

For You

Your time, your dragons, and your always, ever-constant friendship

The Mandates

The papers fluttered down through the still night air. Injured birds, scattered stars beneath the shrouded moon. They fell slow. Kicked up only by the tail winds as they came down from the whirring choppers. They flitted through the streets of the nation's capitol as the Corporation's mandates always did. White bats in the moonlight.

They mucked the gutters of the two-story split-levels of the North-West quadrant and lay scattered across the dried winter lawns. The motion-sensored porch lights like search signals flickered with the falling sheets. Morse code of the quadrant's quiet complacency. High schoolers sprawled on the rooftops snatched the latest mandates as quickly as they fell. They craved more information on the disturbance in the Anacostia that had spilled out onto the Mall. They wanted more stories of the savage dockers full of heroic, burning wrath who'd lost their folkloric fiery tempers, destroying the homes of their own people. They thought the whole thing was poetically darling, a metaphor like the ones they scribbled in their notebooks come to life. When you don't live it, destitution is so artistic.

They giggled as they pulled stolen cigarettes from the back pockets of their blue jeans. Rebels escaping their imposed curfew in the still and silent night, snatching the mandates their parents didn't want them to read straight from the evening sky. They whispered the same words of revolution into the winter air, envisioning lives other than those prescribed to them. Each on a conveyor belt towards low-level employment for the Corporation. But they didn't dare leave their

basements. They'd read the mandates. *All citizens discovered to have had contact with any congregations of a violent or disruptive nature will be prosecuted as co-conspirators.*

The mandates fell around the houses of the lucky few in the South-West. Mothers with scarred sons who served in the Corporation's military on two-year tours, wives with decorated husbands who worked in the Pentagon, siblings who fingered a brother's old dog tags in a the silent kitchen. Service meant safety. A place provided for your family in Corporation housing. All knew they couldn't be luckier to live there. Each stark, handsome home came with an open collection bin to gather falling mandates. New design for a postbox. Mandates were the only mail that mattered. The new ones fell and the luckiest people in the city left their cooling dinners when they heard the familiar rustling of papers and the whirring of choppers. They held their jackets closed with one hand and reached into the metal box for a sheet. They read it all before turning with a curt wave to their nameless neighbors who were pouring over their own. Each smiled when they locked eyes, tucked the sheet neatly under their arm, and retreated back into their houses. There was nothing to be said. None of the neighbors would be found to have had contact with the revolutionaries. No one would dare to take up arms against their own family members. They wouldn't listen to a single word coming from the Mall. No, each mandate was a small reminder of just how lucky they were to surely be on the right side.

The mandates flitted amongst the silver spoons of the South-East quadrant. The proud faces pressed against the sleek windows surrounding Hirshhorn's newest

art exhibit, staring down at the gathering on the Mall. They weren't used to seeing falling mandates. They'd heard stories of the frightfully prehistoric method of communication. They watched in three-piece suits, heirloom jewels, glinting cuff links, and fur stoles as the sheets fluttered from the sky. Slim, wide snowflakes. Purring and peering through their lorgnettes at the battered tents below, they swapped bills and made bets on which prize horse would emerge from this scuttle the North-Easterners called revolution. Coos and delicate laughter rose like champagne bubbles from their flutes. Risky no doubt to be this close to the growing skirmish of ruffians crying out against Corporation officials like themselves, but they couldn't miss it. The whole matter was great sport.

The mandates fell in droves around the ruins of the North-East, the derelict grounds of the collapsing quadrant called Anacostia, named for its great river. They settled in the brackish waters flowing out into the Chesapeake, clogging the waterways and surrounding the scabbed fish that could leave you weak or heaving. But the Anacostia was all her people had. She'd been theirs throughout the ages. The old dockers, with their cracking joints and popping backs at the cusp of forty, told stories of how you could once drink her water from your palms, and how her current had been fast. You could swim in her great body, catch fish with gleaming gills, or spend a day just floating and staring at the sky. No one ever knew if the tales were true or just dreams warped into memories. But they spoke of the river as a fallen goddess to a village of dying people. And now she was drowning in mandates. People once spilled from the shared apartments, three generations stuffed in two

bedrooms, burning the mandates for heat. No more. All quiet on the North-East front. Mandates fell like ashes in the air, the sky imprinted with new birds.

They nestled in the white marble crannies of the Capitol Building and in the tarps the rioters had raised on the trampled grass of the National Mall almost three weeks ago. The Corporation's falling words mixed with words of revolution, hastily painted signs and flyers crying "Country over Corporation". They landed beside the guns. Heavy things that came at heavy prices from the kingpins who held control over the collapsing North-East quadrant.

One of the rioters grasped a flickering sheet before it hit the ground. Calwyn, fifteen and fed up with the failures of the past few days, scanned the most odious parts of the latest mandate: *All citizens are to cooperate fully with any Corporation officials they encounter. All citizens are reminded of the efficiency with which officials are trained to handle hostiles.* She spat on the trampled earth, threw the sheet into the dying fire, and headed back into the main tent with her gun.

Council was meeting again. She knew what she was facing at another meeting: more recounts from AC, back from leading another reconnaissance mission through the borderlands between the North-West and the South-West. More reports about how their plan to storm the reflection pool was tactical suicide. She knew AC would dig his heels in the sand against the blitz attack she'd been pushing for two days now. She knew he wouldn't be happy. She knew Otero never was. Even-tempered but he never smiled, only poured over the crude maps he sketched. Stood hunched over the spread papers, muttering to himself like the maps could answer

his many questions. Each meeting he cleaned his round glasses slowly while staring at the tarps strung together overhead as if they could tell him if this was all worth it.

The North-East Quadrant

Her name was Calwyn because her mother liked the destiny of it. In the North-East, the sickly, ignored sector in what had become of the nation's capitol, children were named for objects that tried to feed the hollow spaces of their lives. Her mother liked to think that with a name like Calwyn her daughter had to become something greater than a docks girl. That she gave her daughter something beyond the river Anacostia with its hollow fish bones and nets that never pulled in enough. Beyond the waters infected by the BioTech arm of the Corporation, brown as the soy broth slopping on her anemic dinner table. It must have been that destiny that brought Calwyn five weeks ago to the warehouse that functioned as her people's illegal market, where you could buy almost anything that had once belonged to someone else.

She stared long and hard at the milky eyes of a brown bullhead catfish freshly caught and smattered in cancerous sores. It had more spots than she did coins in her regulation nylon jacket, the same scratchy option all dockers wore. It was the only one they could afford from the Corporation-run supermarts. You could always tell a docker by their jacket, thin and brown like the waters of their Anacostia.

"Catfish again this week?" She was used to having to speak loud to be heard over the din of too many voices.

The worn docker grumbled. Calwyn couldn't place his face. With their age and daily strain, all the dockers started to look the same. And no one bothered to

exchange names. They knew names didn't matter. "We got a special running on the ones pocked with sores."

"Still pulling coins out my ass for 'em."

"Least they wrapped in something pretty." He snatched a mandate and started wrapping the fish she picked.

"What's this one say?" Her mother had finally let her drop out of school like the rest of her classmates to help lift down at the docks. But only after she could read. She knew not to broadcast that in this part of town.

He cocked his head towards the stand beside him where plucked bare birds hung from exposed pipes on strings. "Butcher told me. We gotta apply for permits to net fish now. Officials gonna be checking the boats." The docker growled, wiping sweat from his brows while he stacked crates of more milky fish eyes.

Calwyn had stopped bothering to read the mandates. She could only take so many constant reminders of her immobility, but she'd already started to catch wind of dissenting words even in the stale, crowded air. Words born of the falling pages. The snarling children of *all citizens will obtain fishing licenses from the Department of Domestic Proceedings for a fee of twenty-five dollars*. The sons of *all citizens found without a license will be subject to fines of up to \$25,000 or seven years imprisonment*. The daughters of *licenses are distributed at the sole discretion of the Department of Domestic Proceedings, and all decisions are final*. The beginnings of dissent.

"Corporation's fast starting up the Department of Fishing or something, they are. Working to choke us till they take us all out of business, so why keep

bothering?" The butcher muttered as his cleaver fell over a pigeon's neck, but even with all his birds for sale, he still failed to make his rent in meat.

The Speech

“I’ve seen the people. People cramped at the checkouts of the supermarts. People made to steal to make ends meet. People giving what little they have to kingpins like Jezzies and his leeches. People with no promise but the promise of poverty!”

He was several years older than Calwyn. He stood on stacked crates before the packed crowd in the curtained back crannies of the market. Wiry beard but a young face. Bright eyes behind smeared grease that covered his features. His voice loud over the cramped crowd of people that gathered before him, scratchy and hoarse around the edges like it came through an old radio. He held that day’s mandate over his head in triumphant rage.

“I’ve spoken with mothers who send children to sleep with no food. Men who come home to nailed eviction notices. Drop-outs that can’t read the very mandates BioTech keeps dumping on us. They think we’re nothing.

“And now they want to take the last of what’s ours. Listing how we need permits now to net up what our own waters provide. Wanting us to keep sucking from their shelves when they won’t give us not a cent more for brute work. Keeping us chained like mad dogs. Keeping us sealed like canned fish. Keeping us away from what’s ours so we buy what’s theirs. They’re trampling on sacred ground.

“We’re of the Anacostia. We live among the dockers. Proud people of the water. So why are we all drowning?”

He shook the mandate in his hand, raising it high towards the exposed pipes that whistled steam.

“Are we gonna let them keep wasting on us? Are we gonna let them drop their papers on us like we’re nothing but trash sacks?

“Are we gonna let them keep on mucking our streets, draining our pockets, infesting our Anacostia, smothering us and expecting that we ain’t gonna say nothing back?

“You’ve been voiceless for too long. *We’ve* been voiceless for too long!” He clapped his cap in his hand and then thrust it over his head. Thudding cheers erupted under the tin roof. “Tell all these people what has been done to you and yours. How they wring profit from your Anacostia like she’s no more than wet rags. How they violate her waters. Tell them how they rape your lady mother.”

The Blood

The man on the stage spoke the same sort of words Calwyn's mother had always said when her husband was out of earshot.

"Your father's a strong man, a good man. But look around and you'll see what just *being good* can get you." She spoke while they scrubbed the blood and grease stained counters of their kitchen, their arms splattered with bleach. The sharp smell burrowed into their skin. Stung their eyes. They opened the few windows in the room, but no cross breeze stirred. Stagnant air. Burning nostrils.

"We still got something and there's something to be said for that." Calwyn knew when to humor her mother. Devil's advocate worked best. Her mother ignited as quickly as the mandates they gathered to start fires on their rusted out stove burner.

"You're your father's daughter, that's the problem with you." Her mother's dark hair stuck to her forehead as sweat poured down her weathered face. A supple sapling, but with deep cracks in the bark. "Tell yourself your lot's fine. You don't wanna knock anyone's elbows. Don't wanna rustle nobody. Don't wanna say nothing."

"Only cause I'm spending so much time around dockers lately." The men on the boats were good at taking orders, good at heavy-lifting, good at passing time while waiting for more incoming orders. But that didn't leave much room for breaking their silence. "They're just built that way."

Her mother, working out a deep brown stain of old blood, scrubbed and wheezed. "Built that way by who? Ever seen a baby? They don't come out silent that's for damn sure! They come out squalling. You got half dock blood and you screamed your whole first year living. Besides dockers weren't always silent. Once tried to get a boycott of the supermart started." She didn't take her eyes off the stain. Her hands were red and raw from the strain and the bleach.

Calwyn dropped her rag she'd been wringing out. "There was a boycott?"

Her mother kept scrubbing. "Some tried to start one up. Wanted all the dockers to spread the word to bleed BioTech out. But it didn't work. A paper cut won't take down a possum, let alone a twelve-foot gator. You need something bigger. Gotta make sure the gash is deep enough. And the way it broke your father..." She slowed, staring down into the stains on the table. "Shattered the dockers to just glass shards. Took the blow hard. Never tried nothing like that again."

"Wait, how was Dad a part of this?" She wanted a link. She wanted something more in the history of her bones than just fish.

"Look, Cal." Her mother set down her washrag and wiped her face in the crook of her shoulder. "I'm not saying the dockers ain't good people. They come from a strong, proud history. Lord knows your father's told you all the stories: the magic of that river, the legends the sailors told. But they're just that, Cal. Stories. And you're father on that *damn* boat of his doesn't spend enough time on land to know what it's really like. What really happens." She sighed and stuck her hand out towards Calwyn, reaching for her rag. Calwyn dropped it in her grip. "Dockers mean well with all their talk. Your father means well and you know he loves you, but it

broke them just like glass. Even the sharpest shards tossed in tumbling waters will end up nothing but sand.”

She picked up the bucket full of watered bleach, pink and pungent, and dumped it out one of the open windows into the marsh grass around their shack. “You mustn’t never be sand.”

The Rally

The man standing on the crate now, a mandate clutched in a rage-white fist, he wasn't sand. But he kicked up the settled silt at the bottom of Calwyn's riverbed. Spittle flew from his lips. Caught in his beard. Flung over the crowd. His fury burned with hers. His words rang over their heads. Cries and cheers thundered around her, inaudible in their discord. Each shout burrowed deep. Echoed straight through her. He strode the length of the stage, thrusting his cap like a trident.

One of the oldest vendors she'd seen before at the warehouse, ancient at fifty-seven, raised his own soaking cap over his balding head. He had a name. She should know what it was. Him, the butcher, the man she bought her fish from. Even if it was something like Boots, Can, or Bulb. It still meant something. The vendor's hand stretched high above his head in prayer, reaching up to a now silent God. *They* still meant something. Several other vendors raised their hats. Others raised their hands, their mandates, their meager purchases.

Her heart pounded to the same thudding, uneven tempo of the cries around her. All sounds absorbed through her skin until her blood pumped to the same beat, rushing and racing through her veins. Her head spun dizzy, swirling like a globe caught in a current and tumbling over and over through the waves. Sparks flashed in her eyes, bright whites, bottle greens, and deep blues. Thoughts free and clear but not blank. She found calm in the chaos. Like she'd never thought more clearly in her life. Never knew that this is where she needed to be, what needed to be happening.

Clear and smooth like a glass bottle at the bottom of a riverbed. She musn't never be sand. She wouldn't be.

She blinked back to the world, scanning the faces now staring towards her, mouths slightly open. The mandate in her hand, wrapped around her fish – that's what they were looking at. But no. Her fish wasn't in her hand. In the fervor of the crowd, someone must have stolen it. They were staring at her face and then slowly down at her brown nylon jacket. And the look on their faces told her it was because she was the only person wearing one.

A docks girl. The only docker among vendors, shop clerks, new intelligentsia who stood on the stage. The bearded man looked out upon the crowd, darting eyes for what had stolen his spotlight.

He saw her, unsteady on her crate, holding herself up by a drainpipe. His voice was loud ringing sounds, all fuddled and swirling in her head. Hands pushed her forward and the sea of bodies spread parted, allowing her forced passage straight to the front. Straight to his outstretched hand.

His palm was thickly coated in grease, but it was too slick to be dock grease. Did he paint it on for effect? He pulled her up and turned her towards the crowd. No light save for the swinging naked bulbs. Shadowed corners and busted crates and damp walls.

Where once there'd been a deafening roar, now there was a new ringing silence, empty but for breathing. Each person staring up at her, waiting for the only docker, the token icon of their quadrant, to say something profound. To put it all

together: everything that had been said, everything that needed be done. To find what they'd been looking for.

But she didn't have anything to say. Never had the opportunity. Never had been asked. Moved from school desk to boat deck to docks. Never a break in the relentless momentum that was her life. Until standing there, seeing the faces before her, she realized how stagnant that momentum had made her.

It was strange hearing her voice rise above the silence. "I'm – I'm not a docks girl."

No one spoke. The man with the beard beside her dropped his hat. Not emphatically. Not triumphantly. Not with a dramatic flair to which he'd become so accustomed. Just a stone at the bottom of a river.

"I'm not a docks girl... I'm not *just* a docks girl. It's Calwyn. My name is Calwyn."

The Net

Calwyn's father, sitting at the worn kitchen table as the wood beneath him darkened with water dripping off his clothes, sensed in his daughter that spark that died inside him years ago. It's your young dangerous days when you latch onto notions that things can be different. The pressing years, all filled with the same unchanging hours taught you different. His wife's fire had not died. He supposed that's why he loved her. But he knew he could never understand her. And he knew his daughter was taking after his wife.

He dipped his feet in slow one evening to test the waters, trying to bridge the growing gap of silence between him and his daughter. He'd learned where he stood from dinner conversations with Arnella that Calwyn, on the opposite side of her and her mother: for inaction. His girls were like fires. He didn't want to see them drown. He tried to speak but he stumbled the first few times he opened his mouth. He knew the way to bait and catch, but he never expected to have to do this to her. "What fish were there today?"

"Same as usual." Calwyn's words were tight. She was standing at the same table, gutting a bottom-feeder on the propped up worn board. Pale grey guts spilled across the scratched wood. "Vendor set aside the least pocked ones. Gave me a good price. Sends you good words."

Both knew it didn't matter who had said them. The sentiment was all the same. The vendors were all the same. "Coming back with less fish than usual though." He pressed slightly. He knew it was a risk.

“Course I am.” Her blade fell down too sharply. Nicked her thumb. He made to jump and help her but she hissed and stuck it in her mouth, looking so much like the child he remembered. She shook her hand and he saw only a small bubble of blood so he went back to threading his line. She kept slicing. The moment passed.

She muttered. He couldn’t tell if it was to herself, to him, or to the empty room at large. “The way BioTech keeps strangling us, surprised they still let us go out on the water. That’ll be next. After the new permit law.”

He sighed. He’d been right. He heard it in her voice. That crackle born of broth grown weak and weary, jackets worn thin and torn, roofs buckled and cracked, land shrunk with the growing numbers of squalling babies, and air fumed hot with far too many people. “Calwyn, just – just keep your nose down, promise?”

“That’s the problem,” His daughter said, yanking the dull knife through the brittle meat. “When we let others ignore us we start doing it to ourselves.”

“Nothing good’s gonna come from this.” Both of them knew what they were talking about.

“Nothing good? From what? That we may finally be heard?”

His thick shaking fingers fumbled over the line. “Cal... Look, we all got that phase. We think what we have to say is gonna do something, that it matters.”

“It does matter.”

“*You* matter. To your mother and me. You don’t have to prove anything, Cal.”

He looked up at her, wishing to brush the hair from her eyes, wishing to put his hand on her shoulder, but his fingers were caught in the line.

“That’s not enough.” She skewered the knife into the wood. It shivered, standing upright. “Them with their mandates, they can’t keep slopping on us.”

“But Calwyn,” he sighed, “there’s no sense in doing something about it. We don’t got the words needed to get going what’d have to get done. None of us. Most couldn’t even read them.”

There was a clatter around the corner. He knew it was his wife who had dropped the small picture book, grade 3, that she would stutter and fume over nightly. It landed with a soppy thud. The pages were damp. Everything in their shack was.

Her father dropped the frayed fishing line and looked at his daughter, speaking softly so Arnella wouldn’t hear. “You’re your mother’s daughter. Full of ideas, but there’s no real way to use them. It’s a dangerous, deadly combination.”

Calwyn yanked up her knife and pulled it through the meat of the fish and the smell of rot filled the space. “That’s where you got it wrong. We got the words this time. And we’re finally saying them.”

He didn’t bother picking his line back up. “We told ourselves the same.”

She didn’t look up from the fish, just tore the knife through its meat. “I will never be like you. Trapped in a net.”

The Spark

“We’re gonna do it,” He promised. His head was by her feet so his voice drifted towards her ears. “We’re gonna finally make them listen. Show them we won’t be ignored no more.”

They were both flat on their backs after Calwyn’s third rally, her and the man with beard who said his name was Pack. They stared up at a smattering of stars, feeling the wood of the dock sway in the lapping flow of the river beneath like a pulse. The whole quadrant hummed alive with a steady heartbeat. They just had to show everyone they weren’t dead yet. Had to let the people here know they’d been slowly smothered but not fully suffocated. Whole worlds buzzed on her skin, held taunt in the space between her toes and the water’s surface. She wanted to know how to keep them buzzing.

“Really? How we gonna do it?”

“It’s all about visibility. Lock us up here, keep us stuck up in this quadrant with their social structure shackles round our wrists and they can keep us shut up.” He smiled. “In both meanings of the phrase.”

“How have they gotten away with it for so long? BioTech?”

“Cause no one’s got the guts or the brains or whatever to put this all in motion. No one’s been as smart as us.” He trailed a hand closer to her, his nylon sleeve scratching up against the cuff of her jacket, and she pulled her hand back, flipping over onto her stomach and gazing out across the opposite bank, the dark

line of trees and the cawing of the night birds, silhouettes in the sky and herons low over open waters.

He continued. "They made us think we're nothing." He sat up, moving rocks and stalks of marsh grass around on the wood of the dock, fingers catching small splinters. "They had us participating in our own confinement."

She turned around so she could see his face, the moonlight casting shadows and lighting sparks in his fervent eyes. "What do you mean?"

"We don't need them, BioTech. This ain't a symbiotic relationship. It's parasitic. They're draining us dry and they've got us convinced that we need them. Where would they be, their whole quadrant system be, without people like us? Without people from the Anacostia?"

She was piecing it together. Merging with his anger, feeling his passion flow through her like it had at that first rally. "They'd all be stuck where we are. They're trying to keep us as the only ones smothered so they can save themselves."

He snapped and pointed at her excitedly. "And that's what they don't want you to see. They're nothing but leeches on our skin from a bad river swim." And with a satisfied sigh, he drew a cigarette from the pocket of his leather jacket, the kind passed down through families. She'd never seen leather for sale in these parts. He flicked his lighter. She sat up slowly when the wheel caught the flint and a small flame burst forth in the darkness

Lighters were kept behind the back counter at the marts and no docker had known the back counter goods. The small flame burst forth like magic. Not a

shimmer off a water's edge. Not a spark in an old docker's tale. Real magic. Something actually amazing.

"Tell me about them." She heard herself saying. She wanted to hear about the failures of the past generations. "The others." She wanted to hear how her father's generation had failed them. Had left them with a ruined inheritance. "The ones who tried before."

He blew smoke into the night air, watching it drift over the dark water. "There's not much to say. They were cowards. Tossed round some ideas but never did anything real with them."

"Like?" She wasn't going to let him showboat around this one. She wanted real answers that she'd never learned in school. Never heard in full around her dinner table. Certainly never heard at the docks.

"Oh doomed to fail shit like strikes or boycotts. Buddy a'mine told me how his old man's always ranting about protesters in his day. How a few of them almost managed something. Didn't know the details. There were only a few of them and most were arrested before they managed to put anything in motion. Doesn't really count as trying if you never make it out of the docks, does it?"

"Well now you're talking like you're straight from BioTech." But it wasn't funny anymore. She wasn't pushing him to start him running again, to keep the interesting part of him going. He was wrong. He had to know that.

"S true. Don't pretend it's not. Bunch a dockers grunting won't do nothing."

She sat up. "Excuse me?"

“They’re buried in sludge. Set in their ways. They don’t stand a chance without us.”

“Without *you*, you mean.”

“S not like that.”

“I’m a docker, ok?” She was on her feet. Felt good staring down at him. “I’m a fucking docks girl.” She curled the cuff of her jacket into her clenched fist and brandished it at him. “I need pulling up and out then?”

“Ever gonna say anything at the rallies again?” He stood and was back to towering over her. “Until we pulled you up from that corner of yours were you ever gonna say anything?”

“Well if you’d pass the platform.” She spat.

“No. You’re silent. And if you’re silent, you’re useless.”

The Things They Burned

The dissenters reached the supermart two days after they decided to burn it down. After two days of rigorous planning and gathering followers, they carried smoking torches through the night air, the heat rippling the black sky in tails behind the flames. They shouldered rifles like men in a stockade, their hands hanging over the long barrels cradled at the napes of their necks. They pocketed slim handguns, stuffing them down the waistbands of their pants, the flammable polyester scratching together as they walked. They counted their barrels and their bullets, all bartered and bargained for. Bought from the kingpins. Calwyn didn't want to know what those had cost them. Even if they'd paid in something as seemingly innocuous as cash.

The dissenters took their cries and their anger and they tunneled it straight through the streets. From the illegal market they stormed straight for the supermart, the one closest to the docks. They banged chipped pots and rattled dented cans and shrieked, hollered, whooped into the night like schoolchildren burst free through a parade. Instead of cotton candy in paper cones, bouquets of fire leaping and licking the air. Their brass cymbal band played new instruments that were worn from years, clacking and clanging the kitchen metal in the night air.

They shrieked to be heard. They shrieked to be noticed. They sang dockers' chants deep in the dark to be a part, to be the pulse of a slowly flat-lining culture. They arrived at the supermart and threw their first stone through the glass

windows. They let the shattering echo their cries before pouring in, letting the glass fall down around them like summer rain in the middle of their dark, cold winter.

She wanted retribution. She wanted to steal canned goods. She wanted three jars for the price of none. She wanted fluffed feather-pillows, thin and haggard blankets, beer from the back wall, cigarettes from behind the counter. She wanted bullshit taglines on cardboard boxes. She wanted to call the number on the back because they were not satisfied with their experience. She wanted their fathers to be proud and understand what they were doing. She really wanted to try the spearmint gum.

She wanted nylon jackets to tie together like daisy chains or a banner. She wanted a good strong wind to loft their jacket-banner high. She wanted adrenaline. She wanted a second chance, the real childhood they'd never let her have. She wanted to play tag through the aisles. She wanted to run shrieking with one arm out. She wanted to knock all the glassware from the top shelf. She wanted to watch it all burn.

What they burned was wood. Slim, dry, oak boards. Imports from other lands. Not damp pine. Not driftwood. Not the soggy, buggy boards, bitten and crumbling, barely keeping shacks together. Shacks all along the riverbanks, shacks down in the streets, shacks holding too many people. Not collapsing in from the weight of it all.

No. Clean fresh scent given off from raw beams. The dark grain defined in the contrast from the bright blonde wood; the lies of age lines. The virgin wood burnt clean and new, sparking instantly when they threw their torches through the glass

windows, hearing the shatter echoing their cries, and their fire wrapped around it in one explosive gasp, climbing higher into the infrastructure.

What they burned was the mortar around the cinder blocks that cracked and split in the heat. What they burned was any notion that they could not be taken seriously. What they burned was one supermart in the sea of dozens spread around the quadrant.

The Ashes

What the Corporation burned was all their shacks. All their wood. All their land. Slash and burn. Straight along the banks of the Anacostia, the shacks went up like matchsticks. Firebombs fell from the sky like mandates. No one thought twice to hear the familiar whirring of choppers until there was empty space where once chairs and bodies had been. The blaze was so great the few who survived it swore they thought the fires would swallow the whole river and leave nothing but dry earth.

Calwyn, standing by the flames in the immediate aftermath of the bombs, watched her father's shack smolder, once so damp she didn't know how it caught fire. She watched it crackle like kindling. Like the great blaze she'd sent up at the supermart. She couldn't help but stop and stare and marvel how in the dead of night it really was beautiful. Muted landscape in deep monochrome. Bursts of brilliant orange. Not what the Corporation had in mind with their slash and burn technique, but they couldn't stop the fertile ground. Taking up her gun, the two bodies she'd never find now made important like her mother so longed for, Calwyn knew that at least now she'd always have something to fight for.

The Docks Girl on Dry Land

Her mother had once told her stories of imagined heroes spun from her own fabric: tales of long walks across desert landscapes. The earth beneath your feet like fire, like making your way across the surface of a great sun. Calwyn could never close the holes, fill the gap, finish the story when she'd mull over the words to herself, trying to fill endless stretches of time her life moved between. Never any mirage of water, just miles of soothing emptiness. Calwyn never finished them. She'd never know the end. But now she walked away from the sun and stories her mother spun and wrote her own.

She stamped out new sagas. Shed her shoes, useless tattered things held together with too many years of tape, tied the frayed laces, and hung them over her shoulders like a talisman. Her bare feet felt the grit and charred grime like new braille words that told her she'd never find her parent's bodies and that home was a promise she wouldn't get to see. She set off walking, working her way south from the flames, leaving the rivers behind, feeling her feet dry and coat in grit with each step. She'd make her own shoes and walk her own path, the smell of sludge and ash like mandates hanging all around her. She walked south and the dockers followed, more lost creatures looking for somewhere to go now that they had nowhere to return.

The slowly growing band found dissenters, those who had run from the burning supermart. Those she would call cowards if the word didn't bite her back. They all scattered through the streets like sewer rats, now coming up to test the air.

She found Pack, his beard grey with ash. His face empty like his hands. No proverbial megaphone. He didn't say anything to her. None of them did. He just fell in line beside her, groaning as he walked, favoring his left leg over his right. So she didn't look at him when she finally spoke.

"Who's grunting now?"

The Walk

"BioTech didn't leave much." It was the first thing he said after he fell in line beside Calwyn. She'd lost track of how long the group had been walking south. Not large in numbers and they knew their quadrant well enough to slip around corners and sneak through alleys to evade the thudding storm of Corporation boots. Calwyn walked with her gun in her hand, her grip lax, not from the weight of the gun. Exhaustion was heavier.

"Course they didn't. Thanks to your *plan*." She spit. Up close, not wrapped in night air or fogged by content stupor those nights at the rallies, his eyes didn't glint. Not when he walked beside her now.

"And yet if I'm not mistaken, you're still following my same plan, you're still walking south." He hissed, delighted with himself.

"Yeah cause of you I can't exactly head back to my shack."

"I didn't drop those bombs. You know exactly who did."

"Yeah, BioTech cause *you* pissed 'em off."

"You threw your torch too. Or are you forgetting that so easy?"

She fumed. "Those are – those were good people."

“And there are causes to die for.”

“Funny,” she sneered. “Thought I saw you running to save yourself at first chance.”

“Every revolution needs an orator.”

She scoffed.

“And I don’t see you charred in the wreckage with the other bodies,” He continued. “So see, everyone has their place. We get to fight another day so that all those dockers didn’t die for nothing.” He was rummaging for another cigarette. She could have taken the carton and stomped it beneath her feet.

“Who says we get another day?” With their disasters, with their failures, they weren’t prepared. Before the fire, they didn’t have the numbers, the supplies, the real means. She didn’t want to even think about now.

“*We* do.” He clenched his cigarette between his teeth, talking through the tight grip. “That’s the beauty of this whole thing. It’s up to us now.” He let out a long, slow hiss of smoke. “Not saying I’m glad how things turned out, dockers are my people too.”

“Oh they are? Yeah? Then where’s your jacket?”

“Come off it. You know what I mean. Dockers are practically living history for all Anacostia. I’m not happy to see most of them go. But it woke everyone up. Most the quadrant.”

“What’s *left* of the quadrant.”

He ignored her. “Shook ‘em out of their ruin and turned ‘em towards *revolution*,” He always slurred the word. “When you’ve got nothing left it frees you up to do anything.”

Walking through the battle-worn urban jungle, the minutes and miles slipped away like her sense of him being something of a genius with a megaphone. Twisted tree roots of snapped street-lights. Low hanging branches and fluttering leaves of ash floating in the air, so like the mandates. Great palms of buildings scratched and scarred with bullet holes. So the troops had passed through these streets. She couldn’t find any bodies. Didn’t know if that was good.

A couple people, some she recognized from the rallies, walked ahead as lookouts. They weren’t exactly subtle, but somehow they’d made it this far without hiccup or hitch. BioTech probably thought there was no one left.

“You didn’t snap them outta ruin. You showed them the real meaning of the word.”

The Borderlands

They reached the southern borderlands at late day with the winter sun weak in the sky. Pack, who'd been silently chain-smoking next to Calwyn, turned to her. "Make a left up here." Wooden signs hung limply in the dead air, jutting out from scabbed brick buildings like thin, stumpy arms.

"For what? Out of smokes?" The borderlands between Anacostia and downtown were all chain links, graffiti-tagged overpasses, and dead street lamps. She'd heard stories from boys in her class about their older brothers who came south when they scraped up enough money to piss away on slots, sluts, or spirits. Dockers' daughters who couldn't cast a line, throw a net, or haul a crate came down here to shed the nylon jackets of their past and strip down to ripped fishnet stockings.

"No, turn up here." He pointed to one of the wooden signs hanging underneath a torn, faded awning. *The Naked Nun*.

"Classy. You need a second alone?"

"Hysterical. I'm trying to find Jezzie. He owns half the borderlands. This is one of his clubs."

"Jezzie?"

"One of the kingpins."

"What are you dragging them in for? I thought we were *shaking off the powers that be*." She stole words from one of his rally speeches. He shot her a filthy look.

“We’re gonna need guns for this little revolution of yours.”

“It’s not mine.” She interrupted, but as always, he ignored her.

“And Jezzie’s got ‘em. Or what, you were gonna storm the whole Corporation with your. 38 there?” He nodded to the gun in her hand.

“We can’t go blazing down to the Mall fully armed. BioTech’s troops may be up north now but there’s still city cops to deal with.”

“You mean like those slack shits over there?” He nodded up ahead. Two cops were leaning against a brick wall, caps skewed sideways. Sloppy grins amidst four-day stubble.

“They’re speak-easy officials,” He whispered. “Paid off. Fat pockets for their silence and blind eyes.”

“And you know all this how?”

“Gotta let off some of that dock steam somehow.” He smiled. “And cops’ll tell you anything if you buy ‘em enough rounds.”

“Beer or bullets?”

He laughed. First real laugh she’d heard from him, deep and booming. “You learn fast, docks girl.”

He led their straggling band down an alley behind The Naked Nun, around the corner, and to a back entrance. A beefy, towering man a couple years older than Pack stood by the doors. He had a shock of blonde hair that should have been funny against his rawhide skin, but he wasn’t the type you laughed at. Glossy, pinprick eyes but his trunks of arms commanded enough attention.

"He's not seeing anyone today." Came out as a growl. Calwyn wasn't surprised.

"For an old friend?"

"He's not seeing anyone today."

"For a paying customer."

The lumbering mass looked across the group huddled in the back alley. Worn and weathered docks and stragglers from Anacostia.

"You can't afford our business."

"Who said anything about money?" He said with a sneer.

The mass blinked. "Stay here." And he walked through the back door. As it swung open Calwyn could see it was at least four inches thick. They couldn't have opened it if they tried.

She turned to Pack. "Old friend?"

"Pits and I go way back. He's Jezzie's bouncer. Always collects his cover charge one way or another."

"Well if you're not gonna pay in money, what does your friend take? I've heard the stories and I can tell you I am not gonna be a piece in your bargain."

"Calm yourself docks girl. No one'd want to buy you. Hands are too calloused. That and your *sparkling* personality."

Before Calwyn could say something Pits was back. "He'll see you in the upper lounge rooms. You and the girl." He pointed a fat finger at Calwyn. It was as thick as her nose.

Pack smiled and started walking towards the door. Pits stopped him. "You know the rules." He held out his hands, big as dinner plates. "Your guns."

"Fine." Pack agreed. He fished in his deep pockets for his and glared at Calwyn until she reluctantly surrendered hers. He wrapped an arm around her waist and ushered her inside through the thick back doors.

The Naked Nun

Jezzie's court was all dust and stadium lights flashing stained glass colors. Splatters of paint on a wheel. A wooden bar spread the entire expanse of the back wall, glass bottles on shelves stacked five high. The bartender was an unsmiling middle-aged woman who two-hand-poured rows of shots and tucked the bills straight into her torn bra. She slid a slopping row across the counter to three cops on stools. Two were engaged in a heated debate while the other was straining to stare through the haze at the main stage.

A girl lazily spun around a poll to a throbbing bass line, indistinguishable as anything other than a low thudding sensation in your chest. Wafts of smoke carried across the room from the men's mouths and filled the tight space.

Pack leaned in to Calwyn's ear while they walked. "Fat cats with cigars. Listen." Thumbs ran over bill stacks. "You can hear the purring."

"Least they have a real platform." Calwyn watched the girl made a circle around the pole and remove one of her netted stockings with a flat face. A couple bills fell like stray roses on the scratched paint of the stage.

"Mhmm... see you like Keys there? Can't blame you. I've spent a fair share throwing bills at her feet."

Keys bent low around the edges of the stage and collected the bills, stuffing them in the waistband of her purple tutu slung low on her hips. A different song started. She walked back to her pole and slowly slid down the length. A few more bills fell at her feet.

“And I don’t got a stage,” Beard continued but he still was staring at Keys, “but at least I got a sense of authenticity. Notice how the couches are ripped? They do all themselves. The tables are covered in spray on dust. All the glasses have painted lipstick stains.”

“What?”

“They cover it in all grime before shifts. Not cause it’s dirty. Cause it’s expected.”

She looked around. The dingy tables, the dusty air, the flashing Technicolor lights, the shadowed faces, the low hats, the grumbling voices. How it got more inauthentic than the grease he smeared on his hands, trying to get in on poverty like it was some sort of private joke.

“Same as dock grease?” She sneered. But he didn’t hear her.

A lanky, greasy man walked out through hidden doors as they reached the other side of the club, spoke quickly with Pits, and motioned to Pack and Calwyn.

“He’ll see you now.” His voice was like oil grease on gravel. He didn’t wait for a reply, barreling straight back through the wide double doors.

Pits hulked towards the stage. Calwyn could see him beckoning Keys down with a few fat fingers, collecting her. She slid down the pole and slunk off stage.

Pack leaned into her ear again. “That one,” he nodded his head towards the doors, “that was Hammer. Jezzie’s right hand man. Rumor is he’s never missed a shot. Jezzie rarely takes bets, but Hammer makes sure the house wins in any gamble.”

They walked through the doors, up a creaking metal stairs, and down a curtained hallway. The private rooms. They heard Pits and Keys walking silently behind them, but didn't turn around the check. They stopped in front of another set of doors. Hammer was waiting outside, twirling a key in his hand with his gun in a holster on his hip.

While Hammer slid the key in the lock, Pack started hissing low in Calwyn's ear, any trace of snide sarcasm gone. His voice was stone. "Don't say anything. Don't even nod. Let me do the talking. Your job is to stand there."

"But if he asks me something?"

She didn't get a response. The lock clicked and the door swung open.

The Kingpin

Jezzie was named for Jezebel but he was no false prophet. With control of all contraband in the North East, he'd built himself an empire. He held control of more than three-quarters of the trafficked people and products that moved in and out of Anacostia. He had several police bureaus sitting in his deep pockets. He knew the words needed to make things happen and they were crisp and printed: "In God We Trust". He prayed that rosary, fingering fat stacks of bills like beads. He ran his operation out of the borderlands. But every so often he packed up his travelling carnival and went around the quadrant collecting his dues and pushing his product.

If Jezzie was the ringleader. Hammer, the shooting gallery gunslinger, Pits, the behemoth of a strongman, and Keys, the cage-dancing carnival barker all answered to him. Pits stood with his back to the metal doors, staring at the room with beady eyes, arms crossed and face set, barring the exit. Keys draped herself across the low couch on Jezzie's left. Surrounded by the humming sound of her own laughter, she started rolling joints and licking them closed. Hammer went to the nearest wall, leaning up against it, twirling his gun in his long fingers.

Jezzie was confined to shadows. He sat behind a long, low table with his fingers intertwined. No expression on his dark face.

"So *this*... is what you bring me?" His face split into a smile upon speaking.

Pits started to grumble, but Jezzie flicked a hand up. The gesture silenced the room.

Jezzie peered down at Pack and Calwyn, his thin lips curled. "You call yourselves revolutionaries, but to me you look more like street rats.

"And yet you come asking for services. You come asking for more of my guns. Which it seems you cannot afford. I have not scaled to where I am today through charity." He smiled.

"I was told you make other arrangements." Pack slathered a thick layer of grease over his words.

"Only if you can provide me something of value. Guns are not cheap. And you don't seem *scrappy* enough for what I have in mind..."

"What do you want then?"

"Well that's no way to barter. You see, you come up with an absurdly low offer and I counter with a much too high one. Or are you too new to this? I told you, I don't make time for street rats." Jezzie's lips curled as he slid into his words.

"You sold to us before."

"That was when you were paying in a currency we all can understand. Prices change." He unfolded his hands and spread his arms wide out behind him across the back of the low couch. "Welcome to the free market."

"We don't got money."

"No, you don't *have* money." He smiled at his little joke. "And I don't have time for you." He smiled at his little joke.

Calwyn was growing sick of this. Pack didn't know what the hell he was doing. "What'd you have us come up here for? Gotta want something and playing

round with us won't do shit. Won't get nothing if we walk straight out. Waste your time if you wanna but not ours."

Pack whipped his head towards her and hissed. But Jezzie turned and stared right at her, right in her eyes, lingered on her jacket, and his sneer spread wider across his dark face.

"Docks girl... I was wondering when I would get to hear from you. Don't you just love how they talk?" Jezzie turned and purred to Keys, "I'll never grow tired of it."

Calwyn forgot what she was about to say. All words replaced with the low, howling sound of fury in her brain.

Jezzie kept smiling, wide and thin. Did he ever stop smiling? He snapped. Keys, on cue, lifted a freshly rolled joint to his hand. He grabbed it and pulled a lighter from his jacket pocket. The tip smoked.

He held it towards Calwyn. "Try a taste." Jezzie's voice was a hypnotic baritone. He crooned each sentence. His timbre said *song*. His tone said *order*.

Calwyn still didn't say anything. But she didn't take the smoking joint either, held his a tight grip.

Two deep, polite chuckles rose and were muffled by Jezzie's closed lips. "You know how to play, docks girl. Can't be swayed by temptations. I respect that. It surprises me. And surprising me is a risky game. But I would take the bet that you are quite new to this, laying your cards down on the table in front of the *kingpin*. Tell me docks girl, am I your first?" He still smiled. Keys laughed so hard she fell over, rolling on the floor.

Jezzie kept his dark eyes on Calwyn. "We play our next hands yes, docks girl? May beginner's luck keep serving you well...

"If you won't accept my first offer I have another proposal for you and I suggest you think harder about this one." He took a slow drag and exhaled, letting the cramped space fill with smoke.

"I'd like offer you freedom. But if you want my service then I want yours. Bring me heads. Real results. I want the scalps of Corporation officials. If you're going to play at revolution, I have no intention of helping you. But if you want to do the thing properly, well, that's another story. If you accept my bargain, as I believe you will because despite your cheek you have no other options, then might I suggest you take my contributions down to the National Mall? It can be rather lovely in the crisp winter air and you will find it quite *convenient* to your aims."

He didn't break eye contact, dark gaze through the shroud of smoke. She straightened. "And why's that?"

"Oh now don't go doing this. I had thought you smarter than the average docker, and I don't like to be proved wrong." She thought she saw his smile flicker through the smoke. "Amidst all that priceless history, all those profitable monuments and museums, our dear corporate friends would not dare to try and silence your little revolution with an air raid. No, they'd be left with only one option: overtake you on foot. Now, Pits informs me that your numbers are low, which I can hardly say is surprising, but if you establish a smart perimeter and *maintain* it... I dare say that should do the trick. Allow you to grow your numbers into something more established. More effective."

She paused. His silent smile filled the room. "What's your endgame?"

"Why? Do I need one?"

"Men like you. You always have an endgame. Or do you forget that I'm a docks girl so easy?" She knew what the kingpins were capable of, what they were after. Customers and control. "You're giving us guns."

"For a price. As you know, I never work for free."

"You're giving us guns for revolution. Can't tell me you don't mean nothing by that. Can't tell me that means you don't have an endgame. That that's not a statement."

"Scalps are never statements, docks girl. Not unless you force meaning on them. There are plenty of scalps that don't mean anything, that slip quietly away, that die with a whimper."

"People dead cause of BioTech's policies, cause of the dead weight they throw on dockers, cause of the web you catch them in, that don't mean nothing?"

"Skulls and scalps can be rewritten by the living. The beauty of bones is that they are a blank canvas. I take you have never been in one of the museums lining the Mall?"

"I didn't take your for the tourist type."

"I'm interested in keeping up with the perspective of the current victors. It is *all* about perspective, you see. You view the promise of guns, of revolution, as change. I see it as chaos. And change *is* chaos, docks girl. So in either instance, I'm right."

"And you always tip your scales like that."

“It’s just smart business. So I’ll give you your guns, docks girl, because we are both after the same thing in this little gamble. It’s all just bread and circuses. You, docks girl, and your little revolutionaries can call it bread.”

“And so this is the circus?”

He smiled as wide as his lips would allow, but it still didn’t reach his eyes.

The Mall

The whole motley crew of stumbling revolutionaries, charred clothes, soot-streaked faces, worn shoes, with Jezzie's hulking guns weighing them down, burst from the streets onto the National Mall. The American elms lining the flat expanse of bright, rippling grass stood naked and shivering in the winter winds. A few joggers puffing around the distant gravel track took one look at their group and rerouted their run. But for the howling winds moving across the grass, the whole place was silent, bookended by the white stone of the Capitol Building and the towering obelisk of the Washington Monument.

The dockers and people of the Anacostia sent groups with guns to the far end of the Mall, to check if they were safe to set a perimeter, watching the groups of small shapes move in the distance and return back with the same words: *nothing*. They established their perimeter and took the watch in turns, pacing the length and trying to keep the wind from their eyes.

They shed their jackets and used them to make lean-tos against the trunks of the American elms. They wiped pouring sweat from their brows and gasped as their lungs burned from the cold and wished for spare drops of rain to wash the grime and quench their thirst.

They fitfully slept that night on the hard earth, cradling their guns, waking with the howling winds, expecting to bolt upright at any moment to piercing flashlights and barrels pressed against their foreheads.

They sat around in the pale morning the next day, whittling cut branches into thick rods and stacking them for tent poles to try and secure the lean-tos that shook in the winds. Others talked over the sounds of their rumbling stomachs and their chattering teeth. They hadn't thought about what they were going to do for food, for warmth. They were used to hunger pains, but the winds were brutal.

When the stomach pains shot up through their insides, too sharp to ease with distraction, they sent a group, armed with concealed weapons, up into the borderlands of the North West and downtown. Into all food shops and convenience stores. Smiling places with listless teenage staff that sat behind magazine covers and didn't notice if you swiped from the shelves. They brought back their spoils: candy bars with nuts, beef jerky strips, chip bags that weren't mostly air, water bottles, and soda cans. They ate like kings under the stars that night, watching the rattling winds picking up stray empty bags and sending the plastic whipping into the dark air. The ones on watch still circling the perimeter like strange, slim moons.

The sun crested in its low afternoon height on the third day they'd been there when the latest group returned from their raid with the usual snacks, but this time they carried stacks of paper, wooden pencils, markers, pens, slim journals and fat letter stencils. Calwyn asked what they were for, because it was the other side that made mandates not them. Pack smiled and snatched a journal immediately and then opened the bag wide on the ground, letting people paw through the insides. Just eating and sleeping and shitting out here wasn't enough, he smirked, just survival was ineffective. They had to be heard. He shook a blank sheet at her. Wanted the world to hear your story? Well here was the chance.

By the end of their first week their small compound was covered with signs. *People: Made Not Mandated. Can't Drown Dockers. We Net Fish, You Gut Us.* All were skewered on whittled branches from the elms and stuck straight into the hard earth. By the end of the week, people had started to slow as they passed, throwing quick glances at the signs. No one joined them, no stayed, but they lingered and they read the words all the same.

The Tents

Pack sat against a tree trunk the first morning of their second week. They'd lost track of days with no means of counting the hours. He scribbled furiously in a notebook, grinning and muttering while he scrawled tight script.

"Planning on giving more of your famous speeches?" She asked him, staring out at the grey sky. The signs fluttered in the winds. Bright colors and stark black letters against the muted morning.

"Ensnared *you*, didn't they? Thought I'd try and catch some more." He mimed casting a fishing rod in her direction and slowly reeling her in, laughing. She groaned and left. She was up for perimeter duty, pacing the length, staring out at the grey buildings and bare tree branches in the pale sky.

A few tourists had started to trickle in with coffee cups and cameras. Snapping pictures of the white marble buildings, groups smiling in front. At best the few she'd seen this early angled their cameras away from the gathering revolutionaries. Others let their eyes slip over them entirely. But none of the civilians even noticed them, grim faces looking down at the ground and not up and out, pointing and cooing at the various buildings. They had briefcases, baby prams, student bags, and no time for anything out of their daily routine, let alone a straggling band of street rats calling themselves revolutionaries. The civilians came from the South West and had forgotten the words for revolution or they'd come from the South East and didn't bother to learn them.

The streets around the Mall started bustling as the weak sun tried to climb higher in the sky. She kept pacing the perimeter. She didn't know how they were going to wake anyone up, get anyone to listen at this rate. Day one of occupation and they'd managed to assert themselves like gum on a street corner. Everyone just walked around them.

She sighed, something she seemed to be doing a lot lately, and started pacing back towards the small collection of people sitting around their lean-tos. No one had really moved, but Pack wasn't by his tree. He was standing over by one of the gravel paths, talking to two pretty high school girls. Of course. They were in skirts, thick tights, and cardigans. School girls. They looked to be around Calwyn's age.

She walked over, their conversation coming into focus as she got closer.

"So you both are in school?" Pack was leaning against one of the trees near the path, arms crossed. She saw a cigarette in his hand. The tip slowly smoking. Both of the girls were blinking too much and shuffling their feet around coyly.

"Yeah up in the North West. We're here on a class trip. Just came from the US History Museum, but we ducked out early." She was blonde with her hair slung back in a high ponytail. Calwyn could see the markings of what looked like a tattoo on her neck. The first two buttons of her starched blouse were undone and she'd rolled up her skirt.

"Total snooze fest." The other one giggled. She chewed on her bottom lip, something silver on it catching the faint light.

The blonde girl nodded. "Bunch of, like, limp-dicked propaganda if you ask me."

Pack laughed, same grease that he used around Hammer coating his words. "How so?"

"Got this whole wing on the Corporation. Going on about how great they are. How, like, American ingenuity meant strengthening sovereignty and uniting under a common interest, or some shit. How each of the quadrants helped keep the corporate machine going. Even those people from the North East." The other said haughtily, trying to impress Pack.

"Oh I bet they had a lot to say about my quadrant."

Both the girls' jaws dropped and their eyes went wide. The one with the lip ring practically squealed. "You're from the North East?"

"Guilty as charged." He kept smiling.

"Oh my god, we just thought you were, like, homeless or something with all those... tent things. But this is so much cooler. What's it, like, like?"

"Well, it's gone now. The Corporation bombed it all completely. Whole streets gone."

They looked like they'd met their rock god. "No way..." They both breathed at the same time.

"Yes way. Nothing left." He flicked the tip of his cigarette and let ash fall to the ground. "Ash on the wind."

"We haven't heard anything about that. And we get mandates like you guys do, er, did." The blonde one laid into the last bit, trying to show how similar they

were. "I mean obviously most of it is bullshit. Nothing like the truth you tell. We'll definitely include you in our class report." She turned to the other girl. "Even if we get detention. Or even dragged down to Mrs. Hedgewater's office – she's the headmistress."

"Total bitch."

"Stick up her ass."

"She'd *hate* it if we wrote that. But some things are worth saying."

"I couldn't agree more." He smiled. "Take this." He took out his small notebook, tore out the page he'd been scribbling on that morning, handed it to them. "Might help with your report."

They took the paper, smiling, and walked back to catch up with their leaving school group. They started chatting eagerly with each other.

"See?" Pack said with a wink when he turned and saw Calwyn watching the whole exchange. "Every revolution needs an orator"

"Yeah, they're great allies to have..."

"We're not in a position to turn anyone away, no matter how... *simple*."

She didn't listen to his answer. Words were echoing in her brain, Jezzie's deep timbre. *Ever been to one of the museums lining the mall?* His smooth baritone wrapped around the grinning girl's drawling apathy. *Got this whole thing on the corporation...how great they are...*

She looked over towards where the girls were walking, down the length of the Mall towards the Washington Monument. The US History Museum must be near that side.

She turned to Pack. "I wanna see that museum."

Whatever quip he'd been expecting, it was nothing about that. "What?" She'd managed to truly catch him off guard.

"That exhibit. You heard them. What BioTech's saying about us."

"Yeah let's go right now. Take the guns and everything. Just so you can go get all worked up reading shit we both know isn't true."

"You're the speechmaker. If we wanna counter with the truth, we need to know what's really being said."

The Ruins of History

They went around midnight. Taking handguns that fit in their waistbands, they made their way down the Mall by the faint moonlight, counting the museums until they reached the end of the row. Engraved across the flat white marble were prestigious block letters printed next to the glass doors. *National Museum for American History*.

She walked slowly up the shallow stone steps, past the twisted metal sculpture in the flat outdoor entry pavilion, and placed her hands on the cold glass doors. She traced her fingers down to the handle, smoothing her thumb over the keyhole.

Pack pulled something from inside his jacket, slipped it in the lock, and started fumbling with it until the door creaked open.

They walked into the pitch-blackness inside. Pack flicked his lighter and their faces jumped into shadows. The air was cold and crisp. Pristine. The whole place felt like a mausoleum. Vacuous house of the dead.

Pack set off towards the gift shop on the left, taking the flickering light with him, leaving Calwyn in the dark lobby. The sounds of Pack's feet echoed across the smooth surfaces as the light dimmed.

She was going to walk out, ignore the impulse to see what passed for propaganda on this side of the city, to leave and not get sucked up into the spun stories. But as her eyes adjusted to the faint moonlight coming in through the glass doors, she could just make out a vast metal sculpture, hanging across from her on

the far wall. She walked closer, her eyes straining, wishing she had the lighter. The image sharpened as her eyes adjusted to the scant lighting, coming forth from the dark shadows. Sculpted as if in a forever-blowing breeze, hung an artistic rendering of the American flag, barely touching metal squares created the mirage of abstract stripes. Each one bore a different puzzle piece of an etching that when joined together formed the shining two crossed fists of BioTech. Their life over her people's liberty and happiness. River leech.

Light burst across the white stone floor in a thin tunnel. Pack had found flashlights then. He came back and threw one at her. "Heads up, docks girl." She grabbed it and flicked it on. The pale beam stretched over the information counter to her right, a bright sea-blue, with plastic trays for maps. She snatched one and unfolded it across the desk, pushing aside the first phone she'd ever seen before pouring over the colored squares.

Floor 1 was dedicated to American Innovation, Creativity, and Enterprise and boasted the gifted Heral Bode Hall of Innovation and Bode Theatre, both namesakes for the President and Founder of the Corporation. It featured "Stories on Money" and a café with access to the basement level cafeteria that boasted "All-American Favorites" and a vegetarian option.

Floor 2 covered American Ideals, housing the first Star-Spangled Banner and the first design renderings of the Corporation's logo. The east and west wings were both closed for renovation, but promised exciting new American Stories opening this summer. It also housed the gift shop and information desk and exit onto the National Mall.

Floor 3 was devoted to American Politics, featuring the largest green square on the floor plan, an exhibition in the west wing on the founding of the Corporation.

She didn't bother shutting the map. She just started walking. She heard Pack following, chuckling mildly to himself, as they walked across the lobby and up the west stairs to the third floor.

Off the unmoving escalators, there was a wide arch in that same calming blue. *The Might of the Many* was etched along the side in handsome block letters.

Pack's hand caught her shoulder as she was about to walk towards the entrance of the exhibit. "You sure you want to do this? It ain't gonna be pretty."

"No, I need to hear this for myself. I need to hear what they tell others. What they don't tell us in Anacostia. We need to know what poison we have to suck out if we actually wanna do anything." She grabbed one of the audio guides from a bin outside the entrance to the exhibit. She heard Pack fumble to grab one behind her. She looped the wrist strap around her hand, placed the plastic to her ear, walked through the archway, and pressed play.

The Tour

The National Museum for American History presents The Might of the Many: Memories of the Creation of the Corporation. Please press 1 to begin your journey...

Her finger slipped over the button.

The Corporation was founded over fifty years ago as just a small sapling of an idea: a more economically unified America. We here at the Corporation are just like you; we want quality assurance with cost efficiency. Or more simply put, we want to be able to buy the best at the lowest possible price. What can we say? We're only human. Looking at what was once the disastrous economic state of the nation, how the ever-growing debt crushed even the best-off American citizens, we vowed to right the mistakes of past, spendthrift generations. So we here at the Corporation founded and formed a new tomorrow in the hope of returning America to her once great prosperity, forging new ground right in the heart of the nation's capitol as a beacon of promise.

Our first office, set up right in the South East quadrant and headed by Heral Bode, remains standing today under his fearless guidance as a testament to our national ingenuity. Even though we have the personal spirit of a small operation, we continue to grow nationwide to this day. So vast grew the competition for available positions as people became aware of how much we embody their ideals. New hubs have bloomed across the eastern coast and swept across the mountainous majesty and through the fruitful plains like a great wind of innovative possibility. If you look to figure sixteen on your right, you will see that today over three million people are employed at venues overseen by the Corporation and that as many as eighty-nine

percent of all Washington, D.C. residents are employed by one of our branches. In fact, in our first five years of establishment, our new positions alone helped to lower the unemployment rate by over nine percent! And we're constantly developing new branches specifically to fit your needs. If you look to the left you'll see our announcement for our new Department that will be opening in June. We can't tell you what it will be though, because we wouldn't want to spoil the surprise... Please continue down the hall...

Unlike yesterday, the Corporation is not a commercial conglomeration, one of those cartels that steal personal liberties and rights from the people. If you look at figures twenty through twenty-two you will see multiple court cases in which figureheads for these commercial machines tried to argue that their companies were due the same rights as citizens. That's no way to run America. We here at the Corporation are not made higher than you. We are made one with you. We are not in competition for goods, rights, and services. We provide them to you. And we think that's pretty neat.

If you look to your right you can see an eviction notice, dated back to 2005.

Calwyn stopped. It was small. Pink. Worn lines across the paper remained from being crumpled and laid flat. Sitting behind thick glass. Illuminated by dull yellow light. Barely at the level of her hips. The smudges of small fingerprints smeared across the glass. Bold black type.

If you look closely at the writing (unfortunately this one suffered some water damage but our team of experts was able to restore over ninety-seven percent of the original document) you can see how impoverished people were unceremoniously

dumped from their homes for being unable to make their rent payments to an arbitrary landlord. This harkens back to the feudal economic caste systems of medieval times...

She read the print: Citizen you are ordered to vacate this dwelling. Officials will be arriving in twenty-four hours to secure the premises. If you do not vacate the unit within that time period, pursuant to Code No. 513, we maintain our right to destroy the unit. We do not maintain the responsibility for anyone remaining inside.

Talk about backwards!

Her fingers hovered over the glass, over the prints of other people, long and smeared, who couldn't be bothered to read the whole thing. Who couldn't stop moving for a moment in order to leave an intact mark.

Today all residences are owned and maintained in trust by the Department of Domestic Proceedings, eliminating any unfair private commerce, and delivering to you, the resident, confidence in your housing purchase.

She didn't move. Pack brushed past her, the familiar click of his lighter, the deep exhale, still lightly laughing to himself. It was all a joke to him. Everything was just one giant joke. Pressed tight to her ear, the audio tour played on. She didn't move.

The Corporation has done more than just revolutionize the way in which you live, it has also helped to revolutionize the way in which you, tomorrow's leaders, learn...

It was all just sounds, all a blur that didn't line up with the faded slip behind smeared glass before her.

In 2002, the U.S. enacted the “No Child Left Behind Act”, which could not be more misleadingly named. This legislation only further ensured and maintained the gap between those students who were able and those students who couldn’t keep up with regulated curriculum. All students were held to the same standard, but that standard was so lowered that many young minds were permitted to graduate high school while reading at an eighth grade level. If you look to your left you can see the transcripts from several students of the upper schools that once surrounded this city.

She did not look to her left. She still stared at the notice.

All received the same diploma, but the student of the far left went on to graduate from Cornell while the one on the far right ended up failing out of his vocational tech school.

Seeing the injustice and the disservice being done to our nation’s youth, the Department of Intellectual Potential launched its flagship program thirteen years ago with the first kindergarten class at Bode Elementary School in the North East Quadrant. All students in this remarkable class were allowed to learn at their own pace, studying what they pleased and expressing their own individual aptitude for the material presented before them. These children, as they continued to mature and matriculate from year to year were allowed to attend schooling until they felt the course material surpassed their personal potential. If you look at item twenty-seven, you can see the form these bold, self-assessing students would then fill out and submit to Academic Advising, which would work tirelessly to find them a suitable career in the exciting and important fields of Circuitry, Sanitation, Purification, Agribusiness, and Construction. The class of nine fledgling students who have completed this program

and their full schooling will be graduating this May, four of them continuing their studies at the University level and five of them going on to exciting upper-level positions in the Corporation... Please continue to the next room...

We here at the Corporation believe that with the promise of tomorrow, anything is possible. That when people are given freedom they are allowed to succeed, and that when everyone is given their proper place we are allowed to rest easy in those homes. We thank you for your continued support and your business and ask that you continue to take hands with us. Apply for a position with us today, you never know where we could take you...

Thank you for visiting the National Museum for American History. Please return your audio guide to the nearest receptacle upon your exit so the next group of patrons can enjoy their experience...

She lingered in front of the worn eviction notice.

The Eviction

She did not drop her audio guide into the nearest receptacle. She did not give two shits about the next patrons. She didn't make it to the end of the exhibit. She still stared at the eviction notice. Her blood boiled. The audio guide started up again in her ear. Shaking fingers must have hit the button. *The National Museum for American History presents...* Her brain seethed. She held the audio guide tight in her grip, nails scraping against the black plastic. The world flashed white-hot and red sparks and hissing steam. The strap around her wrist, she smashed the guide down hard against the glass. Not a dent. Her gun ached in the waistband of her pants. Pack laughed somewhere behind her. She swung again. His cigarette between his teeth muffled his cries as he screamed out game points as she kept swinging. *Ten. Twenty. Thirty.* The display case shattered. She let the glass cut her skin and her blood flow freely across their carefully restored document. Thin as tissue, barely a breath with its faded print. Just paper. Just like the mandates.

She slung the long loop trailing from the end of the audio guide around her neck like a hangman's noose. On the gallows she'd have more choices than what they had given her.

It could all dissolve in water. All that paper. All the sheets that mucked their lives. Dissolve beyond the point of restoration.

She snapped her fingers towards Pack who had joined her again with an armful of audio guides, black like beetles. The words of the tour hissing as they all

jostled together, feelers shuffling and wings clicking. They clattered to the ground as he handed her a pen from his pocket.

Not revolution. Not slow revolution. No. Sitting out there on the Mall wasn't enough. Sitting was silence.

Pack picked up the guides and hurled them at the displays, letting them crash against the wall, fall to the floor, or shatter straight through the glass. His echoing score count rung through the high ceilings of the dark labyrinth as he tallied his points.

Signs weren't enough. Flimsy and flapping in the brutal winds down on the Mall. No one read them. The finally spoken words of her people met not smatterings of applause like at Anacostia's rallies. They were smothered in the bottom of school bags, forgotten at the tops of trash bins, trampled underneath the shuffling feet of people who were being taught that lies were history.

Not revolution. Destruction. Tear it all down. Start from scratch.

Pack threw audio guides, laughing, letting them smash through the glass and topple artifacts from their spindly stands. He slipped more over his head forming a new armor. They clapped together around his neck like clacking applause.

But this, the Corporation would have to notice this. This they'd have to face. She made her marks, thick and dark, across the paper. She'd never been happier her mother made her stay in school, that she'd learn to read and write. She held it up towards the weak backlights of the once pristine display cases, and smiled, Pack still howling in her ears.

This, they couldn't ignore. This they couldn't silently bomb into oblivion.

The audio guides swinging wildly around his neck, Pack went swooping back through the labyrinth back towards the entrance, cackling to himself, throwing more guides, and singing the few dockers' chants he knew. She grabbed a thin glass shard, followed him, and used it to tack up the notice over letters etched into the entryway. Pack stopped singing and throwing guides to read what Calwyn wrote.

"And what's that supposed to be?"

"Souvenir for the Corporation. Wouldn't be a museum trip without one."

The sheet hung still, skewered over the entrance to a sea of shards scattered around the ruins of history. Glinting waters like her people's once proud Anacostia. Fine glass, ground from Pack's gleeful stomping. A sea of sand.

The notice now read: CORPORATION *you are ordered to vacate this dwelling.* THE PEOPLE YOU'VE SMOTHERED ARE ALREADY HERE. *If you do not vacate OUR LANDS IMMEDIATELY, we maintain our right to destroy YOU. We do not maintain the responsibility for anyone remaining inside.*