resourceful but not even you-"

"He's wearing their uniform," Clay interrupted, his gaze fixed firmly on Cougar. "He could easily pass for one of them, and if he left the hat behind and covered up his face they might not recognize him."

Jake throat felt too tight to breathe through. It was as if the world was slowly closing in on him and no matter how hard he fought he couldn't stop it. Clay was right but Jake didn't want to admit it.

"I meant that I was the one supposed to do it," Jake tried weakly, but he could tell that he had already lost ground with Clay.

"You need to do the hacking, don't you? Would you be able to do it from outside the wall, surrounded by hostile Raiders?" Clay's tone was unforgiving and harsh, mostly because he must have realized that Jake was grasping for straws.

"Jess can do it." Jake had to try. He didn't want Cougar out there with the Raiders he had betrayed time and time again. If he was caught they would kill him, as opposed to Jake who would simply get captured.

"Not as fast or as well as you," Jess said, completely undermining Jake's pathetic attempts at turning the direction that this conversation was taking. He had all the right to be angry with her for that but at the same time he knew that if it was a choice between Jake's and Cougar's life she wouldn't even hesitate to shoot Cougar herself if she so had to. She would probably feel bad about it now that she knew Cougar better and had seen how much he meant to Jake, but there were few lengths she wouldn't go to when it involved protecting her family.

"Maybe someone else-..." Jake didn't even finish the sentence, knowing that he had already lost when he saw the look on Clay's face.

There would be no other volunteers.
Jess had Beth to think of, Clay was needed to command the troops, Pooch had his family and to ask another guard or Settler – who had nothing to do with this mess – was selfish. Cougar was the best choice, but that didn't mean that Jake had to like it.

"Jake-

"Don't!" Jake interrupted, before Jess got any further.

He turned away from the others, pacing restlessly as he tried to push down his anger. But more than anything he was afraid. Absolutely fucking terrified.

If Cougar went out there the odds of him coming back alive were incredibly slim. Even so his chances of succeeding were better than anyone else's – even Jake's. Cougar could get closer simply on accounts of being dressed like one of the Raiders; not to mention that he was very adept at being subtle and stealthy when necessary.

"What do you need to make this work?" Clay was clearly trying to sound considerate but it grated on Jake's nerves all the same.

"Ask Jess. She knows," he shot back, not even bothering to look up. He was too busy pacing and would have kicked one of the chairs if it hadn't been for how utterly useless that would be.

He could hear Jess say something to Clay but was frankly not interested in hearing what. He was just so angry and didn't acknowledge the others when they made to leave, obviously giving him some space. The door clicked shut behind them and Jake couldn't care less. He knew that they were on a time schedule and that he didn't actually have time for a nervous breakdown, but the others could handle it right now. Jess knew what Jake would need and she could get it from the things Jake had stored at the borrowed apartment.

Only Cougar stayed. Jake hadn't missed that. He could feel Cougar's presence as acutely as if he had been right in front of him.

"Cielito-

"Don't you fucking cielito me!" Jake barked, still refusing to look anywhere near Cougar.

Jake knew that he would all fall apart if he did. He was barely keeping it together as it was; anger, fear and panic mixing into a suffocating whirlwind trying to swallow him completely.

He flinched when Cougar touched his arm and quickly sidestepped, out of Cougar's reach.

"I have the right to be angry with you right now," Jake practically spat.

"I know."

Jake kept going as if he hadn't even heard.

"You setting yourself up to get killed is not going to help! It's stupid and it's reckless and I hate you."

"I know." Cougar's voice was far too soft.

Jake felt his throat seize up and he tried desperately to ignore the sting behind his eyelids. He stopped though, swaying slightly; as if he barely even had the strength to stand up straight. He rubbed a hand over his mouth and felt too exhausted to fight against Cougar's grip as it settled around his arm again.
"I hate you. I really, really do," Jake croaked as Cougar tugged enough to make him turn around. Jake's voice barely held. "Why do you have to do this? I c-can't stand the thought of losing-"

"I know," Cougar said gently, pulling Jake to him.

There was no way that Jake would have been able to fight that. He could feel himself crumbling under the desperation and panic, seeking out what little comfort he could. He slumped against Cougar, his hands gripping Cougar's coat.

"I h-hate you." Jake's voice cracked, muffled against Cougar's shoulder as he clung to him. He could barely breathe for the tightness in his chest and a sob slipped free, even if he tried to hold it back.

Cougar only hushed him, hugging him close.

Jake knew that Cougar couldn't be any happier about this than he was but he still felt unreasonably angry. Cougar didn't have to volunteer. Cougar didn't have to put himself in danger. Jake was so desperately afraid of losing him and to send Cougar out there – alone against who knew how many Raiders – was something Jake didn't know how to cope with.

If they caught him they would kill him.

But they didn't have that many other options and Clay no doubt thought that it was better to risk one life than that of the entire settlement. In a way Jake understood that, but it was just so difficult when that one life mattered so much to him as it did.

He didn't want to lose Cougar, not when he finally had him.

"I hate you," Jake whispered, feeling warm tears roll down his cheeks.

"I love you too."

Jake's only reply was a wounded, half-choked sob.

Clay said that it was better if Jake didn't come along to see Cougar off. They had chosen a spot well out of view of the front gate and the Raiders stationed there, where Cougar would rappel down the side of the wall. After that he would make his way to where the Raiders were and try to get close to the tank without being seen.

Jess had already taken Cougar aside to go through the general build of the tank and where he was expected to find the maintenance hatch with an USB-port. If they had had access to the Internet Jake could have pulled out actual blueprints but in lack of that whatever knowledge Jess had would have to do. She hadn't studied tanks in detail – she had never had a reason to – but even an educated guess was better than nothing.

Jake had left them to it, focusing on setting up his laptop in the guard station's mess hall. It was risky to remain so close to the gate if things failed and the tank broke through, but the closer he was the stronger and more stable connection he could get.
Jake worked on autopilot.

Well over half an hour had passed and the tension was rising. Cougar would need as much time as possible to sneak up to the tank without raising suspicion, so he was set to leave within a couple of minutes. And Clay said that it was better if Jake didn't come along. The official reason was that Jake might be seen but that was just bullshit and everyone knew it. If anything Clay wanted to keep him from causing a scene or refusing to go through with the plan.

But Jake wouldn't do that. Not because he had changed his mind – he was still against it and if it had been up to him he would have scrapped the plan altogether – but he knew that Cougar wouldn't want that. And it would be incredibly disrespectful and belittling to try and keep Cougar from it. As much as it hurt it was Cougar's decision.

That didn't mean that Jake was happy when Cougar arrived to say goodbye.

Jake was absently tapping away on his laptop, glancing up briefly before looking back at the screen. In the warmth of the guard station he could forgo his mittens and his knitted hat, which was only to his benefit since the mittens might be a hindrance to his typing.

He ignored Cougar during the first couple of seconds. He was still mad and he didn't want to say goodbye. He didn't want Cougar to leave in the first place.

Cougar didn't seem to care all that much about Jake's silence, calmly walking up to the table Jake was sitting by. Jake couldn't help stiffening when Cougar placed his hat next to Jake's computer.

"Keep it safe for me?"

Jake clenched his jaw so hard his teeth began to hurt.

"Sure." It didn't sound nearly as casual and dismissive as Jake wanted it to.

When Cougar's fingers wandered into his hair Jake closed his eyes and swallowed. They didn't have time for this – he knew they didn't – but he couldn't help craving it all the same.

"Jake."

He didn't have the heart to refuse, looking up at Cougar without even trying to hold back the fear he knew had to be blatantly visible in his eyes. The responding pain in Cougar's told Jake just how little either of them wanted this.

"Be careful," Jake whispered, knowing that he couldn't demand that Cougar would come back to him. He wanted to but he knew that Cougar would hate to have to lie to him.

"I will," Cougar promised, but that in itself didn't say much. He might still die.

Jake got to his feet and pulled Cougar in for a desperate kiss. As much as he hated all of this he wasn't going to be stupid enough to let Cougar go without having kissed him one final time. He wasn't going to do that to either of them.

There was very little comfort to be gained from the kiss, even if it was deep and searing. There was simply too much pain mingling together with the need, making it bittersweet enough to send a shiver down Jake's spine. He still let it linger, taking his time to savor the feel of Cougar's lips against his own and the taste of him on his tongue.

He never wanted it to end.
But eventually it did. Jake swallowed, his fingers stroking along Cougar's cheek as if he could commit his features to memory through touch alone. He barely even dared to breathe, wanting to postpone the moment when Cougar had to leave for as long as possible.

"I have faith in you," Jake said so softly that it was closer to a whisper.

"And I you, cielito."

Right now faith was the only thing Jake had.

And it nearly broke when he had to stand there and watch Cougar walk through the door, not knowing whether he would ever see him again.

It was nerve-wracking to just sit there in the guard station, waiting for the minutes to tick by. Jake couldn't even take comfort in the fact that Jess was there with him because she looked about as grim as he did. Possibly because she knew that Jake would never be the same again if Cougar didn't make it.

Jake's leg was bouncing up and down as he sat restless and fidgety, waiting for his computer to give off the beep that would mean that Cougar had managed to somehow – against the odds – connect the USB transmitter to the tank. But it could take up to an hour for that to happen, perhaps even more. Cougar wouldn't rush things. He would be patient and wait for the best opportunity, even if it cost them another couple of minutes.

It was impossible to say how long it would take for Jake to hack the system once he had a connection, but probably less than ten minutes; unless it was drastically different from the ones he had seen before. Once they managed that the tank wouldn't be an issue but getting Cougar back inside the settlement definitely would. There was a haphazard plan to have him climb back up where he went down but the wall was slick steel and even with a rope and people to help pull him along it wouldn't be easy.

Jake suspected that no one really expected Cougar to make it that far.

Minutes ticked by.

Cougar had left roughly forty-five minutes after Max had given his demands and that was more than half an hour ago. A part of Jake still toyed with the idea of surrendering in some delusional hope that it would save the people he loved, but he knew it wouldn't help.

This plan – no matter how suicidal it might be – was their best shot.

"How do you think Max got a hold of a tank?" Jess asked, probably just to fill the oppressive silence somehow. She had to have noticed just how much time had passed already and for every minute they had to wait they were one minute closer to being laid under siege.

"He has an old army base," Jake replied distractedly, forcibly keeping himself from reaching out to trace the brim of Cougar's hat that still sat on the table, next to Jake's computer. "He probably found it there."
"But how did he get it to run?"

"He's been kidnapping Engineers left and right. He probably had one of them do it." Jake's tone was flat and disinterested, his nerves getting the better of him. The pressure around his ribcage made it difficult to breathe and he just wanted all of this to be over. He wanted Cougar to be back inside the wall, safe and whole.

Jess remained silent during a couple of seconds before pulling something out from her pocket. She placed a handgun on the table next to Jake's hand, giving him a firm look.

"Just in case." She forced a small smile. "I figured you should have one too."

Jake swallowed and nodded. He knew she was right and he wasn't going to argue. If Max and the Raiders broke through they would be overrun, but that didn't mean that they couldn't kill off as many as possible before going down themselves. Not to mention that the longer they held out the more people might be able to escape in the chaos that would no doubt erupt.

"Clay is going to want to have words with you about this too," Jake said in a lame attempt at humor.

Jess' smile seemed more sad than happy.

"Jake, you know that I-"

The perky chirp from Jake's laptop made them both freeze. The command window for the remote access software was blinking, letting them know that it was online and had successfully connected to another device.

Jake forgot how to breathe.

"He did it. He fucking did it." Jake quickly turned to face his laptop, his fingers flying over the keys as he sought to establish a connection. Jess was hovering next to him but she seemed to know better than to say anything. The way she gently squeezed his shoulder made Jake's heart constrict, but he tried to ignore it.

The sooner he could gain control over the tank the better. Jake knew that Cougar was still in danger what with being surrounded by an army of Raiders, but there wasn't anything he could do about that. As much as it hurt to admit he had no influence whatsoever over what happened to Cougar.

The only thing Jake could do was to focus on the lines of codes and commands flashing across his screen. That was his domain.

Jake was so engrossed in what he was doing that he was barely even aware of time passing. It couldn't have been more than a couple of minutes but it felt like a small eternity, lost as he was in managing this as quickly as possible – for all of their sakes.

It was impossible not to jump in fright when the door was suddenly slammed open, Pooch standing panting in the doorway. Jake wasn't done but he could feel the solution at the end of his fingertips, definitely within reach.

The look on Pooch's face made all of that crumble in a matter of seconds.

"They--... they got him."

Jake's entire world ground to a halt. It felt as if everything around him was suddenly tilting out of
alignment, making him grasp the table in some vain attempt to keep himself upright.

"He's alive!" Pooch hurried to add, but it didn't offer much comfort. "But they--... they're holding him at gunpoint. They're asking for you."

Jake was on his feet and heading for the door before Jess had time to start protesting. He barely even heard her as she shouted for him to wait and calm down.

Jake wasn't calm. He was fucking terrified and he couldn't breathe and he didn't know what he would do if Cougar died.

Pooch was already heading back towards the wall but Jake passed him in his hurry to get there was soon as possible, climbing the stairs without even noticing it on a conscious level. He couldn't think beyond the crushing fear and dread. It seeped through his veins – cold and biting – and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Clay looked surprisingly sympathetic when Jake reached the top of the wall but he honestly didn't have the capacity to be grateful for it. As soon as Jake was able to look down at the street below he saw nothing but the man standing on his knees in the snow with a gun pointed at his head. Even if his eyesight wasn't the best Jake could clearly see that it was Cougar, his scarf pulled down to reveal his face and whatever he had been given to protect his head from the cold taken away. His dark hair was blowing softly in the wind.

Jake let out a strangled, keening sound.

This couldn't be happening.

He couldn't quite see Cougar's expression due to the distance but he was willing to bet that he looked angry. Or possibly the complete opposite, leaving him absolutely calm. That was the thing with Cougar; whatever emotions he showed it was seldom half-hearted. Sometimes the cues were subtle and sometimes he could be blank and unreadable, but it always went to his very core. There was something awfully genuine about it that Jake couldn't help admiring.

And Jake might very well find that he had seen it for the last time.

He was barely even aware of Jess joining him on the wall or the fact that Clay, Roque and Pooch were all there somewhere. He couldn't look away from Cougar, afraid that he'd disappear as soon as he blinked.

Wade was holding the gun. Jake couldn't see his face either but the posture spoke of triumph and smugness that only served to make Jake's heart sink further. His mind was frantically trying to think of ideas that could help solve this but he came up blank, time and time again.

The panic was too suffocating.

"I am very, very disappointed in you, Jake," Max's voice rang out, once again amplified by speakers while he sat safe and sound inside the tank. Jake might be just a couple of commands away from commandeering it but right now he couldn't focus beyond Cougar.

He needed to save Cougar.

"Now, I don't know why your friend here was sneaking around outside of the wall but I'm willing to bet that you care about him a great deal if you've kept him around for this long. I think you might be planning something, Jake, but I advise you not to." The pause that followed was enough to make Jake swallow and he tried to hold back the chaotic mess of fear and anguish stuck in his throat. "You see, Wade here would very much like to blow your friend's brains out and I'm
inclined to let him, unless you offer me something in exchange for your friend's life. Or should I say someone?"

Jake sucked in a deep breath. It didn't come as a surprise. Of course Max would seize the opportunity once he found an even bigger bargaining chip than before – one Jake wasn't sure if he could risk losing.

To give an entire settlement two hours to hopefully come up with a way to fight back against the Raiders coming to attack their home was one thing, but to watch Cougar get shot in the head when Jake could prevent it was completely different.

He couldn't do it. He just couldn't.

"You better decide now, Jake, because I've lost my patience with you."

It wasn't even much of a decision, truth be told. It was probably one of the simplest decisions of Jake's life, even.

He turned on his heel, marching towards the stairs without hesitation. He hadn't followed to where Cougar had climbed down the wall but he knew where it was, and that another staircase would lead him up onto the wall again. It was faster to walk straight through the settlement than follow the wall. The rope Cougar had used – the one he was meant to climb back up with – was still there. It could take Jake to the other side and down the wall.

His thoughts were spinning so fast that he barely even heard the shouts for him to stop. Pooch made an attempt to reel him back in but Jake shook it off, intent on doing the only thing he could.

"Jacob! Get back here!" Jess shouted, fear making her voice sound shrill and sharper than usual.

Jake didn't stop, already stepping down the first couple of steps.

"You can't, Jacob! Think of-

Jake whirled around so fast he almost lost his balance.

"I can and I will!" he snapped, his voice threatening to break even if he was practically yelling.

"You can't stop me!"

In a way Jake knew that he shouldn't challenge her like that. Jess was ruthless in her efficiency and while he might be able to wheedle and argue his way out of trouble from time to time he had nothing on her when it came down to it. She was just as decisive as he was but infinitely more prepared to act on it when needed.

Which was why it didn't surprise him to see her reach for the pocket where she had stashed her gun.

"Oh Jake..." Her expression crumpled into something that was part regret and part grief.

For a second Jake stood frozen, just watching as she pulled out her gun, clearly not caring about Clay's barked order for her not to. Jake hadn't actually thought that he would ever reach a point where his own sister would shoot him. For his own sake, bizarrely enough, but still.

But then, with a sickening lurch, he realized how utterly he had misjudged the situation – and her.

He felt his eyes widen in horror as she cocked the gun and turned, aiming over the edge of the wall, down at the street below.
"NO!" The panicked shout was ripped from his throat so suddenly that it hurt.

He was moving without conscious thought, stumbling back up the stairs.

The shot rang out before he even reached the chest high wall, much less in time to stop it. For a fraction of a second Jake tried to deny what had just happened. He tried to ignore what he knew would await him. But all the faith in the world couldn't change it. All Jake could do when he reached the edge of the wall, slamming into it with his hands bracing for most of the impact, was to suck in a gasping breath and watch as Cougar collapsed into a lifeless heap on the street below.

It was as if something switched off inside of Jake's head.

He just stood there, staring at Cougar lying motionless in the snow, trying frantically to deny what he was seeing. Trying to make sense of how completely the world had just been turned upside-down.

This couldn't be right. It just couldn't.

Everything seemed swallowed by some nameless, shapeless emotion that was swelling and growing, spreading under his skin and leaving him numb and cold. He would normally have swayed under the weight of it but now he just felt hollow. It was as if a huge void had opened up inside of his chest and he couldn't function – much less breathe – around it.

This wasn't happening.

This couldn't be real.

But a part of him knew it was, even before the first bullet whistled past his head; the Raiders had apparently decided to return fire. Jake barely felt Pooch's grip on his arm as he was yanked off his feet, out of the flying bullets' trajectories.

It felt surreal.

Every sound was muted save for the ringing in his ears and even if he couldn't breathe he found that he didn't care. He just sat there, slumped on the cold steel next to Pooch, completely swallowed by the growing numbness. He was staring at nothing, feeling the hollowness in his limbs and chest. It was a crushing, ruthless emptiness that he just didn't know how to fight.

His sister had shot Cougar.

Jess had killed Cougar.

Cougar was dead.

Jake sucked in a whistling, trembling breath, and felt something inside him shatter.

Chapter End Notes

I want to dedicate this chapter to all those of you who told me to read the comics (you know who you are). I mean, don't get me wrong here; I love you guys and I love the comics, but oh how it hurt to read them. Did you really think I wouldn't get back at
you for that? I can be quite vicious when I put my mind to it.

And, to the rest of you who are just reading this for fun, well... urr... hang in there! I know what I'm doing. (Kinda)

CarpeDentum betaed and she wasn't overly thrilled about this, if I put it like that xD
But she still has hope! Here's my Tumblr! Take care, my lovelies!
It was somewhat of a miracle that Jake managed to keep breathing. Everything seemed muted. Sounds were just a muffled roar in the background, Pooch's tight grip on his arm was barely even noticeable, and Jake's vision was blurry.

Jess had shot Cougar.

Jake had always known that when it came to choosing between him and Cougar, Jess would kill Cougar herself if she had to. And she had. She had made sure that Max no longer had leverage that could force Jake to surrender. It wouldn't save Cougar now.

Pooch was shaking him, trying to catch his attention, but Jake tuned it out. It felt as if he was swaying – tilting – even if he was sitting down. He didn't know what to do. It was as if he didn't quite inhabit his own body anymore, merely lending it. He felt detached and his skin didn't seem able to keep the chill and numbness from seeping in.

"Hey!"

The bark was loud enough to make Jake flinch and with some effort he managed to look up, hazily recognizing Clay's face as he crouched in front of him. Jake could barely get his brain back on track.

"Snap out of it!" Clay's urgency made Jake swallow, and slowly but surely other sounds seemed to bleed back into his awareness. He could hear the whistling bullets and shouted orders on both sides of the wall.

His vision was still blurry and he realized it was because of tears.

He was crying.

"Have you hacked the tank?" Clay had to raise his voice to be heard over the steadily growing noise around them. The negotiations were clearly over and all that was left was all out war.

Jake swallowed thickly before shaking his head. He hadn't. Cougar getting captured had felt more important.

"Then get to it!" Clay barked before yanking Jake to his feet, the treatment a lot rougher than Jake
was used to. Clay made sure that Jake was low enough not to get caught by a stray bullet and the harshness of it all – that and the next couple of words Clay shouted at him – served to snap Jake back to attention. "We can't let them get through. You know what will happen if they do. Think about your niece."

Beth.

Fuck. How could Jake have forgotten about her?

He nodded shakily, trying to push back the grief clogging up his throat. Jake wiped away the tears with a trembling hand, barely even feeling the biting cold traces they had left.

Beth. That was what he needed to focus on. He had to protect Beth.

"We'll hold them off for as long as we can," Clay finished, before pointing towards the staircase, as if he needed to tell Jake where he was supposed to go.

Roque could be heard shouting orders to the nearby guards.

A part of Jake wanted to refuse to leave. He couldn't leave Cougar. Not out there, with the Raiders. But he had Beth to think of. He needed to protect Beth.

"Jake, listen-"

Jake ignored Jess' words, tuning them out without remorse. He couldn't look at her. Maybe later, when they weren't under attack and Jake didn't feel so raw and vulnerable, but definitely not now. A part of him understood why she had done it but that didn't mean that he could forgive her.

Not yet.

He stumbled as he headed for the stairs, almost colliding with three guards who arrived to help defend the wall. The metal railing was cold under his hand, almost enough to burn his skin, and he distantly remembered that he had left his mittens behind in the guard station.

"Jake, wait!" Jess shouted, but she didn't come after him. Maybe Clay held her back.

Jake almost tripped on his way down the narrow staircase. Every second counted and he could feel the tension and urgency crushing down on him. There was no telling how long it would take before the tank started working on getting through the gate, and Jake needed to stop it before that happened.

The thought had barely crossed his mind before there was a deafening boom, the ground and wall shaking violently enough to throw Jake off balance. During a short, breathless moment he felt weightless – a shock of cold dread spreading through him – and then gravity claimed him. Jake fell down the last couple of steps, landing at the bottom of the staircase with a pained gasp. The snow was packed tight, not breaking his fall in the slightest.

He hissed at the sharp pain shooting through his left side but he didn't have time to worry about that now. He pushed himself to his feet and ignored how the snow seemed to singe his bare fingers, the cold seeping into his bones in a matter of seconds.

Jake stumbled twice as he struggled to right himself, sucking in a quick breath before turning to look at the gate. A huge, noticeable dent told him that it wouldn't take more than two hits – three at the most – before the gate would crumble. Already the metal was shrieking and groaning in protest after the force of the explosion.
The guards on top of the wall were shouting to each other, trying to help those who had fallen over. The flash of Jess' blonde hair – next to Clay's bigger form – made Jake's throat tighten, but he didn't linger long enough to see what they would do next and how the guards intended to defend the wall.

Jake needed to get to his laptop.

He ran towards the guard station, skidding through the snow and past the guards hurrying towards the wall. Some were shouting to the few civilian Settlers nearby to get back, away from the chaos at the gate. But if the tank broke through it wouldn't save them. Even if they hid in the most distant part of the settlement the Raiders would find them eventually. Terrified screams cut through the air when people started realizing what was about to happen, but Jake shut it out. He had to. He couldn't allow himself to get distracted.

Just as he reached the door leading into the guard station there was another loud explosion, making Jake flinch and duck low out of pure reflex. In the brief instance of stillness that followed Jake could hear nothing but his own thundering heartbeat, until the world seemed to catch up and get back on track again. Panicked shouts and cries for help were mingling with the sound of bullets being fired, even if Jake had no idea what the guards were aiming at.

He didn't look behind himself – didn't want to see the state of the gate – and simply tumbled into the guard station as fast as he could, heedless of how he slammed his shoulder against the doorframe as he did so. It was a short distance to his computer and he barely gave himself enough time to sit down before he started typing, trying to pick up where he left off.

His hands were shaking.

He pretended that it was from the cold but a part of him knew that was a lie. He still had to swallow back the tears, and the hollowness in his chest didn't seem to want to go away.

His eyes flew across the screen, snapping up the bits and pieces of code that would take him further. Jake barely dared to breathe as he hurried through the commands, typing as fast as his trembling hands would allow. He was almost there. He almost had it.

Almost.

The third explosion he heard like a distant rumble and felt it quaking through the earth, making the table he sat by – and the gun on top of it – rattle. Jake's heart stuttered in his chest and his blood ran cold, but he didn't stop. He could hear another sound too; a loud, wailing groan that he knew had to come from the wall. He didn't even have to be outside to understand that it was collapsing. He could hear it from where he sat and feel it in the way the entire room vibrated.

He had failed.

The cracks of gunfire seemed to multiply, as did the muted shouts outside.

The Raiders were coming.

Jake gritted his teeth and only gave himself a second to close his eyes and push back the panic-induced nausea. Even if the gate had fallen he had to stop the tank. The army of Raiders would be difficult enough to handle but it was doable, as long as they didn't have the support of the heavier artillery. He tried to tune out the noise from outside, focusing on what he saw on his screen instead. It was the best way to help the people fighting to keep the Raiders from advancing.

He hoped Jess was alright.
Ignoring the outside world worked almost too well, to the point that had he been just a tad bit more distracted he would have looked up too late when he caught a movement in the corner of his eye. As it was now he glanced up, recognized the color of the Raider uniform and ducked down just as a bullet whistled past his head.

"Shit!" he hissed as he scrambled to take cover on the floor.

Of course the Raiders would search the nearby buildings and the guard station was close enough to the gate that it was one of the first they would enter. Jake cursed under his breath as another shot rang out, making him roll to the left – away from the gun lying next to his laptop.

This Raider had clearly not been briefed on how blowing Jake's brains out would be rather counterproductive to Max's evil schemes. Or maybe the Raider hadn't managed to catch who Jake was before he or she started firing. For a second Jake toyed with the idea of announcing himself, just to see if the target practice would cease, but he never got that far.

The next bang he heard was closely followed by the sound of a body slumping to the floor and Jake blinked in surprise, before ducking low enough to look through the array of table and chair legs. There, just by the door, lay what he assumed was the Raider, and next to it he saw a couple of boots that looked surprisingly familiar.

Before he could think better of it Jake peeked over the edge of the table he was hiding behind, his hands rising into the air when he found himself at the wrong end of a barrel.

"Shit! Don't shoot!" His eyes were wide with surprise. "Aisha, what the heck are you doing here?"

Aisha raised a delicate eyebrow and angled her gun away before marching over to him.

"Where is Max?"

Jake blinked.

"Max?"

"Yes! You thought I would leave this in your capable hands?" She sounded even more biting and sarcastic than usual, which hadn't even seemed possible up until that point.

Still, Jake could adapt to new situations and embrace an unexpected ally when he got one. Aisha must have somehow sneaked in with the Raiders once the gate fell. She could easily have slipped past in the commotion.

"He's in the big vehicle outside the gate." Aisha was turning towards the door before Jake had even finished the sentence. He hurried to continue, "Wait! You can't get to him! Not from the outside."

Aisha paused but the low growl she emitted showed just how little she appreciated his interruption. Jake got to his feet and sat down in front of his laptop again, knowing his priorities.

"I'm trying to remotely gain access to it, so that I can take command of it."

"With him inside?"

Jake nodded, his fingers tapping away on his keyboard.

"I can lock the hatch, keep him inside it and make sure the tank doesn't leave. He'll be trapped."
Jake threw a quick glance in her direction but didn't try to smile. He wasn't sure if he could even if he wanted to.

"What do you need?"

That was one of the best things with Aisha – she seemed to instinctively know when it was time to compartmentalize and not let her emotions run away with her. She was clearly reckless and a bit on the crazy side, but also undeniably competent.

"Cover me," he replied without looking away from his screen. He knew he could trust her to keep him safe as long as he could give her Max at the end of it all.

"Fine," she replied, "but you better do it fast. There are about a hundred of them and not so many of us."

"I do some of my best work under pressure," he mumbled almost without thinking, sinking back into the letter and numbers on his screen.

It wasn't just that he wanted to take over the system – that he could have done already – but he needed to make sure that they couldn't manually override it somehow or take back control. That was the tricky bit. He also wanted to be able to steer the tank, to get it further away from the settlement if necessary. All of this took a bit more work, but with Aisha there he could at least focus on the hacking instead of having to worry about getting shot too.

Aisha played her role well, barely even hesitating when the next Raider came barging in through the door. Jake didn't look up, knowing as soon as he heard her gun go off that there wasn't any need for him to be concerned. She wouldn't miss – not now.

Jake couldn't say if it was anticlimactic or just underwhelming when he pressed the final key and the tank was his. There were no fanfares or outer signs of him having managed; only the softly glowing letters on his screen.

It didn't feel half as good as he thought it would.

He just couldn't help feeling that it was too little, too late. The gate was already destroyed, the Raiders had broken through and Cougar wasn't there. It felt like a defeat more than anything else.

Jake should have been quicker, then maybe none of this would have happened.

Maybe Cougar would be there with him instead of Aisha.

"Are you done?" Aisha asked when she noticed Jake's brief moment of inactivity.

He cleared his throat and nodded, hurrying through a couple of commands that would lock the tank and cut off most of the power, on the off-chance that there were some kind of manual means to control it. After another couple of taps a small window popped up at the top left corner of his screen. It wasn't a live feed – the USB didn't have the capacity to send that over the Bluetooth connection – but it was a photo from the inside of the tank, taken with the tiny camera attached to the main console.

"He's in there," Jake said in a voice that was surprisingly lifeless. Jake would recognize Max's face anywhere.

Wasn't he supposed to feel triumphant – especially considering the frozen look of confusion and fear on the faces of the four men inside the tank? It had been taken just moments after they must have realized that something was wrong.
Aisha's grin was pleased, with an unmistakably feral edge, when she leaned closer to take a look. Jake didn't share her glee. He knew that this was the reward for all of his hard work, and that he might finally be rid of the maniac that had been chasing him for over a month's time, but it didn't feel like a victory. It was already too late.

It wasn't worth it.

"Where's your shadow, by the way? I can't believe he's not here keeping you safe," Aisha drawled and reached forward to nudge the hat lying next to Jake's laptop.

His hand shot out, grabbing her wrist before she even got close. Even if he was squeezing way too hard Aisha didn't flinch. Not that Jake could know for sure since he refused to look at her.

"Don't touch that." His voice might have been low but there was no mistaking the steel in it.

"Jake?" She sounded confused – possibly even a little alarmed.

Jake had to struggle against the choking grief that welled up inside of him, frantically trying to push it back down. Now wasn't the time. There were still hostile Raiders let loose inside the settlement and Jake needed to decide what to do with Max and the tank. For now they could remain where they were – the tank was under Jake's command and Max couldn't get out – but sooner or later he had to do something. There was one option that he was toying with, but he wasn't sure if he would be able to go through with it when push came to shove.

"I think that-"

Jake didn't get any further before the noise from outside grew in volume. It sounded like orders to search the nearby buildings. Jake doubted they came from Gallagher guards.

"We should get out of here," Aisha said, wrenching out of Jake's grip as she looked around for other escape routes. The front door was probably a bad idea.

Jake was already getting to his feet, unplugging the laptop from the power cord. It had enough batteries to run for at least an hour. He snapped the lid shut, knowing that it wouldn't go into hibernation and nodded to another door in the far corner of the room.

"There's a window in the next room. Break it if you have to." Jake felt no remorse even if he knew that glass and windows were not something you should sacrifice without a reason. This, however, probably counted as one of the few times it might be necessary.

Jake hastily pocketed the gun Jess had given him before grabbing his laptop in one hand and Cougar's hat in the other. Aisha had already disappeared into the smaller office space in the next room and Jake arrived just in time to have to duck from flying glass as she threw a heavy, steel framed chair out through the window.

"They probably heard that," she said somewhat unnecessarily. "Get moving."

Jake didn't need to be told twice – he could already hear the approaching footsteps. It took some maneuvering to get out through the window, even after Aisha had kicked away some of the bigger shards of glass still attached to the frame. The sleeve of Jake's coat got a long, nasty tear but it was a small price to pay in comparison to what would happen if the Raiders caught them.

He realized a second too late that he should have brought his mittens and knitted cap, the cold settling in almost immediately. His fingers would be stiff within a matter of minutes and he hated the crawling chill that seemed to be hugging his skull.
"I need a building overlooking the gate," Jake called out as he followed Aisha down the narrow, snow covered alley they found themselves in. The Gallagher Settlers were apparently less diligent about shoveling on some of the smaller streets.

A sharp nod was all he received in reply and he was glad that Aisha didn't find it necessary to argue. She was moving smoothly despite the ankle deep snow, her gun at the ready, and Jake did his best to follow. It felt wrong to put Cougar's hat on his own head but Jake needed to have at least one hand free in case he stumbled. It was easier than to carry it and leaving it behind wasn't an option. He had promised to keep the hat safe and Jake wasn't going to break his word.

It only made his heart clench harder, however, and he struggled to shove down the tears and grief.

Not now. Not yet. He wasn't done.

Aisha seemed able to navigate rather well despite never having been inside the settlement before, soon taking them through a doorway that lead into a seven story building not too far from the wall. It seemed to be fairly unused – or deserted due to the invasion – but Jake didn't pay it much mind.

"High up. Roof if possible," he said in a rush, not quite panting but a little breathless none the less.

Once again Aisha complied without a word, holding open the door to the stairwell, allowing Jake to pass first – possibly to make sure that no one followed them. It was a tedious climb up the flight of stairs and Jake wasn't ashamed to admit that he felt winded once he reached the top. If he stuck around in the Gallagher settlement after this whole ordeal was over he would make sure that they started using their elevators again, if he so had to build them three new generators to sustain them with the electricity that would require.

The door opening up to the roof was heavy steel and the hinges groaned as it was forced open for possibly the first time in years. As soon as Jake was able to slip through he did, knowing that Aisha would have no trouble following him. The layer of snow was thick but not so much that Jake couldn't move forward.

Jake headed to the edge of the roof, ignoring the swoop he felt when saw how far down the street below actually was. He didn't have time to be afraid of heights. His laptop might be sturdy but its sensitive wires and circuits could only withstand the cold for so long. Fact was that he might very well crash it if he forced it to run in this temperature, but it was a small price to pay if it meant that they won the war.

The tank stood abandoned just in front of the wall, obviously having been on its way through the broken gate when Jake shut it down. His timing had apparently been rather impeccable. Jake couldn't see much of the actual gate with the other buildings in the way, nor the Raiders and Gallagher guards fighting on the streets.

Not Cougar's body either.

The only sound was the howling of the wind and his own harsh breaths.

"What are you going to do?" Aisha had clearly understood that Jake had something in mind.

He swallowed, staring down at the motionless tank.

"Destroy it." His voice barely sounded like his own.

A silence settled between them but Jake could feel Aisha move, until she was standing slightly behind his right shoulder, following his line of sight.
"Cougar is dead, isn't he?"

Jake closed his eyes, struggling against the burn of tears. He couldn't even bring himself to nod. Aisha had to be able to read the answer on his face. A part of Jake wanted to live in denial and never face the truth. He would break down the moment he did. He could feel it approaching, spreading through his veins like a poison.

Just a little while longer. He couldn't let himself succumb to it yet. He still had things he needed to do – things only he could do.

"You asked a while back what my reasons were. Max murdered my father and most of the caravan I grew up with when they opposed what he's trying to do – the weapon he's trying to build." Aisha's gaze was firm when Jake turned to look at her, not an ounce of weakness showing in her eyes, even thought there was plenty of grief. "I want Max dead because he took things from me that I can never have again – things that weren't his to take."

Jake swallowed and nodded softly. He wouldn't have understood what she meant before, if she had answered the first time he asked, but now he did. He definitely did.

"I can blow it up," Jake croaked, his voice barely carrying far enough to reach her. "I can remotely activate one of the missiles, but without letting it discharge. It will rip through the tank and kill those inside."

Aisha's eyes widened in surprise, but her expression soon settled into steely determination.

"Do it."

After a trembling breath Jake sat down with crossed legs, resting his computer in his lap. The snow underneath him was cold, seeping through his pants, but he wouldn't have to sit there for long.

"I need to move it first," he said as he started pushing a couple of keys, testing out the connection to the USB-device. It was weak but still functional. His fingers were almost painfully cold at that point but he forced them to move. "I don't want to detonate it too close to the wall and risk hurting the people or buildings inside the settlement."

Aisha didn't say anything, probably because there wasn't much she could add. She kept her sharp gaze on the tank as Jake slowly started giving the commands that would make it move. It was a whole lot different than it would have been if he was sitting inside it and he was practically driving blind.

Well, almost.

"Keep backing up..." Aisha directed, waving absently with her gun-free hand as if to tell him to keep going. She probably couldn't see much either what with the tall buildings blocking her sight, but her guesses were better than Jake's. "A little further. Stop. Now left."

Jake painstakingly followed Aisha's directions, trying not to think too much about what he was actually doing. There were people inside that tank – not just Max – and Jake was going to deliberately murder them. He had killed people before, sure, but it was always in self-defense. These men were practically helpless and he planned to blow them up without remorse.

Jake had to swallow down the rising nausea as he and Aisha guided the tank further from the wall, until it was on such a distance that it wouldn't damage the settlement. Jake kept typing without stopping, refusing to let his conscience take hold.
This wasn't payback – nothing could ever make it right – but Jake was sick of the fear and having to constantly look over his shoulder. He wanted it to end. Cougar might be lost to him but Jake was putting an end to this, even if it cost him what little innocence he had left.

It didn't matter anyway. Not anymore.

Cougar was dead.

Jake took the time to snap another photo, just to make sure that Max was still inside the tank.

He was, and seemed to be quite upset with how the big, hulking vehicle was moving without their consent and how the hatch didn't seem to open. Jake stared at the grainy photo with a kind of detachment that was almost terrifying, since it was so far from what he would usually feel when faced with someone's death – even someone like Max.

"Do you have anything you want to say to him?" Jake asked, voice dull. At Aisha's questioning look he clarified, "I can write him a message and put it on the main screen. He'll see it just before-
"

Jake wasn't able to finish the sentence, swallowing thickly instead.

"Just tell him that Aisha al-Fadhil sends her regards." There was so much hate in her voice that Jake couldn't help feeling a little sorry for her. He couldn't imagine what his life would be like if he had been forced to carry around something so dark and twisted.

It only took a couple of strokes with his keys before the message window opened. Jake took a slow, steady breath before relaying Aisha's words. A part of him would have wanted to see Max's reaction but another was too afraid. He didn't want to see the faces of the men he were about to murder – not again. He already had twice. That would be enough.

There were so many things Jake could write to serve as his own message to Max, but in the end there was only one thing he wanted to say. Just four words that summed up the reason that Jake even felt capable of doing what he was about to do. Just four words; that was all Max was worth.

This is for Cougar.

Jake closed the message window once it had gone through and brought up the one controlling the missiles instead. It only took three quick taps with his stiff, cold fingers to set it up.

His hand hovered over the enter key.

Just one more and Max would be gone. Just one more.

Jake swallowed, feeling the roll of guilt, grief, sadness and panic. He had no idea what he was doing. He was so confused; his thoughts scattered and unorganized, clamoring for attention. And underneath all that was the hollowness. The emptiness. The loss. The crushing, suffocating grief and the heart wrenching anger.

Jake jumped when he felt gloved fingers wrap around his own, realizing only then that Aisha had crouched down next to him, an unreadable look on her face. But he could see the understanding in her eyes. Not sympathy, but the knowledge of something he had yet to face.

Jake couldn't do it.

He wasn't sure if he wanted to cry out of relief or anger. He had to do this. It was just one button. Max would keep destroying settlements and taking lives if someone didn't stop him.
"Does this make me weak?" Jake asked, voice trembling.

He didn't actually expect Aisha to answer.

"Possibly, but more than anything it makes you human." She made it sound awfully simple somehow, and a part of Jake found comfort in that. "You're a good person – unlike me."

Aisha squeezed his hand – fleetingly almost – before she let go and pressed enter.

Jake held his breath, feeling disgustingly grateful that she took the decision out of his hands. It didn't decrease his guilt since he was the one who made it possible, but it helped none the less.

It only took a couple of seconds before a roaring, burning explosion lit up the sky and buildings several streets away. The force of the blast shook the earth and was enough to knock over two of the nearby buildings, both of them collapsing with horrible, wailing shrieks of bending and snapping metal, onto where the tank had once stood. Jake could only watch as the buildings crumbled, making even the one Jake and Aisha was on top of shake ominously. But it held, as did all the others. A big cloud of smoke and dust rose from the pile of rubble, billowing against the slowly darkening sky.

The sun was about to set.

Maybe if things had been different Jake could have found that somewhat poetic, but now, sitting there with his laptop after having helped kill the man responsible for this mess, Jake wanted nothing more than to burst out crying. He looked down, quietly shutting down one program after the other, allowing the brim of Cougar's hat to shield his face from Aisha's gaze.

He felt tired and worn. Empty.

"We should head down." Aisha straightened, obviously giving Jake a couple of seconds to gather his wits. "There are still Raiders out there and we need to let the others know the tank is taken care of."

"You're going to stay?" he asked in slight disbelief while closing his laptop lid again. He had thought that once Max was dead she would head back to where ever she had left her caravan.

She had gotten her revenge.

Her smile was crooked when he looked up at her, accepting the hand she held out to him. He rose to his feet and almost flinched when she patted his arm, a bit more roughly than he had expected.

"I guess it's the least I can do after the closure you helped me find."

Jake didn't know what to reply to that so he merely nodded. Aisha seemed to judge the conversation as over considering how she turned and headed back towards the door. Jake followed, trying with some fumbling to hold on to his laptop and breathe some warmth into his fingers at the same time.

A part of him had thought that he would break down the moment he was done, but as he followed Aisha down the many flight of stairs he mostly felt detached. It was as if he was moving without conscious thought and nothing around him really mattered. It wasn't the hollowness from before – not quite – but rather a kind of apathy to what would happen next. He was functioning, if only barely.

"Keep an eye out. Odds are that the Raiders are controlling the nearby area, unless the Settlers have managed to push them back out the gate again." Aisha only offered a quick glance before
she stepped out onto the street, certain that he would follow.

Jake did. He couldn't think of much else to do at the moment.

He still had his laptop in one hand and pulled out the gun with the other, knowing that right now he was more likely to end up in need of that than his hacking skills. He was far less agile and elegant than Aisha but they still moved together along the narrow streets, keeping away from the bigger ones where they could still hear the occasional crack from guns and shouting voices.

The war was still raging.

Then again, it only made sense since he and Aisha couldn't have been gone for more than fifteen or twenty minutes at the most.

When a Raider turned up on the crossing up ahead Aisha didn't hesitate to raise her gun and fire, the body hitting the ground before Jake had even had time to react.

"Remind me to never get on your bad side," he mumbled, secretly a little pleased when it earned him a brief but amused grin.

She turned slightly, as if to speak to him, completely missing the second Raider that followed the first, gun at the ready. Jake had just enough time to take aim and fire – mostly out of reflex and a flash of panic – and even though the Raider did the same Jake's bullet found its mark while the Raider's dug into the wall some distance from Aisha's head.

Jake let out a slow breath while Aisha stiffened in surprise.

"Not so bad yourself," she drawled once she regained her wits, patting him on the chest before she walked over to the fallen Raiders to claim their weapons.

She put away her own small handgun and grabbed the two assault rifles, holding one of them out to Jake. He shook his head, and after having given him a slightly judgmental look she slipped the strap for one of them over her shoulder, securing it as well as she could. She might feel safer with a heavier weapon in her hands but Jake didn't. Not to mention that he didn't actually have two hands to grab it with since he was still carrying his laptop.

They kept walking but at the next corner Aisha didn't have time to take more than one step before she was forced to recoil again, narrowly avoiding the bullets fired at her. She bumped into Jake and he had enough sense to step backwards, hearing her furious, sharp hiss.

She placed a hand against her shoulder, her teeth clenched tight in what Jake realized had to be pain.

"Shit! They got you? Let me-"

"No!" she snapped, shrugging out from under his hand when he tried to have a look at the damage. "We don't have time. I'll cover you while you cross to the next street, but you better do it quickly since there's more than one of them." She nodded towards the shielded street up ahead.

Jake swallowed, feeling dread and fear trickle through his veins. It wasn't far but he would be completely exposed. Still, he knew better than to argue and gave her a nod in reply.

She leaned out enough to fire back against the Raiders without posing as too big of a target herself. Jake waited until she signaled for him to run. He could feel one or two bullets whistle past but Aisha's steady, ruthless firing kept the Raiders from risking too much exposure.
Jake skidded to a halt once he had reached the other side, turning to face her, but she was already shouting at him.

"Go! I'll take care of these. You have to find whoever is in charge and let them know about the tank." Her expression was grim but void of fear, even as she was forced to duck behind the wall again, bullets peppering the corner.

"But you-"

"I'll be fine!" she persisted, glaring angrily at him. She might be bleeding and at a clear numerical disadvantage but he had to admit that he believed her. Jake had never thought that he'd meet a fiercer woman than his sister, but Aisha might very well be it.

After a brief moment of hesitation he nodded, already moving backwards, away from Aisha and the Raiders firing at her. He felt a twinge of guilt at leaving her but she was clearly more capable of defending herself than he would ever be.

"Don't die, okay?" he called back, slightly surprised to see the flicker of a grin on her lips.

"Right back at you."

And with that she whipped around the corner to return fire and Jake took off running. He had no idea where he might find Clay but he was willing to bet that most of the Gallagher guards had pulled back to the center of the settlement, protecting the living quarters and civilians.

Jake was so focused on getting to his destination that he missed the fact that he was being followed until a bullet flew past him, so close that he recoiled violently enough to tumble to the ground. The gun and his laptop slipped from his hands, both of them landing next to him in the snow. He quickly flipped onto his back, amazed that Cougar's hat still stayed on his head somehow, and sucked in a sharp breath when he saw Wade further down the street.

"I thought I saw you back there, Jake," Wade shouted while Jake allowed himself a moment to catch his breath, back pressed against the wall. "I had to take a slight detour thanks to your friend but I found you eventually."

How was this not over yet? Max was already dead and now he had to deal with Wade too?

Jake swallowed and looked around. He could easily lose Wade on the streets; he just needed to be careful and not panic.

"You can't aim for shit. But I guess that explains why you kept Cougar around." Jake froze at Wade's casually drawled words, his spine stiff and breath caught in his throat. "You could really use him right about now. Too bad that's not going to happen."

Jake wasn't an idiot; he knew that Wade was trying to get a rise out of him. The problem was just that even if Jake knew this on an intellectual level he still felt himself succumb to the burning, searing anger. He was still unbalanced from the grief, fumbling to keep himself together and he
just couldn't hold it back.

It was foolish to lean out from behind the cover of the wall. Jake knew that. But every single fiber of his being was screaming at him to do something. He could feel the fury and the hate spreading rapidly through his veins and he didn't hesitate when he raised his gun and pulled the trigger.

Too bad Wade did the same.

Jake barely felt it at first. It was just a tug in his shoulder – a vibration travelling through his body – but a second later he was falling backwards. The pain came when he hit the ground, tearing ruthlessly through his right shoulder, forcing him to clench his teeth around an agonized yell. Cougar's hat tumbled off, landing in the snow a couple of feet away.

Distantly Jake could hear a vile curse being shouted, but he was too caught up in his own agony to really notice. He tried to breathe through the pain but it was so difficult with how his nerve endings were screaming and his head was spinning. He pressed his hand against his shoulder but it didn't help much.

He had no idea how Cougar had managed to keep so calm while being shot.

"You fucking shot me."

It was an effort but Jake managed to look up, blearily catching sight of Wade who was moving towards him. His gait was uneven though, Wade's right hand pressed against his side and his expression furious. Wade's gun was in his left hand and Jake's was lost somewhere in the snow, his fingers too numb from the cold and pain to grip it anyway. He tried feebly to crawl backwards, away from the Raider coming towards him.

"Max is dead," Jake blurted out, not knowing why he thought that would make a difference.

Wade barely reacted besides baring his teeth in some sort of bastardized version of a grin before raising his gun, aiming at Jake's forehead.

"All the more reason to kill you."

Jake didn't beg. Fact was that he didn't do a thing. He just stared, frozen in place, waiting for the bullet that would end his life. For some unfathomable reason he wasn't afraid. He felt empty if anything. Like maybe this was always how it was supposed to end and he just had to embrace it.

A part of him didn't want to, because he had Beth and Jess. His family. His fellow Settlers. Pooch. Possibly also Aisha, no matter how weird that was. But he had no idea how to stop it.

The look in Wade's eyes said that nothing would.

"Wade!"

Both of them flinched at the sudden shout, their gazes snapping to look behind Wade. Jake felt his heart stutter to a stop at the sight of Cougar standing there, gun raised and his expression cold, hard and absolutely ruthless.

For about a second – perhaps even shorter than that – everything seemed to still. Jake had been through too many sudden shifts and surprises to fully grasp what was going on.

This made no sense. Jake must have lost his mind. Cougar was dead; he couldn't be standing there, just a couple of feet away.
The fragile, breathless moment ended when Cougar – without any kind of ceremony or hesitation – pulled the trigger. Wade's head snapped back when the bullet lodged into his skull but Jake barely noticed. He was too busy just sitting there in the snow, staring at Cougar. Who was right there somehow.

Cougar was running towards Jake before Wade even hit the ground, slipping through the snow in the least graceful sprint Jake had ever seen Cougar perform.

"Jake!" Cougar slid to his knees next to Jake, dropping his gun as he did so. A distant part of Jake's mind wanted to point out how reckless that was but he was too busy staring at Cougar's pale, worried face. Cougar said something in Spanish that Jake definitely couldn't catch but the anxiety in it was easy to understand.

The fact that Cougar was there in the first place – after Jake had seen him get shot by his own sister – was less easy to understand.

Jake was reaching out without conscious thought, his numb, useless fingers shoving the grey scarf aside and grasping for Cougar's collar, even if Cougar was trying to push his hands away. Jake didn't stop until he could pull open the topmost part of Cougar's coat, seeing the thick, black material underneath.

Kevlar.

"Oh, fucking thank you," Jake gasped out, fingers tight around Cougar's coat. It wasn't a dream. It was real. Cougar was really there. "Y-you're alive. Fuck. Thank you. Now I can die happy."

"No dying," Cougar gritted out, before he resolutely pushed Jake's hands away to reach for Jake's bleeding shoulder instead.

Oh. That was probably what Cougar had been aiming for all along.

"Did the two of you plan this?" Jake asked dizzily, the adrenaline rush fading somewhat. "My sister gave you that, r-right?"

Jess had shot Cougar in the chest. She must have. Wade would have shot him in the head but she aimed for the chest, where she knew there was bulletproof material meant to protect him. All Cougar had had to do was to pretend it killed him. The Raiders hadn't had the time to actually make sure.

"Not planned. Last resort," was Cougar's curt reply. He seemed more interested in tugging off his scarf and attempting to wrap it around Jake's shoulder.

"Great. So my sister shooting you was your last resort. Awesome." Jake couldn't hold back the sarcastic edge in his voice, even if it was beginning to slur slightly. "You two are never planning anything together ever again, you hear me? You'll give me a f-fucking heart attack before this is over."

He was babbling. He knew that he was, but somehow it felt better than allowing himself to really feel the relief and utter bliss of having Cougar there with him. Jake didn't know whether that would leave him crying or screaming. He couldn't grasp it yet. Not quite. It felt too surreal – too many emotional twists and turns in such a short amount of time.

Jake might be in shock.

Cougar gave him a reprimanding glance, as if he would rather have Jake be quiet for once. Jake knew that wasn't happening anytime soon, but Cougar continued to swiftly and efficiently wrap
Jake's shoulder all the same.

"I'm serious. Ow! *Fuck-*" Jake gritted his teeth to hold back the rest of the curse, knowing that Cougar was pressing so hard on his wound only because it was necessary. It still hurt thought and he glared sullenly, both for the excessive pain and the conversation he was trying to have. "No plans. WHATSOEVER. Not even for our wedding, you hear me?"

There was a brief yet noticeable slip in the fluency of Cougar's movements.

"Our wedding?"

"Well, hypothetical wedding." Jake thought for a second before amending, "Very possible wedding."

Now Cougar paused for real, seemingly caught between disbelief and bewilderment. His hands were still pressing against Jake's shoulder though.

Jake was beginning to feel increasingly woozy and wasn't sure if he would actually be able to hold on to consciousness much longer. Blood loss was a lot more difficult than Cougar had made it seem.

"Are you proposing?" Cougar asked with a stunned look on his face.

Jake opened his mouth but didn't reply at first. He just sat there for a second, *really* thinking it through. Amazingly enough the answer was pretty simple once he had.


It seemed equally easy for Cougar to grin back, even if he looked slightly exasperated. Jake could admit that his timing might not be the best but there was nothing wrong with his sincerity.

"Sí." Cougar's laugh was short but soft. "Yes. I will marry you."

"Fucking awesome," Jake slurred before reaching out, pulling Cougar to him in a tight, desperate hug. He wasn't willing to bet that he would be able to aim well enough to kiss him so a hug it was, even if he could only use his one arm. Cougar made up for it when he returned the embrace, almost as desperately.

It didn't take more than a couple of seconds before Jake started trembling. Everything began to catch up with him – the panic, the pressure, killing Max, Cougar –, making his breath hitch and eyes sting.

Cougar was alive. Cougar was there; warm and solid and alive.

Jake buried his face against Cougar's bare throat, not the least bit ashamed of the sob he finally – *finally* – let loose. He clung to Cougar with everything he had, even as he felt himself slipping. His head was spinning and his thoughts were muddled by the blood loss. He still refused to let go.

Cougar was alive.
No, I wouldn't kill Cougar without tagging it as Major Character Death. I'm not THAT evil. But with the way I had written it I had very few options on how to get him out of the mess I put him in. Poor thing.

Also, yes. This is Jake we're talking about so of course this is how he would ask Cougar to marry him. As my beta, CarpeDentum, put it: The least unromantic proposal ever. But it suits them.

There's just one chapter left now! And it's more of a tying up loose ends, letting everyone calm down and get settled chapter. I promise that no one dies!
When Jake blinked his eyes open it took him a moment to realize just why he felt so disoriented. He couldn't remember when he had blacked out or what had happened after it, but he figured that he had been given some kind of care because he could feel the itchiness of a bandage against his skin. Not to mention that he was dressed in his sleepwear, lying on a soft mattress with thick, warm blankets spread out on top of him.

Jake had no problems remembering the invasion and what had happened during it, his memories floating to him without any kind of conscious effort. It was all swirling around in his head, begging for his attention even if he tried to shut it out. He didn't need that right now.

The pain in his shoulder was almost unbearable.

He groaned miserably and blinked a couple of times, willing his eyes to focus even if he knew that they couldn't without his glasses. As if conjured by his thoughts he felt them being slipped onto his nose and he turned his head, meeting his sister's gaze.

Jess' smile was so soft and careful that it hurt. Jake wasn't sure if he had ever seen her look so uncertain before – or at least not in recent memory. She moved to sit on his bedside, her hip warm against his side.

"Hi," she whispered, placing her hand on his cheek. "I like your new glasses."

Jake couldn't help the sleepy grin that spread on his lips. While she might have seen them during the Raider attack it had clearly not been the time.

"You okay?" he croaked, voice raspy from disuse.

She nodded while her hand wandered into Jake's hair. He closed his eyes, reveling in the feel of her gentle fingers running over his scalp.

"Yeah, I'm good except a twisted ankle. Beth is fine too." She took a trembling breath. "Several of the guards died..."

Jake swallowed before his eyes snapped open, finding and holding her gaze.

"Pooch? Clay?"
"Clay got shot in the leg but they'll both live. Most of the Raiders retreated after you had blown up the tank. They had no reason to keep fighting once their employer was dead." That made sense, considering that they were hired mercenaries. Jess exhaled slowly. "The gate is being repaired but it will take months before it's fully functional again. There's a big supply of material handy though, thanks to the buildings that collapsed, so it should be fine."

A slow nod was all he could offer. Jake's shoulder hurt enough to make him grit his teeth and his thoughts still felt jumbled and confused, even if he tried to straighten them out. A nervous kind of urgency was growing in his chest and he didn't know how long he would be able to keep it at bay.

"You did well, Jacob." Jess's voice brought him back to the present. He looked up into his sister's blue eyes, feeling his throat constrict that the pride and sadness he found there. "I wish neither of us had been forced to go through this, but I'm proud of you. You did so well." Her breath stuttered and her hand moved, catching his hand and squeezing it tightly. "I'm so, so sorry, Jake, for what I did; for not telling you about it. I just knew that you wouldn't agree to it, and I hoped I wouldn't have to go that far. I... I could see how much it hurt you."

It was probably understandable that Jake felt panic latch on to his heart. Was she referring to shooting Cougar? But that didn't matter, right? Because Cougar had survived. He had been there. Jake couldn't possibly have made all of that up.

Jess must have seen the look of growing fear on his face, for she squeezed his hand again with a trembling smile.

"He's fine. Well, his ribs probably hurt but he won't admit to it, the idiot."

A quiet, amused snort made Jake aware that he and Jess weren't the only two people in the room. He turned his head, looking to his left, smiling softly when he caught Cougar's gaze. He was sitting a short distance away, leaning back in an uncomfortable chair with his hat tipped back just enough to show his face. Even if Cougar seemed pale Jake wasn't sure if he had ever looked better, simply because he was so undoubtedly alive.

"Hola," Jake mumbled thickly, wanting to reach out but finding that Jess was still holding on to the only hand he dared to move.

"Hola," Cougar replied, that fond amusement sparking in his eyes.

They were in the smaller apartment Cougar had been housed in when they arrived at the Gallagher settlement, probably because it offered more peace and quiet — not to mention privacy.

"You look like shit," Jake teased, not surprised to get an eye-roll in return.

"So do you, dork," Jess cut in before she leaned forward and kissed his forehead. "But I'm glad you're still with us, baby brother."

Jake soaked up the attention, smiling softly when Jess eventually pulled back.

"I forgive you, Jess, even if I have to admit that there was a moment when I wasn't sure if I ever could." Jake clutched her hand a little tighter. "Just... don't ever shoot Cougar again. Please?"

Jess' laugh was a tad bit on the shrill side but the smile she gave Cougar eased a lot of Jake's worries. She seemed almost fond of Cougar by then, if nothing else for the number of times he had saved Jake's life.

"I won't. I honestly didn't think that I would have to this time either."
"Amazingly enough I know you probably saved his life by doing it, but I would appreciate it if you didn't give me another scare like that." Jake closed his eyes for a second before a goofy grin spread on his lips. "Also, tell Beth that I need her to be my bridesmaid."

Jess' stunned expression was priceless. But it was a rather sudden jump, Jake could admit.

"Wait." Jake frowned. "Is it bridesmaid? Is there even such a thing?" He looked to Cougar for help, but he wasn't of much use, clearly struggling to hold back a laugh.

"You... Jake, what on earth are you talking about?"

"Cougar didn't tell you?" Jake was beaming at his sister so wide his cheeks hurt. "I'm getting married."

"Really?" She shot Cougar an alarmed look, as if asking for assistance with her deranged brother. Cougar merely shrugged a little helplessly, but the smile on his face said that he was enjoying himself immensely. Jess looked back at Jake, nodding in Cougar's direction. "To him, I hope?"

Hope.

It was just one simple word but to Jake it meant so much. Jess wanted it to be Cougar.

"Yeah," Jake replied a little breathlessly, happiness swelling in his chest, "to him." He didn't care that he sounded practically delirious – not considering the fact that he actually was.

He was getting married to Cougar.

Jess seemed to gather herself admirably quickly, clearing her throat before patting Jake's hand with her free one.

"Well then, I guess I better give you two some time alone. I need to check on Beth anyway and let her know that you're awake." Her smile was shining with warmth, answering his question before he even had time to voice it. "I'll bring her as soon as I can, I promise."

Jake nodded, satisfied, and watched as she got to her feet. She was limping somewhat when he headed for the door but she stopped long enough to bend down, duck under the brim of Cougar's hat and kiss his cheek.

Cougar looked about as surprised as Jake did.

"I'm not sure whether to congratulate you or feel sorry for you, but for better or worse; welcome to the family," she said as she straightened. She might have been smiling but there was a rather unsettling sharpness to her grin. "If you hurt him I'll shoot you in the head next."

"Jess!" Jake protested. "You promised!"

Cougar didn't seem insulted however and merely nodded to show that he had understood.

"And, Jacob," Jess continued as if he hadn't even heard Jake's scandalized outburst, "if you hurt him I'll confiscate every single one of your laptops."

That was not what Jake had expected and he couldn't help gaping for a couple of seconds. Cougar was looking up at Jess with surprise written plainly across his face, but she only patted his shoulder with an almost maternal smile.

"It's what family do, Cougar. Get used to it."
And with that she limped to the door and left the room, leaving behind a silence that was actually rather comical.

It took a couple of seconds for Jake to start laughing – low and a bit hoarse, but still.

"You are so going to regret this whole marriage thing," Jake said, beckoning for Cougar to come closer with a limp wave of his hand.

Cougar obeyed without hesitation, rising from his chair and taking Jess' place on the side of Jake's bed. Jake immediately raised his hand, curling it around the back of Cougar's neck to pull him down for a kiss. The pain that was thrumming through Jake's body – centered at his right shoulder – wasn't easy to ignore, but with Cougar's lips against his own he almost managed.

"I'm glad you're alive," Jake mumbled once they parted, even if Cougar chose to linger, leaning over him with one hand braced against the bed next to Jake's head.

"I could say the same."

Jake smiled, playing with a lock of Cougar's hair. He just loved feeling it twist and curl around his fingers.

"Yeah, sorry about that. I should have known better." Wade had gotten to him far too easily. Jake cleared his throat and met Cougar's gaze. "How bad is it? My shoulder, I mean."

"You'll live," Cougar replied, catching Jake's hand with his own in order to press a kiss against his fingers. It tickled but Jake would never dream of pulling away. "It will scar. Maybe limit your movements somewhat."

"That's not so bad." And Jake absolutely meant that. It could have been so much worse and he knew that he was lucky that the bullet hadn't hit closer to his chest. His thumb ghosted over Cougar's lips. "What happened to Aisha?"

"She found us. Told me what you two did." There was no judgment in Cougar's voice – that would have been awfully hypocritical of him – but Jake couldn't help flinching all the same. Cougar lowered their hands, squeezing reassuringly. "Then she left."

"So it's over?" Jake couldn't help the tinge of hopefulness to his voice.

He so desperately wanted it to be over.

Cougar nodded, bending down the last distance between them to rest their foreheads together. It felt natural to close his eyes and soak in the wordless, effortless comfort Cougar offered, just by being there.

"How long was I out?" Jake mumbled without even bothering to open his eyes.

"A day and a half." There was a slight pause. "I was worried, cielito."

The nickname was enough to relax Jake even further. His shoulder still hurt but right then and there he felt pretty pleased. It was manageable pain.

"Did you know that you always start talking Spanish when you're stressed or upset?" Jake wasn't sure where it came from but it was something he had noticed long ago.

"Sí." Cougar didn't seem stumped, perhaps because he was used to Jake's flickering attention span.
"But also when you're really happy." Jake opened his eyes, looking up at Cougar. "I'm glad I can make you that happy, even if I worry you from time to time too."

Cougar's smile was that fond, indulgent one that was always a little bit exasperated – as if he tried to stop himself from succumbing to Jake's charms but couldn't.

"I manage."

There was no stopping the grin spreading on Jake's lips.

"You better, because you're going to be stuck with me for life from now on." It was meant to be teasing and cheeky but it was ruined somewhat by how Cougar leaned down and pressed a sweet, lingering kiss against Jake's lips. It caused a flutter in Jake's heartbeat and he rose to meet it, whimpering disappointedly when Cougar pulled back.

There was an achingly soft smile on Cougar's lips.

"Gladly," was all he said.

It wasn't until Jake could see Beth again that he finally allowed himself to relax completely. She came tipping nervously into his room later that day with Jess pushing her gently towards Jake. Beth was still careful when she approached and climbed up to sit next to him. She must have been told that he was injured and that she needed to take extra care not to hurt him.

"Hi, sweetheart." Jake smiled and reached out with his good hand to bop her on the nose.

Beth giggled and caught his hand with both of hers, her small, delicate fingers wrapping around his much bigger ones. The grip was just a little too tight, revealing how worried she must be. Jake's heart ached when he saw the somber look on her face and the hesitant way she bit her lip.

"My right shoulder got hurt," he said, smiling softly before tugging encouragingly on her hands. "But my left is just fine."

Beth seemed to understand what he was offering, crawling up along the bed until she could curl up beside him, pressed against his left side. She buried her face against his shoulder and he placed a kiss on top of her tiny, blonde head. Jess took a seat on the chair, looking at them with fondness in her eyes.

Cougar was for once not in the room since Jess had dictatorially sent him to bed. He had apparently refused to leave Jake's side the past day and a half and had slept very little because of it. That's not to say that Cougar had gone willingly and the staring match between Jess and Cougar was resolved only when Jake intervened with the full backing of his pleading puppy eyes. Cougar would probably be back in another two hours or so, but at least he wouldn't look quite as exhausted when he did.

For now though Jake could focus on Beth, who was snuggling up to him with heartbreaking determination. Jake didn't know what Jess had told her, but Beth was clearly worried; which she had right to be considering the attack and the fact that Jake had gotten hurt during it.
"I'll be fine, honey, I promise." Jake's left arm was looped around Beth, holding her close for both of their sakes. He felt a smile tug at his lips. "If nothing else because I have a wedding to plan."

Beth’s head popped up at that, her big, blue eyes wide with surprise.

"A wedding?" she sounded doubtful, but there was a trace of budding delight there too.

Jess had obviously not told her then. Jake was quite happy to be given the honors.

"Uh-huh." He nodded seriously. "And your mom is not allowed to help plan it so I'm in need of an assistant. Can you think of someone who would want to help me with that?"

"Oh! Me! I want to!" Beth replied excitedly, barely remembering not to bounce up and down and risk jostling his injuries.

There might not be a lot to plan – not compared to the kind of weddings Jake had seen that people before the Disaster had – but he would embrace any chance he got to make Beth happy. It would give her something else to think about than Jake being confined to bed and the fact that they didn't actually have a home anymore.

"Who's getting married?" Beth asked curiously.

"I am, to Cougar," he stated proudly, ignoring how Jess rolled her eyes at his stupidly happy grin.

Beth's squeal was high-pitched enough to make Jake's ears ring but he could do nothing but laugh helplessly as she wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him tight.

"I'm so happy for you!" Beth squeezed a little harder. "I love you, Uncle Jake."

"I love you too, sweetheart," he replied, placing his hand at the back of her head and holding her as close as he possibly could with just the use of one arm. "More than you can ever imagine."

Jess just kept smiling.

As much as Jake had expected his laptop to be banged up he was still distraught when he realized that it was broken beyond repair. Several of the wires were fried and the melted snow had caused water damage once it had been brought inside. Jake wasn't inconsolable since he was able to salvage the files on his hard drive with the help of his backup laptop, but he still mourned it. Computers were difficult to come by and while he had more than one his favorite was obviously only useful if he wanted parts to repair others in the future.

Jake tried not to sulk. Getting used to his backup computer as his main one was difficult though, even more so considering that he only had one hand to work with. Even if Jess allowed him to get out of bed within two days after getting shot he still had to have his right arm in a sling not to put too much strain on the healing hole in his shoulder.

As soon as he felt up for it Jake took a walk through the settlement.
A part of him half expected to be stopped or at the very least required to bring someone along that would keep an eye on him, but the Gallagher Settlers didn't seem to mind his presence. With a jolt Jake realized that they must have been told that he had destroyed the tank and showed their gratitude by being more friendly and trusting.

He couldn't help wondering if they had also had it explained that he was the cause for them getting attacked in the first place.

Jake was pretty certain that he would never get over the guilt he felt, especially not when he attended the memorial service for those who had fallen during the siege, standing amongst mourning families and friends. It was only three days after the attack, the gate still nothing more than a flimsy excuse for protection and the streets closest to it still looking like a war zone, riddled with bullet holes and flashes of crimson mixed in with the pure, white snow.

The dead Raiders had been transported to the far end of the city and burned. Usually burning the bodies was a courtesy bestowed only those who actually belonged to the settlement, but this time it had been deemed wiser lest they wanted scavengers to arrive, thanks to the huge number of bodies needed to be disposed of.

Jake hated what had become of the Gallagher settlement, all because of him. People were quieter and the children kept indoors – as if they feared that the Raiders would return. Every able person who could be spared were helping out with either the work on the gate or cleaning up the streets, trying to get the settlement back on its feet. Jake admired their tenaciousness and resilience, but it didn't ease his guilt.

None of it would have been necessary if it hadn't been for him.

That thought kept gnawing on his conscience and the more he saw of the devastation the angrier he got. The Gallagher settlement might be bigger than Jake's had been but they were still less advanced in certain aspects, simply due to the lack of their own Engineer. But Jake could change that, with some time. He had no idea how long they were expected to stay there at the Gallagher settlement – they had never discussed it and at the moment it was more important to recover from the Raider attack – but that didn't mean that Jake had to remain idle. The Gallagher settlement had not only taken them in at their time of need but defended them at the cost of their own. Jake knew that not many would.

So he started planning.

It was one of the few things he could do without the use of both of his hands. During his walks Jake began mapping out the power grid, where all the other cables lay and how to improve it. He wasn't sure if the council would be interested in hearing his suggestions but he needed to do something to show his gratitude.

On the fifth day after the attack Jake had gotten used to the dull, throbbing pain in his shoulder, and sat cross-legged with his computer in his lap, trying to map the layout of the Gallagher settlement. It was tricky with just one hand and took a lot longer than he would have liked. Still, it would be worth it once he could look at the final product.

He had pretty much moved into the smaller apartment with Cougar by then, and so far there had been no complaints from Jess. Possibly because she would rather not know the details about what Jake and Cougar were up to when they were alone, gunshot wound be damned.

The only one who complained was Beth, but that was mostly because she wanted to discuss Jake's and Cougar's wedding, even if there wasn't exactly a set date yet. Beth took her responsibility as Jake's assistant wedding planner extremely seriously, once in a while dragging a
somewhat bewildered Cougar into it all, interrogating him on his favorite color and other necessary details she needed to take into consideration. It was frankly adorable.

And Jake was glad that she had found something to keep her occupied.

Cougar seemed to help out with the work at the gate when he wasn’t with Jake or occasionally with Jess at the town hall, and Jake was grateful that no one seemed to question his presence – not even the Lancaster Settlers. Jake had a vague suspicion that it was his sister's doing but he wasn't complaining. If anything he wanted to thank her because Cougar deserved to feel welcome after everything he had done and sacrificed for them.

Jess was kept busy with the politics and when she had a spare moment Jake knew that she helped repair and service the vehicles Jake hadn’t had the time to get to, as well as checking up on the generators and other heavier machinery, as was her specialty.

Jake wished that he had been in good enough shape to handle his tools since there were so many things within the settlement that he could help fix, but he would just have to be patient and wait until he had healed enough to be able to get back to work.

Too bad that patience wasn't exactly one of his virtues.

Still, he had taken to writing down the things he could improve on a list, and once he was done mapping out the changes to the cables and power grid he would start working his way through it one bullet at a time.

It wasn’t just that he felt a need to repay the Gallagher Settlers for what they had done but he genuinely wanted to help them. He and his sister had expertise that the Gallagher settlement needed in order to become an even better and safer place to live. And in lack of an own home to improve – no one knew whether they were supposed to return to the burned remains of it or not – Jake figured he might as well make himself useful.

Maybe, if he tried hard enough, it would eventually help alleviate his guilt.

A week after having gotten shot Jake considered himself well enough to remove the sling, or at the very least find ways to work around it and actually get some tinkering done. By then the streets were as cleared as they were going to get, although the bullet holes remained. Most of the effort had therefore been directed to rebuilding the gate, which included transporting materials from the two buildings that had collapsed over the crater left by the exploding tank.

Jake wasn’t allowed to help with that due to his injury, but spent his time fixing up the electronics they had at the town hall – like the old computer and the projector he had seen when he first arrived.

Upon seeing this Jolene – who always seemed to smile in a suspiciously big sisterly fashion at Jake whenever she looked at him – took Clay aside for a brief but serious discussion. Once they turned to face Jake he could tell that something was up but he had a hard time deciding whether it was good or bad, especially when Jolene hooked her arm around his good one and started towing him deeper along the white corridors. Clay was walking a couple of steps ahead of them and Jake
got the distinct feeling that the man was smiling.

"Now, Jake, you have to promise me that you will be extremely careful with what we are about to show you," Jolene urged, patting his arm with an almost mischievous smile.

"Uh-... okay." He didn't know what else to say.

Clay lead them to a thick, steel door which seemed to be some sort of storage room, pulling out an old fashioned key to unlock it.

"You see, this settlement is older than most and while a lot of the things that they had in the city were destroyed in the Disaster the Gallaghers – when they founded it – knew enough to gather everything of value that they could find. A lot of it is still here today."

Jake gave Jolene a puzzled look but she only nodded for Clay to open the door, which he did with a decidedly bemused expression. The air rushing to meet them was stale and slightly colder, but not enough to be freezing. It was too dark for Jake to see what was inside but he still obeyed when Jolene pushed him closer to the doorway, pointing to where he would find the light switch. He obediently reached out and fumbled for a second until he found it, his eyes widening as the fluorescent lights flickered on, revealing several rows of durable steel shelves.

Technology.

The shelves were littered with various pieces of technology and electronics, stacked neatly on the shelves under a layer of dust. All of it seemed to be in pretty much pristine condition, especially compared to Jake's battered laptops and well-worn tools.

He could do nothing but stare in slack-jawed awe.

Jake had been able to gather a lot over the years through looting, bartering and what had been passed on to him and Jess after Marie had died, but he didn't come close to this kind of collection. It seemed to have barely been touched in at least twenty years and Jake held his breath as he stepped inside, reaching out to let his fingers run reverently over the smooth lines of the black box standing on the shelf next to him. It was a gaming console. He had never actually seen one of those before.

"We have no idea whether any of it works since we haven't had an Engineer in almost forty years," Jolene said, making Jake glance over his shoulder at her, "but we're willing to let you and Jess have a look."

"Really?" he asked breathlessly, barely able to contain the excitement bubbling inside of him.

"Yes, really," Jolene confirmed. "Jess also told us that your computer has broken down, so we'll let you have your pick out of the ones you find in here."

Jake had to be dreaming. All of these computers were in better shape than any of those he had ever laid his hands on and if they worked as well as they looked there were no limits to what he could do.

"One computer," Clay clarified, holding up a somewhat staying hand, "and on one condition."

"Name it," Jake blurted out, knowing that he might be getting way in over his head but unable to help it. He wanted one of these so badly he was almost bouncing on the spot.

Jolene's smile was patient and she gently stroked her big belly, probably not even aware of it herself.
"We don't want to be put in this situation again, where we can barely sustain ourselves, so the condition is that you teach us how to use and repair them." Jolene held his gaze. "We need more Engineers in the world."

Jake's grin was wide.

"We most certainly do." He moved in to sweep her into a hug, mindful of her belly but tight none the less. "I'll do it. Thank you. You have no idea how amazing this is."

Jolene's laughter was bright and happy.

"I'm beginning to see it."

Jake couldn't believe how lucky he was. He had never seen so much technology before in his entire life and never in this good condition. Not even Clay's threat to shoot him if Jake as much as thought of hugging him too could dampen his joy.

This was awesome.

Jake's feet were dangling off the edge of the roof as he sat watching the sun set. There were a lot of things he should have been doing but he had decided that he had earned himself a break.

After a month's time in the Gallagher settlement Jake was more comfortable and at home than he thought he would ever feel in the shadow of the crumbling city, but there were still times when he ached for the open plains that had surrounded his old settlement.

They had gone back to it, a little more than a week after the Raider attack on the Gallagher settlement, to salvage what little was left and to look over the greenhouse. It hadn't surprised him that all of the plants had died by then but it still hurt like a real, physical ache to see them brown and withered. He and Jess had fought so hard to keep them alive and it had felt like a failure that they hadn't managed to get back to them in time.

But there was no use mourning things they couldn't change.

Instead they had brought the machines and supplies back to the Gallagher settlement. It had taken some negotiation and convincing but eventually it had been decided that the Lancaster Settlers would stay, merging with the bigger settlement. It was mostly because of Jess and Jake. The council didn't want to let such a valuable resource slip through their fingers and they were willing to offer housing to all of those from the Lancaster settlement, as long as Jess and Jake stayed, sharing their knowledge and agreeing to spread it further to those who were willing to learn.

It was too good an offer to pass up on.

Still, the integration would take time, that much as obvious. The Lancaster Settlers still didn't venture far beyond the building now considered as theirs and while their dogs had been given a large pen they were still not allowed to wander freely. They were taken on regular walks on leashes however, and Jake often insisted on being the one to walk Mirage, Cougar accompanying them more often than not. She seemed calmer if both of them were with her. Sooner or later the
dogs would be comfortable enough in their new environment that they could be given more freedom, but Jake knew it would take months.

The same applied for the humans, who accepted the food given to them by the council but rarely interacted with the Gallagher Settlers if they could help it. Most still clung to their instinctive mistrust towards anything that wasn't familiar to them.

Jake didn't have that problem.

For possibly the first time in his life he could let go of some of his restraints, eager to share and learn from those around him. It would be wrong to say that he felt safe but he definitely didn't feel threatened or vulnerable either. Which might be partly due to Cougar, who always seemed to keep an eye on him when the occasion called for it, but more than anything it was because Jake didn't want to be paranoid and distrustful. He embraced the new people and the opportunities it offered him, spending a lot of his time at the busy market place.

He didn't have much to trade with, even if he toyed with the idea of building some smaller tools and gadgets that people might find handy, but until then he found it incredibly satisfying to simply talk to the people he ran into, getting sucked into conversations left and right.

As weird and unconventional as he was he never felt left out. It was a completely different environment than he was used to but he adapted quicker than most, absorbing the new knowledge with the kind of enthusiasm that Jess – and Cougar, to a certain extent – seemed to find tiring. Jake felt comfortable being himself, with all that entailed, and while that was clearly a bit too intense for most people he quickly made friends, simply on accounts of being happy and helpful. Jake loved it.

He felt accepted.

He thrived.

People were usually wary of change since it could very well mean the difference between life and death, but Jake could admit that he didn't mind the ones he had gone through the past couple of months. He still regretted putting so many innocent lives at risk and he still had nightmares every now and then about blowing up the tank and the people who had died during the siege, but what he had gained was definitely worth it. He had Jess and Beth, Cougar, Pooch and Jolene and to a certain extent Clay and Roque, who functioned like the grumpy uncles Jake might or might not be slightly terrified of, but couldn't help bugging the crap out of either way. As far as families went it was definitely weird and perhaps a tad bit dysfunctional but it still worked, and that was all that mattered to Jake.

He had a new home now and while it was a lot bigger, sharper and more intimidating than his old one he always had things to do and had more materials and resources to work with. There was also a group of six people of varying ages who wanted to learn to become Engineers like him and Jess, but more were expected to join as soon as people's curiosity had been peaked.

Jake's contribution made a real difference and he knew that it would only continue to do so, when he started working through his list of improvements to be made. Getting the Internet up and running was one of the first bullets he would take care of, quickly followed by fixing all the elevators.

He was going to make sure that the Gallagher settlement flourished.

The creak of the door opening alerted Jake that someone else had stepped out onto the roof but he made no move to get up or even look over his shoulder, knowing who it had to be. It only took a
couple of moments before Cougar sat down next to Jake, hat in place and some strands of his dark hair blowing in the gentle breeze.

Jake continued to smile, looking out at the view.

"Excited for tomorrow?" he asked.

Jake knew the answer already – could feel the expectant tension humming between them – but he wanted to ask, just to revel in it. Cougar took Jake's hand in reply; their skin not touching due to their thick gloves, but Jake could feel the distant warmth of it none the less.

His smile only grew.

"Beth is ecstatic enough for the both of us if nothing else." Jake's voice was laced with amusement. "I'm not sure how we're supposed to get her to sleep tonight, much less keep her under control in the morning."

"She'll tire herself out," Cougar replied calmly, as was his habit.

Ever since it was decided that they would stay in the Gallagher settlement Cougar seemed to have lost a lot of the tension he was previously carrying. If it was because he now had a home for the first time in years or because he felt that Jake and his family would be safe with so many other people helping to protect them, well, Jake couldn't tell. But it was obvious that Cougar was much more suited for the life in a settlement than as a Raider. Cougar might still think of himself as a murderer from time to time – when he got lost thinking of his past and the things he had done – but Jake knew better.

Cougar had killed but he was no murderer. Not in the way Max or Wade had been; not even close.

Jake looked down at their joined hands, reaching out with his other to push up Cougar's sleeve – no more than an inch – so that he could catch a glimpse of the still somewhat raw tattoo on the outside of Cougar's right wrist. It might be bordering on silly but Jake couldn't help wanting to look at it. A jumbled mix of pride, satisfaction and sheer bliss always seemed to grow within him when he saw the Lancaster crest on Cougar's wrist. It might not be on the inside where Jake's was – the scar tissue from the burn was far too rough to make it practical to add another tattoo – but it was still the same crest.

Cougar belonged with them now. They were his family.

Jake met Cougar's amused look with a goofy grin, before leaning forward for a quick peck. When he pulled back Cougar was smiling, his head tilted to the side.

"Carlos," he said, voice low and soft.

The confusion Jake felt made him pause.

"You've lost me," he admitted eventually, feeling a tiny bit dumbfounded.

"Carlos Alvarez." Cougar squeezed Jake's hand. "That's my name."

Oh.

It took a couple of seconds for that to settle. In a way he had always known that Cougar probably wasn't Cougar's real name, but it hadn't seemed all that important. But maybe it was. Carlos must be the name his parents had given him while Cougar was what the Raiders had taken to calling
him. The difference was huge.

"I thought you should know. Before tomorrow," Cougar said, before Jake even had time to ask why he decided to tell him now.

"Would you rather have me call you Carlos?" Jake had to ask. He didn't mind either way so if there were bad memories connected to either he would do what Cougar wanted.

Cougar shrugged.

"You choose."

He didn't seem worried in the least and his smile was irresistible enough that Jake just had to lean in and kiss him again. It took a while before he drew back.

"Thank you for telling me," he mumbled happily, smiling against Cougar's lips. "I love you."

"I love you too, cielito."

"Ready to announce it to the rest of the world?" Jake asked cheekily. "Because tomorrow's the day, mi amor, so you better be certain."

Tomorrow all of Beth's hard work would finally pay off as it was time for Jake and Cougar to exchange necklaces and say their vows. While most people would find it somewhat daring to allow an eight-year-old to plan a wedding neither Jake nor Cougar had found a reason why they shouldn't. Jake had helped of course, just to make sure that there were some limitations to his niece's no doubt healthy imagination, but Cougar and Jess had – as promised – been banned from any kind of decision-making.

Still, it was bound to be spectacular, and possibly also entirely pink and purple, but Jake wasn't going to argue about that.

Cougar squeezed Jake's hand, his smile tender.

"I'm certain." He really didn't need to say more since his eyes said everything that his words didn't.

Jake took a slow, deep breath of the cold, crisp air. When he exhaled the condensation from their breaths floated together into one big cloud in the space between them.

"So am I," he said with equal amount of conviction. It was one of those constants he knew would never change. Not now and not ever.

He would always love Cougar, no matter what.

The wedding was just a formality.
EPILOGUE

"Are you all set?" Jess asked, tugging on Jake's collar in a frankly ridiculous attempt to straighten his already flawlessly straightened collar. She was just fussing for the sake of fussing.

"Yes, Jessica," Jake replied, catching her hands before she managed to do actual damage to his clothing, "I'm all set. I've done this before, you know."

She pursed her lips and gave him a narrow-eyed glare, clearly not appreciating the sass.

"Need I remind you what actually happened that last time you were out of my sight for more than a day at a time?" she shot back archly.

Jake couldn't help it – he smiled, squeezing her hands in his.

"I'll be fine, Jess. Cougar will be with me the entire way – he takes his responsibility as my husband and wiser half very seriously, you know that – and Aisha is just as terrifying and competent as you are. And on top of that you have Mirage."

The big, white dog was standing a couple of feet away, looking out over the people busy loading tools, equipment and supplies onto the Nomad sleds. She must be thrilled to finally be outside of the pen without a leash, but instead of running around she lingered close to Jake and Cougar, keeping an eye on them like she probably always would.

"I'm in good hands, I promise," Jake said.

Jess didn't seem entirely convinced but he knew she wouldn't actually keep him from leaving; this was what they had been working towards for over two years. She wouldn't back out now.

It had taken longer than planned to get everything in order to return to the seed bank, mostly because of all the repairs the gate, wall and settlement had required, but it was finally time. A little over five months after Jake and Cougar had first left on the near ludicrous mission to find a forgotten seed bank they were returning, this time with a Nomad escort and enough equipment to bring back whatever seeds they might need to set up a substantial greenhouse back at their settlement.

In the meantime Jess was going to supervise the assembly of the machines and prepare the location for said greenhouse, making sure it was ready when they returned. They had the full backing of the council on this – partly because Jess had pushed for the other members to acknowledge just what it might mean for their future if it succeeded – but few of the other Settlers knew. Like before it felt better to keep it under wraps, just in case it failed.

Jake was certain that it wouldn't though.

He had faith.

He kissed Jess’ cheek before pulling her in for a tight hug. He couldn't say that he was happy about leaving since he knew that he would miss her and Beth – who he had said a tearful goodbye to back at Jess' apartment – but it needed to be done. They both knew that.

"We're gonna make it, sis. I just know it," he mumbled in her ear. A sense of purpose was thrumming through him. "We're going to save the world."

Her breath shuddered but she nodded soon enough.
"I know we will."

Jake could tell that for possibly the first time since they started on the project of re-growing plants she believed in it with all of her heart. It had taken two years and cost them a settlement – ruining several lives in the process – but now they were ready. It had been a struggle but now they finally had what they needed to make it happen. Everything was slipping into place and Jake knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that they could do this.

It was time to make the world start living again.

It was time to give it hope for the first time in eighty years.

He had faith.

Chapter End Notes

I almost didn't want to upload this chapter because as soon as I did it would all be over. We're done. It's been one hell of a ride and I seriously didn't think it would be as awesome as it ended up being. Partly because I wrote this in the firm belief than no one would want to read it. I just figured that it was such a weird AU that no one would care about it - especially not when it's like a full-length book. I am so thrilled to have been proved wrong and I want to thank all of you for your support, comments and kudos. It means the world to me. Thank you.

Small sidenote: Yes, they exchange necklaces instead of rings in this universe because wearing a metal wedding band is one surefire way to get a frostbite and loose your finger. I am full of this kind of trivia for this universe, but I never got to use it all.

CarpeDentum was my beta for this monster of a fic and I want to thank Jujitsuelf and Cleo for the awesome complements they did for this story, and for helping with encouragement and ideas.

If you have any questions - like said trivia about this huge universe of mine - you can find me over at my Tumblr. Thank you so much for sticking with me through this. I love you all, my darlings.

And oh! Happy birthday to Sunshine-and-gunpowder-densi over at Tumblr! I hope you're having a great day, love!
Chapter Notes

This is a (slightly belated) birthday present for the wonderful surgicalstainless. Hyperborean was the fic that brought us together — if you allow me to be a tiny bit sentimental about this awesome friendship of ours — and this scene was one we discussed and both wanted to see, but didn't really expected to be written down. But, as we all know, I am the QUEEN of returning to fics almost a year later and tossing out a bonus chapter, and this was surprisingly easy to write. I loved it.

This one is for you, Z. I am so lucky to have you <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Cougar wasn't quite sure what to expect.

When Jake told him to come to the greenhouse and bring Beth — Jess too, if she could be spared from her duties on the council — he was almost worried that something had happened. Jake had been anxious all morning, stiff and guarded in a way that was so unlike him. Cougar hadn't seen him look so serious in almost a year.

Jake had been distracted, sure, so caught up in the greenhouse and teaching the settlement about technology, but he never forgot to smile. Even when he was exhausted, having worked himself to the bone or been unable to sleep due to nightmares about the siege, he still smiled.

A tired, aching smile that made Cougar's heart constrict, but a smile none the less.

So Cougar was understandably worried, especially since Jake didn't usually keep secrets from him. Fact was that Jake seemed physically incapable of keeping anything from Cougar, and not only because they were married and lived in the same apartment. It was a matter of trust and security.

But Jake had been more fidgety than usual, clumsily dodging Cougar's attempts to make him explain what was going on. The secrecy made Cougar uncomfortable, but the way Jake had disappeared right after breakfast even more so. Cougar knew better than to follow, since there were times when Jake needed his privacy, but that didn't mean that he worried any less.
That he received a short email just after lunch with instructions to come to the greenhouse at his earliest convenience didn't exactly help ease his anxiety. That could mean pretty much anything, and Cougar was trying not to let his concern show, if only because he didn't want to upset Beth.

She was bouncing happily a couple of steps ahead of him, gushing about the new computer Jake had built her. It was impossible not to smile. He saw so much of Jake in Beth's smiles and gestures, but she was also strong and decisive like her mother.

Cougar would never stop feeling blessed for being allowed to watch her grow into what he knew would be a fierce young lady. Every time he looked at her he felt that maybe, if he did right by her, some of the deaths he had caused — children he had been unable to save from his fellow Raiders — would be forgiven.

If he gave Beth all the love he possibly could, then maybe the guilt would ease.

It wasn't as if loving her was difficult. Beth was a wonderful girl and Cougar felt as protective over her as he would his own niece. Jake always seemed to find that incredibly adorable.

Beth skipped over to Cougar's side, slipping her gloved hand into his, even though she didn't have to. They both knew the way and she didn't need Cougar's guidance. It was just a habit of hers, to take Cougar's hand when they were out walking, or crawl into his lap when he was reading. She never did that with the others, or at least not as frequently.

This was just for him.

Cougar wasn't sure why he was worthy of that kind of trust and affection, but it left him breathless, every single time.

He swallowed around the lump in his throat, looking down at Beth's smiling face.

"Did he say what we're doing?" she asked, eyes shining with curiosity.

Cougar smiled and shook his head, walking up to the thick steel door leading down to the greenhouse. He pulled back the flap on his mittens with his teeth, not wanting to let go of Beth's hand just yet. He knew the combination to unlock the door by heart, the steel buttons cold under his fingertips.

"You think he's going to show us a new plant?" Beth was practically bouncing from excitement.

"I don't know, cariño," he replied, while the door slid open. Cougar was still impressed by all the improvements Jake and Jess had managed to offer the settlement, automatic doors and functioning elevators being two of them.

The Gallagher settlement was flourishing under Jess and Jake tender care.

Cougar gently ushered Beth inside, letting go of her hand to push the panel next to the door, closing it behind them. The room was dark compared to the bright, snow-covered streets outside, lit only by a row of lights just under the ceiling, casting a dim, white glow over the grey walls.

Beth was already heading for the staircase, tugging off her mittens and hat as she went. Like always the air was almost too warm to breathe, and stood in such stark contrast to the crispness outside that Cougar was momentarily disoriented.

He followed after Beth, if in a more sedated pace, since he knew that she had to stop and wait for him at the next door. She could reach the control panel just fine, but didn't have the combination.
Only a handful of people did, and Cougar was still humbled to know that he was one of them.

Beth was jumping at the balls of her feet when Cougar reached the last step.

"Come on, come on!" she urged, mittens and hat stuffed into her pockets, while her scarf was looped around her neck.

Cougar couldn't help ruffling her hair when he came close enough, only grinning wider at her indignant squeal. He dodged her attempt to swat his side, and reached over to put in the combination for the lock instead.

The soft hiss of the door opening was enough to distract Beth from exacting revenge. Instead she chose to rush inside with an excited grin on her face.

"Uncle Jake! We're here!" she declared.

No matter how long he had known him, Cougar's heart always seemed to skip a beat when he laid eyes on Jake. The fondness that filled him when he saw Jake look up, glasses slightly askew and hair a tousled mess, was indescribable.

Cougar couldn't believe how lucky he was. He had never thought that he would find the kind of happiness he now had, together with Jake, Jess, and Beth. He had thought that having a family was something he wasn't allowed — not after all the atrocious things he had done.

Jake proved him wrong — Jake always proved him wrong.

Jake had tossed his coat onto one of the empty tables, walking around in one of his big, knitted sweaters — the jarringly pink one with a big, happy sun proudly displayed on the front. It had been a gift from one of the other Settlers and Jake had loved it at first glance, to Cougar's slight dismay.

Jake's sleeves were pulled up to his elbows, and Cougar saw the splash of black on the inside of Jake's wrist when he reached out to pull Beth in for a hug. Cougar had eventually gotten used to having an identical tattoo on his own wrist, but it had taken time. Being part of a settlement was foreign to him, after so many years with Raiders and Nomads.

Jake loved it though. He couldn't seem to stop tracing Cougar's settlement crest with his fingertips — worshipping it, as if it was irrefutable proof that Cougar now belonged with them. Jake's fascination for the tattoo was quite endearing.

"Hi, sweetheart." Jake always sounded so reverent when he held Beth, squeezing her tight.

It made Cougar's heart ache, just a little, to watch them together.

"What do you want to show us?" Beth asked, as soon as Jake had let go.

Cougar walked up to them, noticing that while Jake was finally grinning again, it looked slightly haunted — or maybe nervous? It was difficult to tell, and Cougar automatically leaned in for a kiss, hoping that it would soothe some of Jake's anxiety.

As always, Jake seemed to melt into the kiss, even if it wasn't a particularly long one. Cougar would never tire of kissing Jake, and it was obvious that the feeling was mutual.

Beth was giving them a deadpan look when they pulled away from each other — one she had no doubt learned from her mother.
"Hey, I am allowed to kiss my husband!" Jake defended, bopping her on the nose. She swatted his hand away.

"Uncle Jaaake," she whined impatiently.

Jake merely grinned and nodded towards the table where he had tossed his coat.

"Go take off your jacket and I promise I'll show you."

Beth rolled her eyes, but did as told.

"You too, Cougs," Jake said, nudging Cougar with his hip.

Cougar stole a quick kiss before obeying. The greenhouse felt almost too warm, so he wasn't actually complaining. But he was getting more curious by the second. Getting undressed meant that this wasn't just a quick visit, and whatever Jake wanted to show them had to be important.

Not that Cougar had doubted that — everything involving the greenhouse was important.

Ever since he and Jake had returned from their second visit to the seed bank and the first pots had been planted, both Jake and Jess spent a lot of their time tweaking the machines and watching over the progress. They so desperately wanted it to work, and now, when Cougar could look out over the forest of green, healthy plants, it was obvious that all their efforts had been worth it.

There were splashes of other colors here and there — red, yellow, and purple — where the actual edible vegetables were growing. The room was filled with life, the smell thick and earthy, and even under the glare of the strong lights Jake and Jess had installed it looked positively mystical.

It was beautiful beyond compare.

This greenhouse was quite different from the one Jess and Jake had built in their basement. The room was a lot bigger, for one, brightly lit and full of humming machines, maintaining the appropriate temperature and humidity. More than two hundred pots were lined up on the primitive tables, neatly labelled and organized after what type of seed had been planted.

Jake had also insisted on a computer station tucked in one corner. It was partly for the digitalized database and logs, but also so that he could remotely monitor the various machines, and be alerted if any of them malfunctioned overnight.

Getting the Internet up and running was one of the first things Jake had done after the siege, and sometimes Cougar had a hard time pulling him away from his surfing. Jake was adorable and Cougar loved him very much, but sometimes living with him was a little bit like looking after an unruly child.

Cougar helped Beth take off her jacket and piled both his and hers on top of Jake's discarded one, before returning to Jake's side. Beth looked expectant enough for the both of them.

Jake, on the other hand, was fidgeting, his gaze flickering from one object to another.

"Come on! Tell me!" Beth demanded, but it wasn't until Jake caught Cougar's eyes that the answer finally slipped out.

"It's time."

Cougar stiffened. His stomach seemed to squeeze from both excitement and apprehension. He walked closer, his fingers wandering along the bare skin on Jake's forearm, grounding them both.
"You sure?"

Jake swallowed before nodding.

"Y-yeah." His voice may have wavered, but his gaze was determined. "I'm sure."

That would explain why Jake wanted both Beth and Jess to be there. Jess was too caught up in her council meetings, however, but Cougar was fairly certain that Jake must have told her what he was planning to do. He wouldn't try something of this magnitude without asking her first.

"Come here, sweetheart," Jake urged, leading Beth to one of the tables in the middle of the room. He lifted her up to sit next to one of the pots containing a bright green plant — a fairly tall one, heavy with big, round vegetables. Jake swallowed and threw Cougar a quick glance, as if to strengthen his courage. "Do you know what these are, Beth?"

She looked at the plant next to her, stroking one of the leaves with her fingertip.

"To... matoes?" she answered hesitantly.

Jake was beaming with pride, and Cougar had to hold back a smile when he stopped to stand next to Jake.

"That's right," Jake praised, his gaze flickering back to the plant. "And now we're going to taste one."

Beth's eyes widened.

"We are?" she practically shrieked, looking at the plant with wide eyes, as if she had never seen anything more fascinating in her entire life.

Cougar couldn't blame her.

It had only been a matter of time before Jake and Jess reached this stage. They had postponed it more than once, in their attempt to gauge whether or not it was safe to eat what they had grown. The seeds might have been of top quality, but the circumstances were quite different from before the Disaster. There could be pollution in the soil or water, and Jake had agonized over the risks for weeks.

"We are," Jake confirmed. His hand shook when he reached out and carefully plucked one of the tomatoes from its branch.

Cougar knew he wasn't the only one who held his breath.

The moment was so monumental that it felt almost selfish that it was only he, Jake, and Beth who were there to witness it. But at the same time Cougar knew that Jake preferred to share this with as few people as possible, just in case their efforts proved to be in vain. Jake didn't want to disappoint more people than he necessarily had to.

Cougar wasn't worried, though. He had faith in Jake and Jess — in the miracles they could accomplish — and he knew they wouldn't fail.

Jake swallowed, staring down at the tomato resting in his palm. It was bright red and relatively small — not that Cougar knew how big they were supposed to be.

"Um..." Jake cleared his throat, holding out his hand towards Cougar. "You want to—"
"No." Cougar shook his head, pushing the tomato back towards Jake with a smile.

Jake looked a little lost. And Cougar could understand that, just like he understood why Jake was so nervous. Years of hard work was at stake, and Cougar refused to take that away from Jake by being the first to taste the more or less literal fruits of Jess and Jake's labor.

This was Jake's moment.

Even Beth seemed to know it, staring wide-eyed and hopeful, so excited that she was practically vibrating.

Cougar stepped close, his hand sliding up along Jake's back.

"Breathe, cielito," he whispered fondly, fingers rubbing against Jake's neck, until he could feel the tense muscles uncoil. Jake sucked in a deep breath — as if he was gearing up for a fight — and looked from Beth to Cougar.

"Okay. Yeah, okay," Jake mumbled. He looked just about ready to pass out.

The fact that Beth and Cougar was staring at him probably didn't help, but Jake seemed lost in his own little world when he pushed his glasses into place, before raising the tomato to his lips. He looked almost thoughtful, and maybe just a little bit dazed.

Cougar flinched at the sound Jake let out when he bit into the tomato. It was a mix between a whimper and an almost painful groan, and Cougar wasn't quite sure what to do with that. Jake pulled back a little, cupping his other hand under the tomato, catching a drop of juice in his palm. His eyes were wide and glassy, and he seemed near choking when he attempted to chew.

"Jake?" Cougar tried not to sound too alarmed, not with Beth there, but she was looking worried enough all on her own.

It wasn't until Jake sobbed that Cougar realized why Jake could barely breathe — let alone speak.

He was on the verge of crying.

Jake was struggling to swallow, still holding the other half of the tomato in his trembling hand. His expression was a chaotic mix of emotions that Cougar couldn't interpret. The only thing he knew for sure was that Jake looked almost in pain from whatever it was he was experiencing. Cougar started rubbing Jake's back in a feeble attempt to soothe him. The first couple of tears trickled down Jake's cheeks, but he barely seemed to notice.

"Holy s-s-shit," Jake croaked, voice shaking from the sob he let out a second later. He pressed the back of his hand against his mouth, and Cougar could see him swallow several times.

"Uncle Jake?" Beth sounded frightened, her hand tentative when she reached out and brushed her fingers against Jake's arm.

Jake sucked in a deep breath, which might as well have been a sob, before he started nodding frantically.

"It's okay. I'm okay." Jake straightened, wiping some of the tears away with the back of his hand, before giving Beth a trembling smile. "It's okay. I was just... surprised."

Cougar couldn't blame him. He knew that it probably wasn't just the taste, but the sheer magnitude of what Jake had just done. Unless other settlements in another region had reached the same breakthrough that Jake and Jess had, Jake was the first person to eat a tomato in eighty years.
That could make anyone emotional.

Jake cleared his throat.

"It's really good." He held out the rest of the tomato towards Beth, his comforting smile somewhat ruined by the way he sniffed. "You want some?"

Beth looked hesitant, probably because of Jake's reaction, but eventually held out her hand. Curiosity was a thing that ran in the family, after all.

Jake placed the tomato in her palm with a kind of reverence that was almost comical. Cougar stayed where he was, his hand resting between Jake's shoulder blades, while Beth raised the tomato to her lips. She looked doubtful, with an adorable frown on her face, before she stuck out her tongue and licked it.

Her eyes widened almost immediately, looking in wonder at the red vegetable in her hand.

"It tastes..." She couldn't quite seem to find the words. Amazement was written all over her face, and she seemed to completely forget that Jake and Cougar were even there, curiously studying her tomato.

Jake was already plucking another tomato from the plant, this one much smaller. He left Beth to her careful exploration, and turned towards Cougar instead.

"Open up."

Cougar raised an amused eyebrow.

It wasn't that he didn't want to, but he felt a sting of something vaguely reminiscent of dread. He knew this would change everything. Judging by Jake and Beth's reactions this was just as monumental as he had thought, and Cougar felt just a tiny bit apprehensive.

The unknown was always far more terrifying than the known, after all.

"It's good, I promise." Jake moved closer, one hand settling on Cougar's hip and the other holding the small tomato. Jake was smiling reassuringly, even as he was trying to blink away the tears still clinging to his eyelashes.

Cougar allowed himself a trembling breath before he nodded and opened his mouth. Jake grinned, feeding the tomato to him with maybe a little more flourish than strictly necessary. But that was Jake in a nutshell.

The tomato was smooth against Cougar's tongue, but didn't taste much until he actually bit into it. He suddenly understood why Jake had almost choked.

It tasted like nothing Cougar had ever eaten before.

There were hints of something sweet, yet sour, and there was just so much. It felt as if he would start coughing from the strong, sharp taste, his tongue almost numb from the intensity.

Cougar was used to eating various kinds of meats and fish, as well as bread and the occasional root vegetable, if one was able to grow them. This was something else entirely. Jake had once told him that the root vegetables most settlements and some nomads grew were mutated versions of what had existed before the Disaster — gnarled potatoes and carrots, that didn't taste much at all.

These were different. They tasted so much that Cougar wasn't quite sure how to breathe around it.
When he swallowed he felt a tingle in his throat that wasn't entirely unpleasant.

"Good?" Jake asked, breathless and anxious, as if Cougar's opinion was what would tip the scale.

Cougar couldn't speak. There were no words to describe what had just happened. So he nodded instead, knowing that Jake would read the rest on his expression, which had to be just as wide-eyed as Jake's own.

Jake let out a trembling breath, the relief making his shoulders slump.

"Yeah?"

Cougar nodded again, before reaching up and pulling Jake in for a kiss. He knew that he was bordering on rough, but he couldn't help it. At first he had thought that Jake was too soft to live in this world, clinging to hopes and dreams that others knew to abandon, but time and time again Jake proved him wrong. Time and time again Jake built where others would destroy, and created where others would extinguish.

Jake was a miracle.

He was so vibrant with life and purpose that Cougar sometimes couldn't breathe when he looked at him. Jake was the most precious and beautiful being Cougar had ever known, and now more than ever he felt pride swell in his chest.

Jake whimpered against Cougar's lips and he hastily changed his grip, letting Jake burrow his face against Cougar's scarf. He was trembling under Cougar's hands, and Cougar closed his eyes for a second, swallowing down the elation in his chest — at least until he could breathe normally again.

"You did it," he whispered, sinking his fingers into Jake's hair. Cougar held him close, sheltering and grounding him. "You did it, cielito."

Jake let out a sound that could have been agreement, or just a choked sob. Cougar smiled, stroking Jake's hair.

"You did well. You did so well."

He looked up, meeting Beth's gaze. She was munching on her tomato, clearly wise enough not to try and swallow the whole thing, unlike Jake and Cougar. For once she sat completely still, her expression focused but delighted.

Cougar tilted his head to the side and Beth raised her hand in reply, giving him a thumbs-up.

That settled Cougar focused his attention back on Jake, who was sucking in a deep breath and pulling back ever so slightly. His glasses were fogged over but Cougar could still see the tears behind them. He moved his hand from Jake's hair, letting it caress his cheek instead.

"You are incredible." Cougar made no attempt to hold back on the reverence in his voice, or the pride. Jake and Jess had done all of this — offered the world a new start. It might be a small step in the great scheme of things, but it was a step in the right direction.

It was hope.

Jake's smile trembled, sniffing audibly a second later.

"Couldn't have done it without you," Jake mumbled shyly.
Cougar merely smiled, before his gaze strayed back to Beth. Jake turned enough to reach out a hand towards her, clearly not caring that she saw him so vulnerable.

"You liked it?" he asked, just as her hand slipped into his.

"Uh-huh," she answered with a nod, licking the fingers of her other hand.

Jake beamed, even if his breath was still uneven and Cougar could feel him tremble.

"Awesome." He looked back at Cougar, smiling all the while. "I think this is going to be a hit."

That was an understatement, and Cougar couldn't help laughing. He leaned in, pressing a kiss to the corner of Jake's mouth.

"It will change the world, cielito," Cougar said, smiling back.

"I'm ready if you are," Jake replied cheekily, positively giddy with excitement.

He had never been more beautiful, and Cougar had never been more in love. He leaned in for another kiss, helpless against the joy and hope growing in his chest.

Life was beginning to look more and more like heaven.

And Cougar couldn't be happier.

Chapter End Notes

CarpeDentum betaed as always, and couldn't quite believe that I managed to make a tomato into such an important and adorable plot point, but there you go! Here is my Tumblr, and hopefully you enjoyed this quite sudden return to the Hyperborean-verse! (It really is a 'verse. I am going to use it again. Just watch me)

Take care, my lovelies!
Yes. I did it again. While the story is finished I found I still had things to add, this time by writing a chapter from Cougar's POV. I realised that I'm literally the only one who knows what went through Cougar's head the second time he meets Jake (at the Holden Settlement in chapter two) and that's a tragedy, I tell you — an outright tragedy. I'm not sure if you guys understand the weight of that scene and I really, really want you to.

So I hope this will offer you something new. But I think it will, if you remember certain important things about Cougar's religion and the nickname he eventually gives JJ. Just wait until you get to the part where Jake steps in through the doorway. It will be worth it, I promise.

So yes, without further ado, here's chapter two, this time told from Cougar's POV.

**Warnings for (brief) mentions of suicide and murdered children**

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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Cougar didn't actually want to die.

He might not have a whole lot to live for, but he wasn't the kind to give up either. Then again, he couldn't deny that he felt a certain amount of peace as he sat there, waiting for the blood loss to kill him — unless the cold got him first.

If this was how he died, he guessed he just had to accept that. Considering that he was stranded in a settlement full of corpses and had a bleeding hole in his side, his odds of survival weren't that great. No one was coming to save him and the pain was getting quite bothersome by then.

He could easily end it himself.

He had a gun, after all — his hand was still steady enough to raise it and aim, if need be. But Cougar was too stubborn to take his own life. That kind of surrender wasn't in his nature.

To be honest, he wasn't sure what he was waiting for. Wade and Cage had left hours ago, after
obviously having decided that killing Cougar themselves was too much of a hassle. Leaving him for dead in the middle of a slaughtered settlement did the job well enough, and was less risky for them. Cougar had been quite thorough with the other three Raiders, after all.

He felt no regret for killing them, whatsoever.

Cougar had signed up to help locate and capture an Engineer — not slaughter an entire settlement. Turning against his own was the least he could do, even if he had been unable to save any of the Settlers.

The morbid cacophony of panicked screams and rapid bursts of gunfire had brought back flickers of memories Cougar tried his best to suppress. In the blood-splattered chaos he saw another settlement — a place he knew when he was just Carlos and had brothers, sisters, and parents.

A home that burned down years ago.

He had been helpless to stop the Raiders then, but not this time. He might not be a good person, but he would be damned if he became an even worse one over something like this. This hadn't even been the right settlement; the Engineer they had set their sights on had a different tattoo. These Settlers could have been spared.

So much death and destruction, for one Engineer.

But Cougar could admit that it was one hell of an Engineer. The man hadn't looked like much when he stood there, surrounded by Raiders, tossing out jokes as if that would somehow keep him alive. Cougar had thought that the blue-eyed stranger was just a raving lunatic, banished from his settlement or perhaps out scouting for food.

Cougar had rarely been so wrong.

He still wasn't sure what the Engineer had used to knock them off their feet. All Cougar knew was that his ears had been ringing for hours afterwards and he had barely been able to walk in a straight line. He suspected a sound wave, for how it had affected his balance and hearing. That kind of weapon — something invisible that could incapacitate six armed attackers — was both ingenious and terrifying. Those two often came hand in hand, after all.

And the jaw-dropping ingenuity hadn't stopped there. The Engineer had somehow managed to deflect Cougar's bullet — and made it look alarmingly easy. Just a flick of a wrist and the bullet had changed course and lodged into a nearby wall instead. Cougar had never seen anything like it, and he doubted that he ever would again.

Cougar didn't know a whole lot about technology but he could tell that the man had to be brilliant. Some of what he did looked damned close to a miracle.

So he understood if Wade had decided that they wanted that specific Engineer, but Cougar didn't support pointless slaughter. The Settlers hadn't deserved this, and Cougar knew that their dead eyes and frozen expressions would linger with him for years.

They always did.

When he thought about it, he didn't really have a reason to fight so hard to stay alive. Dying might actually be a relief at this point, since it would put an end to his sinning. His transgressions were already far too many and he doubted that he would ever be able to repent.

How could he possibly end up anywhere but Hell, after everything he had done?
Cougar closed his eyes and leaned his head against the wall. He was getting tired. The air felt raw and biting despite being several degrees warmer than it was outside. His right hand was going numb from pressing against his side, trying to stop the blood flow, and the wall he was propped up against was cold against his back. If he had been able to move he would have, but he didn't have enough strength left. Not to mention that it seemed rather futile when he was dying all the same.

His hat lay next to him on the floor, a silent reminder of all the things he had lost and failed to protect — a memento from the life he would never have again.

He felt that it suited him, to die alone and abandoned.

Cougar sighed and pointedly ignored the gathering pool of blood beside him. So far it wasn't big enough that he would bleed out, but that was only a matter of time. He grew weaker with each passing minute. The gun was still in his left hand but he refused to turn it on himself.

He still wasn't sure what he was waiting for.

There was something in the air — an expectant tension — but he couldn't understand why. No one was coming to help him. There was no salvation for someone like Cougar.

And yet he held on.

His attention flickered — or maybe he lost consciousness. The next thing he noticed was the creak of the door as it opened, jolting him from his haze. Cougar raised his gun on pure reflex, too disoriented to do much else.

Light.

The only thing Cougar saw was the bright light of the open doorway, blinding and breathtaking, and a dark figure, haloed in white.

For a moment, he wondered if he had died after all — maybe this was Heaven.

Only it wasn't.

The silhouette moved, and once his eyes adjusted Cougar realized that he recognized him. He knew that man. Cougar's mind was trying to catch up but he couldn't figure out why the Engineer was there. The odds of that were as low as Cougar finding salvation.

Distantly, Cougar wondered if this was another one of the Engineer's miracles.

Cougar didn't shoot. He knew he could have, but the tension in the air — the soundless whisper of hold on — had finally silenced. His hand might be trembling but the world was crystal clear again. His heartbeats echoed in his chest, fluttering and uncertain.

Was this what he had been waiting for?

"Uncle Jake?"

Cougar reacted to the movement rather than the sound, his gun snapping to aim at the other target. It was much smaller and to Cougar's horror he realized that it was a child — a girl, with a purple cap on her head and eyes as blue as sky.

The Engineer moved into the line of fire at the same time as Cougar angled his gun away. His throat was tight with panic; the knowledge of what he could have done a bitter taste at the back of
his tongue.

Never again — not if Cougar could help it.

He dropped the gun and pushed it across the floor, towards the Engineer. If Cougar would get shot for surrendering, then so be it. He was already dying but that young girl had her whole life ahead of her — Cougar was not going to be the one to ruin it.

Relief settled over Cougar as soon as the gun was out of his reach. Whatever happened now was not up to him. He would usually insist on having control, but despite how vulnerable it made him, he didn't mind handing over the responsibility to the Engineer. Let him decide.

Cougar slumped back against the wall, gritting his teeth against the sharp lash of pain. Moving was an increasingly bad idea. He closed his eyes for a moment, focusing on breathing through the dull throb in his side. He still didn't want to die, but he couldn't deny that he would welcome it, simply because it would make the pain go away.

The Engineer said something to the girl but Cougar didn't bother to translate the words. English was still troublesome from time to time.

When he heard the rustle of movement he opened his eyes, meeting that bright blue gaze. The girl was clinging to the Engineer and Cougar wondered if they were father and daughter. They certainly looked related. Cougar was grateful he hadn't accidentally shot one or both of them.

"Is there anyone left besides you?" the Engineer asked, the question echoing in the barren room. The man seemed unsettled, but his voice was firm.

Cougar shook his head, once he managed to make sense of the words.

The Engineer turned back to the girl and started talking too low and fast for Cougar to overhear. The only thing he managed to catch was the girl's name, and that the Engineer was asking her to leave. Maybe Cougar should have felt worried about that, since it could mean that the Engineer intended to kill him but didn't want her to watch. Cougar couldn't gather up the energy to care. As long as the girl — Beth, his mind whispered — didn't have to witness it, he was fine.

The two spoke for a while before Beth agreed. Cougar watched as the Engineer gently ushered her towards the still-open door. The man was so gentle, as if he expected to hurt her if he wasn't careful. Cougar felt a small smile spread on his lips. Seeing the tall, broad-shouldered Engineer and the small girl, framed by the doorway and bathed in bright light was a beautiful sight — Cougar wouldn't mind if it turned out to be one of his last.

The kiss the Engineer placed on Beth's cheek made a lump of longing lodge in Cougar's throat. He had almost forgotten what tenderness looked like after so many years with Raiders.

He closed his eyes, shutting out the intimate scene he clearly wasn't meant to see. He had no place in their world — it was safer to remain in his own, cold as it may be.

Cougar could feel the chilled air crawl towards him, flooding in through the open door and spreading across the floorboards. He wondered how long it would take before the cold settled into his bones and he became hypothermic enough to stop shivering.

The creak of footsteps made Cougar open his eyes. The Engineer pocketed his mittens before bending down to pick up the abandoned gun. Cougar did nothing to stop him. He merely watched as the Engineer checked and secured the gun before tucking it away.

The Engineer turned those blue, blue eyes towards Cougar, looking conflicted. Cougar knew he
was being scrutinized, but did nothing to stop that either. Instead his gaze followed the rectangular squares of the Engineer's glasses, down along his pale cheekbone and the curve of his bearded jaw, before sliding along the troubled slump of his shoulders.

Cougar realized that his fate wasn't sealed yet. This man wasn't a killer. He was something else entirely — bright and fragile enough to leave Cougar breathless.

This was what innocence looked like.

Cougar had forgotten.

He still stiffened when the Engineer took the last remaining steps between them.

"Thanks for not shooting my niece," the Engineer said. "Or shooting me in front of my niece."

Cougar wasn't sure what 'niece' meant, but he figured it referred to the little girl. The Engineer was thanking him for not shooting either of them. That felt downright bizarre.

The Engineer crouched next to Cougar. They were close enough to touch, and there was something soft hiding in that blue gaze. Cougar wasn't sure what that meant.

The Engineer took a deep breath.

"I can't help but ask why you didn't, though. I mean, it's not like you haven't tried to shoot me before."

Cougar had to focus in order to translate those sentences. He didn't understand why the Engineer insisted on talking to him. The wisest thing to do — if the man couldn't stomach killing him — was to leave Cougar there to die. At this point it wouldn't even take that long.

The cold from the floor was beginning to numb his legs and Cougar twisted in discomfort, hissing softly when it jostled his side. The Engineer was still looking at him and Cougar realized that the man was waiting for an answer. There was only one Cougar could give.

"No children."

That was a difficult rule to keep as a Raider and Cougar would never forgive himself for the times when he had been unable to. The fact that he had been unwilling — years ago, when he was young and frightened — didn't matter. Those precious, innocent lives he had taken were the reason why he would never find peace.

"Really?" The Engineer sounded angry, his eyebrows rising in what could be disbelief — or disgust, more likely. He continued to speak but did so much too fast for Cougar to understand. The tone conveyed the message well enough, full of accusations and fury. The sharp gesture towards the open doorway — and the dead children lying outside — showed just what the Engineer thought of Cougar's efforts.

Cougar felt a need to defend himself, despite knowing that his conscience was far from clear.

"Not me," he gritted out. "The others."

The Engineer only seemed more frustrated by that, but also unsure of what to do next. Eventually he sighed and rubbed a hand over his face, his bare fingers scratching against his beard. The Engineer looked tired — weary in a way that should have dimmed the brightness in his eyes. Only it didn't, and Cougar wasn't entirely sure why not.
"The others. You mean like that guy?" the Engineer asked, pointing at Landon's corpse, lying in the snow just outside the door.

Landon had been their second best shot after Cougar. He should have started with Landon, but the anger had made Cougar more reckless than usual. He had killed the first two in rapid succession and the echo of the gunshots had warned Landon of what was coming — and given him time to retaliate. Cougar was still paying for that slip, with every drop of blood that spilled from between his fingers.

But Landon had also underestimated his opponent, simply because Cougar was wounded. And that was why Landon was the one flat on his back, staring unseeing at the sky, not Cougar.

"Sí," Cougar replied, nodding when he realized what language he had used. Odds were that the Engineer wasn't familiar with Spanish, but body language was universal.

"You killed one of your own."

Cougar felt himself grin at that. The Engineer was a clever one, and his shock when he realized that Cougar had turned on his fellow Raiders was quite adorable.

That word felt foreign to Cougar — few things were adorable in his world.

With some effort, Cougar was able to raise his left hand, holding up three fingers. He could see understanding dawn on the Engineer's expressive face.

"You killed three of them?"

Cougar nodded, feeling disgustingly proud.

"Because they killed the children?" the Engineer asked, voice fainter, as if the very thought made him unsettled.

Another nod was all Cougar had to offer.

"Well... that's..." The Engineer fumbled for something to say. The uncertain look on his face made him look painfully vulnerable, but also strangely alive. He cleared his throat and scratched his beard before looking into Cougar's eyes. "So that's how you got injured?"

"Sí." Cougar figured that the man knew what that meant now.

There was a beat of silence, their gazes remaining locked. Cougar felt a shiver run down his spine but decided to ignore it.

"That's very noble of you." The Engineer seemed uncertain and Cougar couldn't help scoffing. He knew what 'noble' meant and he was everything but that. To his surprise, the Engineer seemed to be holding back a smile.

Cougar wondered what that would look like — to see this man smile. No, he desperately wanted to know. His imagination probably didn't make it justice.

"Well, for a Raider," the Engineer added, the corner of his mouth angling a little higher.

Cougar knew better than to trust this man but he was reluctantly intrigued by him all the same. There was something different about the Engineer — something nameless yet overpowering — and Cougar's instincts told him to cling to it. The light he saw in those eyes was addicting.
"I'm not gonna lie — I hate you more than a little bit for what happened here," the Engineer continued, his voice hardening again. Cougar was grateful that the words were simple enough for him to understand, even if he felt shame curl in his gut. Those disarmingly blue eyes locked with his, somehow only making the guilt worse. The Engineer clenched his jaw. "I know you must have killed at least some of the people out there, and you had no right to do that. It wasn't for survival — they weren't a threat to you. We both know that."

Cougar forced himself not to avert his gaze. He wasn't proud of what he had done — he never would be — but he wasn't cowardly enough to make up excuses either. He would face the loathing head on.

The Engineer frowned, but Cougar wasn't sure what was confusing him this time. The man seemed to hesitate before he spoke next, and when he did his words were slow — soft, almost.

"You know, from where I'm standing, you've got two options."

Cougar didn't have to wait long before the Engineer continued.

"Either I leave you here to die from hypothermia or blood loss — whatever gets you first — or we work out some kind of deal where I agree to save your life, in exchange for information I know you have."

There were too many complicated words for Cougar to understand the sentence in detail, but his best guess was that the Engineer was threatening to let him die, unless Cougar gave him information. He wasn't sure what information the Engineer might want — or how exactly he intended to help Cougar.

The Engineer chuckled, even if it was strained.

"Yeah, I mean it. Not because I feel any sympathy for you, but because I know you came here, to this settlement, to find me. Your merry little band of Raiders is still hunting me, right?"

The last bit Cougar could definitely understand, but he still waited a beat before nodding. He still wasn't sure if he could trust this man, despite what his heart was telling him. Cougar was both lightheaded and in terrible pain and he couldn't be expected to make wise decisions in that state.

"Right," the Engineer mumbled. "Or at least they were before you killed off half of them."

Cougar tried to hold back his amusement but it was surprisingly difficult.

The Engineer started talking again and this time Cougar wasn't able to follow. If it was because of the blood loss or the complicated sentences was difficult to tell. He snapped up a couple of words but couldn't make sense of the context.

Only when the Engineer leaned forward, his expression urgent and intent, did Cougar understand what he was saying.

"So I want to know who sent you after me."

Cougar wasn't sure what good it would do the Engineer to know about Max. There wasn't much to tell, first of all, since Cougar had never met the man in person. And second, he was only expected to bring back an Engineer, not know the reason why Max wanted one. Cougar wasn't someone who asked unnecessary questions and had intended to do his job without arguing.

Well, until now, when he was looking into the honest face of the Engineer he was supposed to kidnap. Cougar knew that he wouldn't be able to — not after having seen the man with that little
girl. Maybe that made him weak, but he didn't mind.

The Engineer seemed to lose his patience. That he added gestures to clarify what he was saying must mean that he was getting frustrated by the language barrier.

"I save your life, and you give me the information I want. Okay?" The Engineer pointed first at himself, then at Cougar. Those hands — bare despite the chilly air — moved with a fickle but expressive grace. Cougar had to stop himself from staring.

The Engineer rolled his eyes when Cougar didn't answer — mostly because he wasn't sure how. A sharp gesture towards the open doorway almost made Cougar flinch, and the Engineer's voice was tinged with anger when he spoke next.

"Unlike them I'm not going to ask you to hurt any children which, as far as I'm concerned, makes me a much better friend to have than the ones you've been running with lately."

Well, Cougar couldn't disagree with that.

He still felt himself hesitate. Cougar had no way of knowing if the Engineer was lying or not. He might look sincere, but Cougar was at a disadvantage. There could be loopholes in the deal — ones that he couldn't catch simply because the terms were laid out in a different language. He hadn't understood half of what the Engineer had said.

But it was true that without help he would undoubtedly die. Taking his chances with this man was Cougar's best bet.

"Fine." Cougar didn't like it — he had never enjoyed being at someone else's mercy — but there was nothing else he could do.

The Engineer grinned and pushed his glasses higher up on his nose.

"Awesome. Now, what's your name?"

Cougar hadn't been prepared for the question, but saw no reason to refuse to answer.

"Cougar."

There was a beat of silence. The expression on the Engineer's face was a mix between surprise and childish glee.

"What? Really? Like the—"

Cougar only had to raise an eyebrow to silence the rest of that sentence. The Engineer still snorted, looking entirely too amused.

"I can't imagine any parent naming their kid that, but okay. I won't pry."

Cougar's parents had nothing to do with the name he now had — it had been given to him with fear in mind, not love — but he had no intention of explaining that. He couldn't think of a single scenario where he would tell someone his real name. That was a thing of the past.

The smile on the Engineer's lips was too sharp to be friendly. Fact was, it made Cougar very uneasy.

"I'm Jake," the Engineer introduced himself. Knowing his name didn't make the smile any less unsettling. "And, Cougar?"
Jake leaned forward, his hand settling on Cougar's shoulder. There was no mistaking the unspoken threat in that simple touch.

"I'm going to take you to my home settlement to get you fixed up, so there's one thing you should know before we go, okay?" Jake spoke slower and clearer now, as if he wanted to make sure that Cougar understood. And he did — all too well. Cougar stiffened under Jake's imploring gaze, wary as the Engineer kept talking. "If you hurt me or my family — sell us out and betray us in any way — I will hunt you down and kill you. I don't care how good of a shot you are or how far you might travel, I will track you down. I will literally follow you to the end of the world if I have to, and kill you as creatively as I can possibly imagine. Okay?"

There were some words that Cougar couldn't quite grasp, but he didn't have to. The message was clear enough with the combination of Jake's hand squeezing his shoulder and that eerie smile. Jake had seemed so innocent up until then and the ruthlessness he now showed looked incredibly misplaced, but no less menacing.

Cougar didn't doubt that Jake was being absolutely serious. He might not look like a killer, but Cougar knew a thing or two about family and loyalty — and just what one might be willing to do to avenge them.

"You understand?" Jake asked, a little patronizingly.

"Sí," Cougar replied with a firm nod.

He couldn't help wincing when Jake patted his shoulder, either careless about his own strength or aiming for it to hurt. Cougar wasn't sure which of the two it might be.

"Great! Then we'll get along just fine!" Jake got to his feet and held out a hand towards Cougar. The grin that now spread on Jake's lips looked more enthusiastic than Cougar had expected. "We better get going soon, or else you might bleed out before we even make it back."

Cougar shot him a disgruntled glare but accepted the offered help, gritting his teeth when he was pulled up from the floor. Jake was as strong as he looked and the tug jostled the gunshot wound in Cougar's side.

When he saw Jake move towards the hat still lying on the floor Cougar snarled on pure reflex. Jake flinched and hastily backed away, looking startled. The surprise was soon replaced by annoyance, but he didn't try again. Jake merely watched as Cougar bent down to pick the hat up himself, even if he had to hold back a pained wince.

Cougar ignored how Jake rolled his eyes.

"Are you done?" Jake asked impatiently. He looked strangely adorable with his thick-rimmed glasses and the pink and yellow mittens he pulled out of his pocket.

"Sí," Cougar replied curtly, not bothering to hide his own indignation.

But he couldn't help that he stopped for a brief second, just to look at Jake — as if he was a riddle Cougar needed to solve.

What were the odds of them meeting here, in a slaughtered settlement that wasn't even Jake's own? Cougar was good enough with numbers to know that the chances were microscopic, at best. And up until Jake stepped in through that door, Cougar had been doomed to die. He had even given Jake his gun — had made it so easy for the Engineer to kill him — but Jake hadn't.

Jake had offered to save him instead.
Cougar's throat seized up and he tried to swallow down the complicated swirl of emotions that rose within. He knew it wasn't because of him — Jake had no personal attachment to Cougar — but the mere fact that someone was willing to try, even after what Cougar had done, was unbelievable.

A miracle in its own right.

Cougar couldn't stop staring at Jake, feeling something within him shift — no, *align*.

And suddenly, without even trying, he could finally identify that nameless, breathless feeling that had been at the tip of his tongue ever since he saw Jake haloed in the doorway. Cougar had almost forgotten that the word existed, and he had certainly never expected that he would find a reason to feel it again.

Hope didn't come easy to him anymore.

Chapter End Notes

I'm incapable of letting my stories go, aren't I? But I think this one is quite understandable considering how big the world is. There is just so much to tell.

I hope you liked it, my lovelies :) 

[CarpeDentum](http://www.tumblr.com) did the betaing och you can find me on [Tumblr](http://www.tumblr.com).

Works inspired by this one: [Graphic Wallpaper: Hyperborean by Amethystina](http://www.tumblr.com) by [Cleo](http://www.tumblr.com)

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