

Outpost sampler (two chapters)

Coming September 4 from Feiwel & Friends

Nightjar

I woke to the cold kiss of steel on my throat.

Though I'd grown accustomed to sleeping safely since our arrival in Salvation two months ago, I'd lost none of my edge. Before my attacker realized I was awake, I knocked the knife away and tumbled him over my head. While Stalker recovered, I rolled to my feet and scowled. Momma Oaks would skin us both if she caught him in my room. People took reputations seriously, and mine was already bruised, due to my insistence on being myself.

“Good work, dove.” Stalker’s grin flashed in the moonlight.

“What are you doing here?” It was the middle of the night, but he loved his little tests.

“We’ve got incoming. I heard the second bell.”

My ire cooled. He wasn’t just checking my reflexes in spite of our precarious situation. Belonging to no one, we had to make sure we didn’t wear out our welcome or anger the townsfolk by flouting their rules. Most seemed designed to discourage unauthorized breeding, and they didn’t like it when I went off to spar with Stalker. It hadn’t taken me long to figure that I wasn’t a normal girl—at least by Salvation standards. So we trained in secret these days, no daylight matches.

“Let’s have a look. Turn around.”

With minimal fuss, I dressed in Huntress attire and strapped on my weapons, which I hadn’t permitted anyone to take, despite complaints of how ‘inappropriate’ it was for me to carry them. Most of those came from women who dropped by the Oakses’ house to whisper their disapproval of my heathen ways. Savages raised me in a cave, to hear them tell it, but as I’d informed Momma Oaks, I earned my scars and

blades. They could pry the latter from my cold, dead hands. Respecting the teacher's sensibilities, I did wear long-sleeve blouses to school to hide my Huntress status.

Stalker slid out the open window, the same one he'd climbed in a few moments before. If I didn't look forward to our nighttime matches so much, I'd latch it, but only those fights made me feel like a Huntress these days. Following him, I leapt to the branch of the tree and then swung down into the quiet yard.

It was a warm night, bright moon patterning the ground with silver. Each blade of grass felt heavenly beneath my feet. Once, I'd walked on broken stones and hard cement, deep in the belly of the earth. It had been a noisy place, full of echoes, soft moans, and whimpers in the night. But that world was gone.

Now I lived in Salvation, where the buildings were sound, whitewashed and clean, where men had their work and women did different tasks. I struggled with that reality. Down below, my sex hadn't mattered much. Most of our titles there were neutral with the exception of Huntress, and we retained that one because in the early days—before we realized females could fight as fiercely—only male Hunters protected the enclave. When the first Huntress changed everything, she wanted an acknowledgment of her achievement. . . and so the distinction remained, unlike the Builders and Breeders who had always been both genders.

They treated their young differently in Salvation as well. Regardless of the threat, brats weren't allowed to fight . . . but I'd spent too long defending the enclave to feel comfortable about lying abed while others battled on my behalf. They had built the town like a wooden fortress with strong fortifications and a sturdy gate; a protective wall with walkway and sentry towers kept the Freaks out, safeguarding the populace, but I wasn't sure it would hold forever. Both Stalker and I had asked to assess the numbers Salvation faced, and how well the guards drove them off. It

seemed like a reasonable request, but the folks in charge—elders who were actually *old*—preferred that young people spent their time puzzling how to read and cipher numbers. There were also history lessons and endless tests on information that nobody in their right mind would ever be required to know.

I found it insulting. If someone already knew how to weave cloth, why would anyone waste time making him learn how to bake bread? It was a waste of effort, but they had rules for everything in Salvation. Breaking them had consequences, which was why I had to be careful.

Along with Stalker, I stole through the darkened town, avoiding dogs that would set up a racket. I found it curious that people kept animals for companionship and not food. When I'd asked Momma Oaks when she planned to cook the fat creature who slept in a basket in the kitchen, her eyes almost popped out of her head. Since then, she'd kept her pet away from me, like she suspected I meant to turn it into stew. Clearly, I had a lot to learn.

"I smell them," Stalker whispered then.

Lifting my head, I sniffed the night wind and nodded. Anyone who had encountered Freaks—or Muties as they called them Topside—wouldn't forget the stench: rotting meat and oozing sores. Once, a long time ago, they had human ancestors. . .or so the stories said. But something bad happened, and people got sick. A lot of them died. . .and some of them changed. The dead ones were lucky, Edmund claimed, but Momma Oaks always shushed her husband when he talked like that. She had some idea that we needed to be sheltered. Her protective instincts made me laugh, considering I'd fought more than most town guards. I paused, listening.

Weapons weren't quiet in Salvation, so if the fight had started, I'd hear the boom of their guns. That gave me time to scramble up to the southern-most sentry

tower, where Longshot stood watch. He wouldn't run me off with angry words about how I ought to be in bed. Over the past weeks, he'd showed great patience with my questions. Other men said it was none of my business and reported me for unfeminine, improper behavior; more than once I'd found myself in trouble with Momma Oaks over my nocturnal jaunts.

As usual, Longshot didn't protest when we slid up the ladder and joined him. From this vantage I saw by flickering lamplight the land unfolding before me. If I pushed past, I could gain access to the walls, but then his fellow guards would yell at me for getting in the way. I didn't have a gun, so I couldn't shoot Freaks anyway. Plus, Momma Oaks would hear about my misdeeds again, which led to extra chores and a lecture about how I wasn't trying to fit in.

"You never miss a fight," Longshot said, cocking Old Girl.

"Not if we can help it," Stalker answered.

"It doesn't feel right. . . I'm used to helping. How many are there tonight?"

"I counted ten, but they're hanging back, just out of range."

That information sent a cold chill through me. "Trying to draw you out?"

"It won't work," he assured me. "They can prowl outside all they want, but if they get hungry enough, they'll charge, and we'll put 'em down."

I wished I shared his confidence in the power of walls for keeping bad things out. Down below, we had barricades, of course, but we hadn't relied on them exclusively. Patrols went out to keep our territory clear, and it made me uneasy to think of Freaks gathering. Who knew how many were out there? I remembered Nassau's fate; that was the closest settlement to where I'd lived down below. When Silk—the commander of the Hunters—sent Fade and me to investigate, the reality was worse than anything I'd imagined, Freaks feasting on the dead after they

annihilated the living. It scared me to imagine such a fate here, where citizens weren't as tough. They had more guards, of course, and not all of them hunted, as we did down below. More citizens lived in Salvation, so they could spread the work out.

From the other side of the wall came the distant bark of someone's gun, and then the bell rang. Just once, which meant a kill. Two bells indicated incoming. I'd never heard more than two bells, so I didn't know if there were other warnings.

"How many signals are there?" I asked Longshot.

"Twelve or so," he answered, raising his weapon. "It's based on some kind of old military language, dots and dashes."

That didn't clarify anything, but before I could ask, movement in the perimeter caught my eye. As two Freaks ran toward the wall, Longshot sighted with Old Girl and dropped the first. It didn't seem sporting when the creatures had no ranged weapons, but most of the citizens here weren't trained to fight, either. A breach in security would be disastrous.

As I watched, the surviving Freak knelt beside its fallen friend and then shrieked as if we were the monsters. The sound echoed in the trees, full of grief and loathing. I glanced at Longshot, who was holding fire. The thing didn't run, although it could have. Its eyes glittered in the lamplight, showing madness and hunger, certainly, but tonight I saw something more. Or thought I did.

It's a shadow, playing tricks.

"Sometimes they sound like they have minds in their rotten heads," he said, as if to himself.

Then he took the second shot, so the other died beside the first. Afterward, Longshot rang the bell once, paused, and then once again, reporting his kills. The townsfolk had learned to sleep through the racket. This information was for the

guards, so they could track how many bodies surrounded the town. In the morning, they would send an armed crew to drag away the corpses, far enough that if they attracted other Freaks, they could feed without the good folks of Salvation having to watch. I approved of the practice; fortunately, the people here didn't have to be lectured on the importance of proper hygiene.

That was the only thing Salvation had in common with College, the enclave where I had been raised. Up here on the safety of the wall, my knives couldn't do any damage, and I hated being useless. Stalker took no better to being cut out of the action. He had a valid point when he'd said, months ago:

You, you're like me.

I'd replied, *You mean a Hunter?*

Yes. You're strong.

It was true. . .but here, physical strength didn't matter. Neither did training. They wanted us to learn new roles and forget that we'd once led different lives. I found it tough, as I'd loved being a Huntress. Yet Salvation offered no similar role for girls; I couldn't even wear my own clothes.

For some time, we listened to the gunfire, until the bell stopped tolling death. Gradually the night noises resumed—and that was another way you could tell Freaks had retreated. When all the animals went still and silent, an attack had to be imminent. Now the hush filled with the peculiar churring of a bird whose name I didn't know.

“What is that?” I asked Longshot.

He always had the utmost patience for my questions, and this was no different. “Nightjar. They come for the summer before heading south again.”

Not for the first time, I envied the birds that freedom. “Thanks. We'll get out of your way before someone catches us here.”

“Appreciate it.” Longshot kept his eyes fixed on the trees.

Stalker glided down the ladder with the grace that made him such a phenomenal fighter at close range. We took every opportunity to keep our skills sharp because deep down, I couldn't believe the guns would last forever. Life down below had taught me to believe in nothing so much as my own abilities; Stalker's upbringing in the Topside gangs had given him a similar philosophy.

They'd placed Stalker in a different foster home, where he could do valuable work—therefore, they apprenticed him to the blacksmith, and Stalker said he didn't mind learning how to make weapons and ammunition. Tegan stayed with Doc Tuttle and his wife; it was a long month while she fought infection. I stayed with her as much as I could, though after the first few days, they made me go to school. Three weeks ago, she joined us in the schoolhouse. In the afternoons, she assisted Doc with patients, cleaned his instruments, and generally made herself useful. As for Fade, he went to live with Mr. Jensen, the man who ran the stables, and he cared for creatures like the ones that towed Longshot's wagon.

Of us all, only I remained with Edmund and Momma Oaks. She kept me busy sewing, though I had little aptitude, and it annoyed me to be saddled with Builder work. They were wasting my potential. I didn't see any of my old friends as much as I once had, and I hated that, too. Sometimes I missed the house by the river, where nobody told us what to do.

These musings carried me through our silent progress away from the wall. By tacit agreement, Stalker and I didn't head to our respective beds. Instead, we had a secret place within Salvation, as we were forbidden to go into the countryside, a half-finished house near the north side of town. They'd gotten the roof on, but the interior hadn't been smoothed out, nor had the second story progressed past beams and slats.

Some young couple had planned to live here once they married, but the girl took a fever and died, leaving the boy wild with grief. Momma Oaks told me he went out into the wilderness without so much as a weapon. *It was like he was asking them to kill him*, she'd said, shaking her head in disbelief. *But I reckon love can do strange things to a body*. Love sounded terrible if it made you so weak, you couldn't survive without it. Regardless, their misfortune left Stalker and me with the perfect place to hide and talk—and spar.

“We don't belong here,” he said, once we settled in the shadows.

I didn't think so either, not in the roles they intended us to play. They couldn't accept that we weren't stupid brats who had to be supervised. We'd seen and survived things these folks couldn't imagine. Though I hated to judge people kind enough to take us in, they weren't very worldly in some respects.

“I know.” When I finally answered, I kept my voice soft.

People already said this place was haunted; that was why nobody had continued the construction. I hadn't even know what that meant before Longshot explained it to me. The idea of a ghost was foreign; that part of a person could live on outside his body made no sense on the surface, but sometimes I wondered if I had Silk's spirit in my head. I'd asked Longshot if people could be haunted like places, but he'd said, *I'm not even sure places can be, Deuce. You're asking the wrong man if you want esoteric knowledge*. Since I didn't know what *esoteric* meant either, I let the matter drop. Topside had lots of foreign words and concepts; I was digesting them as fast as I could. . .but so much strangeness made me feel small and stupid.

I hid those moments as best I could.

“We could leave,” Stalker said.

In the dark, I studied my fingers as if I could see the tiny marks from the

needle I wasn't accustomed to plying. "And go where?"

We'd almost died traveling from the ruins, and there had been four of us. Tegan wouldn't leave Salvation, and I wasn't sure about Fade. For all I knew, he was happy working with the animals. I hadn't talked to him to say more than a handful of words in weeks—and that was another reason for my quiet unhappiness. Sometimes I tried to bridge the distance, but Fade avoided me at school, and his foster father was a brusque, impatient man who shooed me away from the stables on the occasions I had visited. *Go on, Mr. Jensen would say. The boy doesn't have time to wag his jaw.*

"There have to be other settlements."

"Do there?" I asked quietly.

He'd passed through the same wreckage as me while we pushed north. Most towns and cities had been overrun. In all these months, Longshot was the only human we'd seen in the wilderness. Even if we didn't like our lot, it made sense to stick it out until we were old enough to have some say in town decisions. Unfortunately, that could be a long time. That was incredibly frustrating because I wasn't a brat anymore; I'd passed my trials and become an adult. The things I had survived had moved me beyond childhood, and I had wisdom to offer, no matter how many years I had.

"Enough of this." He pushed to his feet and fell into a fighting crouch.

And *that* was why I met him in secret. He understood. Stalker wouldn't let me forget who I was. Momma Oaks had suggested I disregard my old life and try to become a "regular" girl. My first week in her home, she explained how females were expected to behave in Salvation. She made me long-sleeved blouses to hide my scars, and put my hair in neat braids. I hated the clothes, but the hairstyle was practical for fighting, at least.

He lunged; I blocked. Even in the dark, I could tell he was smiling as my fist

slammed into his torso. Sometimes he let me land a few hits early on, but he would never admit it. We circled and sparred until I had no more breath, and several new bruises. Good thing my foster mother insisted on modesty, or I wouldn't be able to hide this night's work.

“You all right, dove?”

I wasn't; I longed for Fade, and I hated lessons, and I missed being valued for my skill. As if in consolation, Stalker tipped my chin up and tried to kiss me. I sprang away with an aggravated sigh. Though I wasn't interested in more than training, he had great determination that he'd change my mind someday. I couldn't see it happening. If he thought I'd ever breed with him, he'd better be ready for an argument that ended with my knives in his gut.

“I'll see you at school,” I muttered.

After confirming the path was clear, I left the little house and headed for the Oakses' place. Climbing back into my room was more challenging than getting out. First, I had to shimmy up the tree, inch along the branch, and then leap over to my window. It wasn't too great a distance, but if I landed wrong, I'd fall, which would prove impossible to explain. This time I managed without waking the household. Once on my return, I had Momma Oaks in my room demanding to know what I meant by that racket. I'd pleaded a bad dream, which led to her *poor lambing* me, and hugging me to her ample breast for intended comfort. This always left me feeling awkward and unsure.

That night, I lay awake a long time, remembering times long gone, and people I would never see again. Stone and Thimble, my two brat-mates. . .they'd acted like they believed the charges against me—that I was capable of hoarding—and that still hurt. I missed so many people: Silk, Twist, the elder's right hand man, plus the little

brat 26 who looked up to me. In a fever dream, Silk told me that the enclave was no more; I wondered if I could believe that knowledge, but I didn't see a way to confirm it. I'd lost nearly everyone I cared about when I left home. Now it felt as if I'd lost Fade too. Up on the wall, when Longshot had killed its companion, the surviving Freak cried out, and that protest made me wonder if the monsters felt, like we did, if they could miss the ones taken from them. Wrestling that uncomfortable possibility, I fell at last into an uneasy doze.

The nightmare began.

My flesh crawled with the smell as we made the last turn. I'd long since gotten used to the darkness and the chill, but the stink was new. It was like the Freaks that had surrounded us in the car, only a hundred times worse. Fade stilled me with a hand on my arm. I read from his gestures that he wanted us to stay close to the wall and move very slowly on the approach. He got no argument from me.

We came up on the busted barricade first. There was no guard posted. Inside the settlement, Freaks shambled about their business. They were fat in comparison with the ones we'd encountered on the way. Horror surged through me. For a moment I couldn't take it all in; the silence of corpses drowned every thought.

There was no one here to save, and our elders had killed the sole surviving Nassau citizen. That meant our nearest trade outpost lay four days in the opposite direction. Fade put his hand on my arm and cocked his head the way we'd come. Yes, it was time to go. We could do nothing here but die.

Though I was tired, terror gave my muscles strength. As soon as we gained enough distance through stealth, I broke into a headlong run. My feet pounded over the ground. I'd run until I buried the horror. Nassau hadn't been prepared; they hadn't believed the Freaks could be a large-scale threat. I tried not to imagine the

fear of their brats or the way their Breeders must have screamed. Their Hunters had failed.

We wouldn't. We couldn't. We had to get home and warn the elders.

My feet moved, but I went nowhere. Running, as the earth opened, trapping me. Open mouthed, I tried to scream, but no sound emerged. Then blackness swirled in, carrying me away. Everything shifted.

The enclave sprawled before me, filled with a hateful crowd, their faces twisted with condemnation. They spat on me as I passed through the warren toward the barricades. I lifted my chin and pretended not to see them. Fade met me there. We stood mute while they rifled through our things. A Huntress flung my bag at my head, and I caught it. I hardly dared breathe when she stepped close.

"You disgust me," she said, low.

I said nothing. Like so many times before, Fade and I climbed across and left the enclave behind. But this time, we weren't heading on patrol. No safety awaited us. Without thinking, without seeking a direction, I broke into a run.

I ran until the pain in my side matched the one in my heart. At length he grabbed me from behind and gave me a shake. "We're not going to make it if you keep this up."

The scene changed. Pain and shame melted into terror. I had no choice but to leave my home. The unknown would swallow me up.

Soon the shadows devoured us and I could only see the vague Fade-shape nearby. "I'll go up first."

I didn't argue, but I didn't let him get far ahead of me either. As soon as he started to climb, I did too. The metal was slick beneath my palms; several times I nearly lost my balance and fell. Grimly, I continued up.

“Anything?”

“Almost there.” I heard him feeling around, and then the scrape of metal on stone. He pulled himself out of what looked like a small hole. Diffuse light spilled down, a different tint than I’d ever seen. It was sweetly silver and cool, like a drink of water. With Fade’s help, I scrambled up the rest of the way and saw the world above for the first time.

It stole my breath. I spun in a slow circle, trembling at the size of it. I tilted my head back and saw overhead a vast field of black, spattered with brightness. I wanted to crouch down and cover my head. It was too much space, and horror overwhelmed me.

“Easy,” Fade said. “Look down. Trust me.”

Morning came after a night of devastating dreams, most of them true, and with it a dull, throbbing headache. Still shaking, I sat up and rubbed my eyes. Everything had a price, and this was mine. During my waking hours, I could be calm and in control, but at night, my fears crept in on quiet feet, haunting my sleep. Sometimes my past felt like a heavy chain about my neck, but a Huntress wouldn’t let it prevent her from moving forward and taking action.

Exhausted, I crawled out of bed, washed up in cold water, and got ready for school. As I trudged down the stairs, I shook my head at the waste. What did I need to learn that I didn’t know already? But there was no convincing anyone of that. Apparently, it was a rule that I had to attend until I was sixteen—at which point I could remove myself. If Momma Oaks had anything to say about it, I would work with her full time, making clothes.

Sometimes I’d rather go back down below.

School

The school was the size of a large house, the interior space divided up by age groups. Colorful charts and pictures decorated most of the walls, except for the one where the blackboard hung. It was smooth, but hard like a rock, and Mrs. James, the teacher, used white sticks to write on it. Sometimes the brats scrawled stupid messages on it, often about Stalker or me.

Mrs. James moved among us, supervising our work. I hated this because I sat with brats younger than myself. I held my pencil awkwardly; writing didn't come as easy as using my knives. The brats laughed at me behind their hands, eyes amused and innocent. I couldn't even bring myself to dislike them for their careless prejudice.

They knew only safety and comfort. These brats were smug and self-assured, confident of their place in the world. In some respects I envied them. They didn't have nightmares, or if they did, they weren't about real things. Most had never seen a monster, let alone killed one. They'd never seen a Freak feeding on someone who died in the enclave, and then was cast out like garbage. They didn't know how ruined the world was beyond the walls; they'd never felt claws tearing through their flesh. Small wonder I had nothing in common with these Salvation young.

As for the teacher, Mrs. James thought Stalker was a savage. Fade, she liked a little better, because his scars could be hidden, and he knew how to show a polite, distant face. He had been doing it for years, after all, well before we went Topside. Nobody saw anything he didn't intend to reveal. Mrs. James liked Tegan, much as all adults did, whereas she sighed at me, calling me an "unfortunate case of blighted potential," whatever that meant.

Today, she was running on about some terrible tragedy, determined we'd learn

from our forebearers' mistakes. "And so, that's why it's imperative to pay attention to the past. We don't want to repeat such errors, do we?"

While Mrs. James lectured, my mind wandered. Things that happened in the enclave—that I hadn't questioned at the time—troubled me now. I wondered how bad a person I was for not realizing there were problems sooner. Sometimes worry and regret balled up in my stomach like a sickness.

I killed my first man when I was twelve years old.

It was my final trial, the last test I would undergo before being accepted as a Huntress. Though I had been training for it, this deed determined whether I had a fierce heart. I could still see his face, even three and a half years later; he had been weak and injured. The elders told me he was a Nassau spy, caught skulking inside our borders outside the safety of a trading party. I remember how he begged for mercy, his voice hoarse with despair. I'd steeled myself. It was the first time I'd held a knife, as brats owned no weapons. In hindsight, I should have smelled the stench of the elders' dishonesty, but I hadn't paid close enough attention.

"They brought me here," he'd moaned. "*They* brought me."

I'd believed he meant when they captured him in the tunnels, and I considered his plea a contemptible effort to avoid his fate. A failed spy could at least die with dignity. Though my stomach had churned, I cut his throat, and his cries went silent forever. For my first kill, I didn't know enough to offer him a cleaner death, piercing a vital organ instead. The elders had been pleased with me. Silk took me to the kitchen thereafter and Copper gave me a special treat. Most likely, the stranger had been captured for our ritual. They had done such things in the enclave and left us scuttling in the dark.

Though I had been in the light for months, the shadows still troubled me.

Sounding irritated, Mrs. James rapped her desk with brisk knuckles. “Will you do the honors, Deuce?”

My head came up, cheeks hot with humiliation. The teacher knew I hadn’t been paying attention, and in this, she was like Silk. She believed making a public example of people motivated them to do better in the future. I thought it just taught them to be ashamed. I met her gaze squarely; I wasn’t a brat she could intimidate, though I felt as she intended.

“I didn’t hear what you want me to do, ma’am.”

“Read page forty-one, please.”

Ah. So the class had moved from history to reading. The others settled in to be entertained as I sounded the words out. My pronunciation was slow and laborious, interspersed with constant correction from Mrs. James. I liked stories, but I didn’t enjoy puzzling them out on my own. To my mind, books offered both entertainment and reward, but the recitation was best left to those who excelled at it.

Like Fade.

He watched me, dark eyes revealing nothing of his thoughts. At last, I struggled to the end of the passage and sat back, silently hating Mrs. James for putting me this position. In six months, I could stop pretending. In six months, I became an adult. That chafed since I’d passed my majority already, according to the laws down below. It wasn’t right that I could make my own way and choose my own course, until I reached the safety we’d dreamed of—and then it could be taken away from me.

That was enormously unfair. I’d once said as much to Longshot, who shook his head and laughed. *That’s life, kid.*

The boys were old enough not to attend classes, if they chose otherwise, but they came anyway. Maybe they thought listening to Mrs. James was better than

working all day. This way, they only did chores after school. For Stalker, I suspected it was also a matter of pride; he couldn't stand that Fade was so much better at reading, so he was working to catch up. Not that the teacher gave him any credit. For various reasons, she didn't like either of us very much.

Later, as the others filed out to eat their lunches in the sun, Mrs. James called my name. "I'd like to speak with you a moment."

I went up to the front, ignoring the looks and nudges. "Yes, sir?"

"It's ma'am," she corrected. "You call men sir."

Down below, we'd called everyone the same—with the exception of the Huntress title—regardless of what private parts they had. I wondered if that made us more open-minded or less attentive to detail. Knowing she didn't like what she termed sass, I seamed my lips and waited for the admonishment that would follow.

"Why don't you take a seat?"

I was hungry; I didn't want to spend my break sitting in here, but I supposed that was what I got for daydreaming. "Yes, ma'am."

To appease her, I arranged myself in the chair next to her desk, reserved for pupils who misbehaved. I sat in it more often than I'd like, not through mischief, but obvious disinterest. She knew I was counting the days until I could cut free.

"You could have a bright future," she said then. "You're a smart girl. I know you think this is waste of your time, but it pains me to see someone who won't even try to better herself."

My lip curled. "Do *you* know how to kill a Freak with your bare hands? Can you skin and cook a rabbit? Do you know what wild plants you can eat? Would you be able to get yourself from the ruins where I was born all the way up north?" I shook my head, knowing the answer already. "In my world, lady, I'm already as good as I

need to be, and I don't like your tone."

Knowing I'd pay for it, I strode out of the schoolroom and into the sunlight. Even now, it still felt unnaturally hot against my skin, but I'd come to enjoy the feeling. The sky was blue overhead, high clouds adding contrast, but not offering any chance of rain. It had taken me a while to learn the weather signs, what meant fire in the sky, and what meant falling water.

Shading my eyes, I glimpsed Fade with Tegan, who had made friends with some local girls. They were sweet, I supposed. I was grateful to Doc Tuttle for saving my friend, but I felt as though I'd lost her anyway to the changes that separated and fixed us with different foster families. Tegan wasn't the first, of course. Stone and Thimble went before when I left College, my home down below. I missed them. You didn't forget a brat-mate bond, no matter how much distance came thereafter.

I knew all the rules in the enclave. Nothing here made sense. Everything I thought was right, people told me I shouldn't even consider. Day after day, they told me I was wrong—that I couldn't be *me* and still be a proper girl. I studied Tegan and Fade, considered for a moment joining them, but Fade didn't meet my eyes and while Tegan waved, it didn't look like an invitation.

Heart heavy, I went over to where Stalker sat, eating alone. With a faint sigh, I flung myself down. Girls weren't supposed to sit like I did, sprawling on the grass. Momma Oaks would complain about the stains on my skirt, but I didn't care; I loathed these feminine trappings. I wanted my old clothes back, designed for freedom of movement, and tailored so I could strap my knives within easy reach. I didn't understand why only men fought in Salvation when women could be just as strong, just as fierce about protecting their homes. It was a ridiculous waste of resources, and after growing up down below, where we made use of everything—sometimes four

times over—that attitude struck me as completely nonsensical.

I peered at Stalker’s lunch. The blacksmith didn’t have a wife, which meant he always had simple fare, bread and meat, mostly, sometimes a crock of beans. He watched in envy when I opened my bag and found cold meat, sliced carrot, and a sweet, round cake. It was a good meal; nobody could say Momma Oaks did wrong by her stubborn, unwomanly foster daughter.

“Want some?” I broke the pastry in neat halves without waiting for his answer.

It was spring, and the school year was almost over—just a month left. I’d heard they tended fields during the summer, growing food to last the winter. Living down below, I’d never imagined food that sprang up from the ground instead of being hunted or found, but it appeared some of the stories Fade’s sire had told him were true. The mushrooms grew, but it wasn’t the same thing; that felt less magical.

For that season, they needed Hunters to watch over the plants and those who tended them. It was the only time they permitted patrols, a decision I questioned. With me in charge, things would run differently, and we’d sweep the area, killing enough Freaks to make them wary. I couldn’t survive three months inside these walls with nothing to do but pull a needle through cloth.

“Thought any more about what I said last night?” he asked.

“About leaving? Not until we know where we’re going. It makes no sense to run off without a plan.”

It wasn’t just the need for caution, not that I’d admit it to Stalker. In truth, I couldn’t leave Tegan and Fade, even if they were settling in better. There was a bond between the four of us, and we shouldn’t split up, even if Salvation seemed to be doing its best to sever that connection altogether.

“Agreed.”

“You still dealing well enough with Mr. Smith?”

It was a common name, so I understood, but it also referred to the man’s trade. His father before him had worked the same forge, making metal goods for the town. Salvation had been here, in its current form, for fifty years—or so they claimed. Mrs. James reported this was a historic site, dating back to the Aroostook War. I had no idea what that was, but it sounded like a made-up thing. I tended not to listen when she rambled about Salvation’s history. If I decided to stay, then I’d soak it in.

“He doesn’t talk much.” Stalker paused to eat the pastry, and then went on, “He’s teaching me to turn scrap metal into knife blades.”

“Sounds like it could be useful.”

“It’s the only part of this town that I can stand. Well, work. . .and you.” The trapped feeling reflected in his wintry eyes.

“I wish you wouldn’t talk like that,” I muttered.

It made me remember an awkward conversation I’d had with Momma Oaks, who disapproved of how I’d traveled with Stalker and Fade. That first night, she’d trod from the stairs, looking pleased. “There, now. Your rooms are ready. I have a spare, and a cozy cupboard off the kitchen, room enough for a pallet, I think.”

“I’ll take the small one,” I’d said. “It’s what I’m used to.”

“I didn’t intend to make you share with those roughneck boys.” In her tone, I heard what she didn’t say; *make you share* meant *that’ll never happen under my roof*.

I’d figured I knew what she was worried about, so I assured her, “We’ve been bunking together for ages. It wouldn’t be a problem. I’m not interested in breeding.”

“In. . .*what?*” Her face went pink.

Hm, I thought. If she had children—and Longshot had mentioned them—then

she knew more about the business than I did. I decided she was messing with me, so I'd show her I could be a good sport.

“In all enclaves, there are those who sire brats to keep the population stable, the best-looking, brightest, and strongest.” She knew that, of course. “But everybody can't do so or folks would starve. I'm trained for fighting and protecting, so I'd never do anything that could make me unfit for duty.”

“Oh, child.” Her eyes went liquid with sympathy.

I had no idea why, staring at her, puzzled. Surely they didn't permit anybody to mix their blood. That couldn't end well. People would wind up stupid and squinty.

“I'm sure that's how it was where you lived,” she said at last. “But it's different here. People fall in love and get married. They start a family if they're so inclined.”

So when Stalker started going on about how I was the only thing he liked about Salvation, it made me twitchy. The rules were different here, and I didn't want him to take any ideas about us finishing up that sad, empty house and filling it with our brats. The notion made me clammy with dread; I'd rather kill Freaks any day.

“Friday, we'll talk to Longshot about the patrols,” I said, changing the subject.

“You think he'll take us on?”

“I hope so.”

Momma Oaks had told me that Longshot always captained one of the squads that ensured the safety of the fields. I wanted him to choose me for his team so bad I could taste it. He knew we were capable fighters; he'd seen our bloody weapons when he picked us up in the wild. And he understood that we weren't tame, Salvation-bred brats. In fact, he was the only elder in the whole town who acted like he had more than a grain of sense. I suspected it was because of the supply runs. They'd taught him more about the world than the others could learn living within the safety of these

walls. While they kept danger out, they also locked the ignorance in.

“They act like Freaks can’t change,” Stalker said quietly. “Like these walls are magic, not wood, and nothing bad could ever get in.”

“*We* got in.”

“But we look human.”

I caught the faint stress on the word *look* and I frowned at him. “We’re still human. We’re just not like the rest of them.”

According Mrs. James, we were both bad as a barrel of rotten apples. She’d used that exact phrase in describing Stalker. Once, for falling asleep in class, she’d tried to whip him with a green switch, but he disarmed her so fast, she never saw it coming. Her face paled as he stood, slapping the rod lightly against his palm.

“I wouldn’t try that again,” he’d whispered in her ear.

Now she hated him, laced with fear, because he’d made her look foolish. A few of the Salvation boys studied Stalker from a distance, trying to copy his walk. Girls watched him, too, when they thought he wasn’t looking, but he noticed everything. Mostly, he thought they were weak and useless, just a bunch of Breeders.

I pushed to my feet, packed up the remnants of my meal and strode away. In the time remaining, I ran laps around the schoolhouse, which made people stare at me. But I’d get weak sitting all day; work kept the body strong.

On my fourth circuit, two boys stood watching me, wearing identical mocking looks. They elbowed each other, bolstering each other’s nerves, and then came after me. They chased me around the side of the building, and I stopped, willing to confront them. At school, they picked on people who were different; girls through cruel whispers and mocking laughter, boys through more direct means.

I faced them. “Do you need something?”

“That depends. Did Mrs. James find a cure for stupid?”

The first pushed the second toward me. “Careful, it might be contagious.”

“I heard you go to the bathroom standing up,” the bigger boy said.

An odd sound escaped his friend—a combination of a snort and a chortle—like he’d said something both wicked and hilarious. Their cheeks went pink, too. I guess I was supposed to be shocked by the allegation. I stared at them until they started to shift on the balls of their feet.

“Why do you keep running around the school?” the small one demanded. “Are you simple?”

“She thinks something’s chasing her.”

I was tired of this, weary of ignorant brats judging me like I was the strange one. These two deserved a lesson in manners, but if I taught it to them, I’d be the one in trouble. Somehow I curbed my temper as someone came up behind me.

“That’s enough,” Fade said softly.

You won’t speak to me, but you’ll rescue me.

It made me angrier that his presence could drive them away whereas I had to prove myself with my fists. Again. I’d been sent to Momma Oaks twice for fighting with the admonition if I did it again, I’d be whipped. Yet I never bothered any of these brats. They were the ones who wouldn’t leave me alone. . .but try telling that to Mrs. James. She’d made up her mind that I was an instigator.

“Thanks.” I brushed past Fade, unable to look at his face without a wave of unwelcome confusion and yearning.

Before he could reply, if he meant to, Mrs. James came out to chivy us inside. Fortunately, we only had one more month of school. I had no doubt the teacher would use that time to torment me ways that would make Silk proud. It didn’t matter. I knew

my own worth. A Huntress didn't rely on a bunch of brats for her sense of self, but on that last day, as class let out, I ran my fingers over the scars beneath my sleeves, reassuring myself I hadn't dreamt it. Salvation had saved me, but their protection came with restrictions. Their rules didn't permit me to be myself. Yet I'd been part of a community that needed me once. Maybe I would be again.

Someday. Somehow.