

My father's wheezing woke me. My parents had both been so ill, yet they led us East, even in their state. We had left a week ago, but as I hear my mother join the plagued cacophony; I wonder if they will make it.

I try to put my mind to rest, but it is drawn back to the sickness festering in the tent next to me. I turn over to see my sister, tears welled in her eyes. Before she can say anything, I put my arm around her like our mother would do to console us.

I gave up my tears that night.

When they had stopped for camp outside of Etis Evarg last night, Croen knew what had happened. Orune didn't want to talk about his parents, but the facts remained. His parents were going to die. He was grateful that they took him in, extending their caring arms to their ill friend's son and daughter. Maybe that was a mistake. Croen's parents died of the contagion a week before his sister too, showed the tell-tale signs of infection. Croen would sit on the other-side of her locked bedroom door, haunted by the sounds of her strained coughing. He couldn't keep his mind off the thought of when his skin would feel like stone and he starts coughing uncontrollably, or start seeing the disfiguring growths, or his vision becoming red as the infection claimed his life as it had done to the rest of his family.

Without speaking, Orune gestured for his friend to take his little sister away for a while. He didn't want Tocy to see their parents in such a disfigured and pathetic state.

"Listen, Croen, can...I-I need for Tocy to, um..." Orune was obviously distraught.

He hung his head as he spoke and didn't look Croen in the eyes.

"To, um, help pick out a present!" Orune looked up at his friend, puzzled, "Yeah, your parent's anniversary is today, right?"

"T-Tomorrow, actually. I didn't remember-- I mean, I don't have..."

"Oh. Don't worry. We'll get something from you," Croen put his hand on Orune's shoulder, "Think of something we can have for their dinner then."

Croen and Tocy left after that, though Croen wasn't sure how Orune would be in their absence. He tried being friendly to get his friend's mind off the spreading illness. He hoped it worked.

Even with Etis Evarg so far east, the crippling disease had left its mark. Wooden storefronts and homes had been marked with papers by the Adamant Guard as 'ill', and what few people that where outside wore loose clothing that covered their mouth and nose.

"Why does everyone look like ghosts?" Tocy had asked along with other questions.

"They're just... trying to be safe," Croen said, trying not to worry the girl.

The calls of a barker, surrounded by patrons from up the street caught their attention. He couldn't see what was so special, but Croen reacted when he heard the word, "cure".

"Praise the Sun goddess!" The salesman beamed from atop a crate, he spoke with a deep voice that enthralled and controlled the crowd.

"Am I glad to see so many healthy faces out and movin'; I'd say bless those who can't be here, but do I have somethin' better,

"Grown right up on the Secluded Territory, comin' from a long generation of herbal doctors-- My late granny bein' one. I present to yuh fine lot, a medical breakthrough even the Adamant Guard hasn't gotten word a'!" He motioned toward the dried leaves stacked on the crate in front of him, "Fer the ill and soon-to-be; just pop one in yer mouth, chew it up, real good, and yuh'll be up and at 'em so fast, the Sun goddess, herself'll have questions for yuh; but yuh

know what yuh'll answer with, 'fer only a single round, I bought this 'ere medicine, try one, O Sun goddess',"

While the crowd seemed skeptical, a few broke the silence and paid for the leaves.

"Praise the Sun goddess, thank you for your contribution, please take one," He would cheer.

A cloaked woman removed her hood to ask that if such medicine worked, why was he selling it so cheaply. He had an answer for this.

"Have yuh ever seen a Wreck Loose feelin' sick? Have yuh ever heard a' anyone in the Secluded Territory coughin'? Is all thanks to these lil' leaves. Is what's keepin' this Wreck Loose standin' here."

He straightened his back and looked out to the crowd. "And like a good neighbor to yuh fine people, we'd like to share our bounty, with hope yuh'll share yers."

The crowd dwindled quickly, and once hooded townsfolk walked away with their purchases, Croen and Tocy made their way to the front.

"Well, hello lil' miss, don't yuh look all healthy and right. Here tuh buy some protection fer yuh brotha and motha?"

Tocy smiled, nodding to the idea.

Croen grabbed the few coins he had, "How much for, uh,"

"Four, four!" Tocy gasped, reaching for the last four leaves, to which Croen grabbed her hand.

The salesman chuckled, "I'd say fer four, it'd cost yuh four rounds, but I like yer little sister here. She knows what she wants, so fer yuh both, only two rounds."

The surprised expression that came across both Tocy and Croen's faces conveyed a 'thank you' to the salesman.

"Ah, think nuthin' a' it, kids. Go on, take one."

"Mister, what's your name?" Tocy asked staring at the man with her wide, brown eyes. Croen could see the uncomfot the salesman was feeling as he paused to answer, "I'm sorry, she's,"

"No, no, I don' mind." He waved his hand, "Lil' miss, my name is Grog Nostrum, an' what's yers?"

"Tocy! Thank you, Grog Nastum" She beamed a smile and grabbed the four leaves off the crate.

"Tocy, why don't you go and give those to Orune?" Croen prompted his friend's sister, who ran off in the direction.

"So, yuh both ain't brotha and sista, huh?" Grog inquired, standing up. Not on his crate, Croen noticed the salesman only came up to his chest.

"No, she's my friend's little sister," stated Croen, "Just took her into town for a bit."

"I can see, I can," He said under his breath, "Are the parents sick?"

Croen didn't answer at first, leading Grog to continue,

"If yuh don't wanna answer, I understand. When my lil' girls started coughin' I didn't know what I'd do. We'd just left tuh go sell off these leaves for the Territory. Who'da thought anyone'd get all sick; who'da thought a coupla Wreck Loose girls would've been coughin' an' wheezin'?" Grog Nostrum's fists were clenched, "They didn't make it, don't blame 'em. Up in that Territory, they ain't tell us anythin', just sell this, buy that; is how they ran us merchants.

Ain't none a' us know it was this bad out here. I only come to know that these leaves can cure once this crate first got opened." He slammed his foot into the box, knocking it over, "That's what the money's gonna be fer. Gettin' the rest a' my family 'way from the illness."

By the end of this, Grog Nostrum looked like Orune had, like a shawl of despair had been draped over their shoulders. Except, where Orune's had a pattern of hopelessness, Grog's expression was stitched with anger. He looked away and took a deep breath.

"His parents are sick, like mine were. My sister was sick too," Croen confessed, "I hope you get enough money for your family."

Grog forced a chuckle, "Seems yer ol' Sun goddess is pretty lonely, if in' she be takin' so many people back. Here," He took from his profit and gave Croen triple what he paid for the leaves,

"Don't let them get the Platy, yer friend and his' sista."

Croen nodded, thanking him.

"Yeh, now make sure they're okay. Last thing yuh'd want is fer Tocy to go an' lose the leaves, right?"

As he turned to head back to their camp, Grog Nostrum said a farewell prayer,

"How do yuh people say it, 'O Sun goddess, motha of life, in debt to yuh; bless us with good health, spirit, an' fortune. Amen'. Or somethin' like that."

He wasn't religious and from how he said it, neither was Grog, but Croen quietly said to himself,

"Amen,"

I screamed again as he kicked my ribs. I turned over onto my side; I didn't have the energy to pick myself up anymore. I could taste the blood that was filling my mouth. It figured that the one time I get caught it's by the burliest baker in Etis Evarg. He grabbed my ebony hair back and shouted with sour breath a string of threats if he as much as thought he saw me again. Partly obscured by the tears that had drowned my eyes, I saw a man run towards us. He spoke the kicking and punching language of the baker well enough, but I lost conscious to before the conclusion of their negotiations.

I awoke to that persuasive man sitting beside me. He had propped me up against the stone wall that ran around the town. It was the scariest thing. He didn't say anything when I was awake; he didn't say anything when I tried scoot away; he didn't answer me when I demanded who he was but I did get a reaction.

When he stood up with the sun setting just behind the wall, I could see the face but didn't care. I shot up to try and match their height, but fell forward on my bruised legs. I quickly scrambled to my feet, and they backed up to look me over. Now, they would know that this thin-framed girl was only fifteen, and that she cuts her hair with the dull knife she found in the same alley as her clothes. That after years of farming turn scavenging in alleys, she still hadn't gotten that horrid disease that took her farm, father, and fun. That the hand-woven ankle bracelet she wore was the only thing to remind her of those warm summer times. If they asked, they would know her name was Mohe.

In the end, they didn't ask. When they looked me over, they turned to walk away. Feeling somehow triumphant, I too made way to go home. My legs had their own opposition to this, and collapsed under me. I don't normally scream, but there was pain in anything that could feel it. Unfortunately, that man heard me and rushed back. Determined or stupid enough, he ignored [my objections and helped me to my feet. I'd guess stupid because he kept insisting on taking

me home. That painful feeling came back and I didn't feel like arguing, so I told him where I stayed. Bleeding really takes a lot out of you.

As we walked, or as I was carried by the man, he told me about himself. From what I paid attention to, I found out his name was Crown or something. He came here with his sister's friend, but now his sister and their parents are dead. He didn't talk a whole lot, just enough to make sound every now and then.

When we were standing in front of my boarded one-room home on the outskirts of Etis Evarg, he didn't say anything. He only stared at the door, or maybe at the paper on it. I thought of playing it up, acting as I and family was horribly ill and now he caught it from helping me. I didn't, though. He gazed upon the Adamant Guard's sign sadly, like it was his family who'd been marked. I was honest, and told him I took the paper from another house. Who would rob someone that could kill them with a cough? The man probably didn't believe me, but he went in anyway, holding me up.

We walked through the unlocked door, and he set me down. Our lanterns were dry, and with the sun having set, the house was almost pitch black. A curtain separated my mom's bedroom from the rest of the house. She must've been asleep; she didn't say anything until I called her name. I explained what had happened up until now; about me being caught stealing, about me being brutalized and beaten--I spent most of my time detailing this for her. I let the man introduce himself with his strange sounding name, and he said he had just wanted to be of help. My mom laughed at that. She didn't leave her bedroom, but she said that if he needed a place to stay, she at least didn't have the sickness. In the dark, my mom couldn't see me glaring at her through the curtain. The man turned to leave, but I stood up grabbed his hand. I hadn't thanked him after all, and it was late. The Adamant Guard did nightly patrols of Etis Evarg, searching for sick people. Except to them, everyone was sick. Conveniently, a human scream went out somewhere in town but was abruptly muffled. I'd like to think my case had been made for me.

He sat down in the only chair we owned. With a candle by his foot, and my eyes free of pain or covered in blood, I noticed the strange clothes that he wore. They had the buckles and zippers of the far western cities. Where streets were paved in brick and stone, and not the dirt and grime of a sickness and disease. Why would anyone come here, where we still use oil lanterns, and are ruled by the iron-grip of tyrants like the Adamant Guard. Etis Evarg was just a place people went to die. I wondered that aloud, half-expecting an answer. From the silence, I looked over at him. Asleep and sitting up. I was taught a while back that if you're anywhere with other people, never be the last one to sleep. Though I still hurt in places, I crawled over from the mat I crept on over to him. Yep. All he needed was the little Z's kids put on pictures to make it more obvious. It hurt standing up, but I checked his pockets. Six rounds and two squares. Not much, but it was something. I could buy that bread I tried stealing at least. Putting the money into my and my mother's savings bag, I took a step back and noticed his shoes. Shoes were a thing of luxury around here. Only the Adamant Guard and tourists ever had a pair. Them and the thieves that could take them. I tried them on and was dismayed at how badly they fit. They were a little worn too, but someone would buy them. I went to put the shoes behind the curtain; I didn't expect what happened next.

There was a crashing sound and our only window blew out. The sounds of a crowd running, screaming, and the heat of flames came pouring in. I ran and opened the door, fear mounting, joints aching. The town was on fire.

I was shoved aside by the man, who ran into the fleeing mob, barefoot. As I saw him go I noticed he clutched a bag in his hands. Was that our money? Had I been robbed? In the heat of the moment I ran after him. I didn't worry about my mother, our house wasn't near the flames, and there weren't any of the Adamant Guards' soldiers about.

Despite the injuries, I managed to keep up with him for a while. I always surprise people by how much I could endure, but that didn't mean I was invincible. Numerous times the crowds knocked me down, and I would lose sight of him amongst other people. But, with the cries and howls of those trapped in the fires all around me, I picked myself up and kept pursuing. It wasn't a lot of money. We hadn't saved that much, but the fact he had taken it demanded a response. We had run to the other end of town where the fires were most plenty. A line of soldiers stood side-by-side blocked the road, and when I caught up with him, I ducked into an alley that seemed safe.

I could still hear everything as the fires blazed. The man pleaded with the soldiers to let him through. When one of them grabbed his arm he punched back. He tried speaking in that baker's language, but there was too much of a language barrier. They restrained him from behind. A decorated soldier walked up to him and demanded why they should move aside. I guess she must've been the captain because she barked the most orders and commands. The captain asked if the man was ill to which the reply was no. The captain paced back and forth, mentioning how her men were burning the 'refuse and remains of healthy men', what ever that was. She said that there had been an enormous outbreak overnight being caused by plants.

A little girl's scream went out and the man seemed to recognize it. He called out to the sky for someone named Tony or Tosh. When a male voice responded with the man's name, he yelled out for Oran-hey. A man ran up from behind the guards, pleading for him to get through. The two seemed to recognize each other and the captive man yelled for his friend to get away with his family. The one behind the soldiers whispered something out of my hearing. It must've been something horrible to send the captive man into a rage towards the captain. She the two men could join their 'them' in the flames. I guess it was their family. She suspected both of the men had it as well and told her soldiers to burn them. The captive man made one last effort. He dropped the bag, the bag of my money, and asked for his and the other guy's release. The captain counted the contents and laughed, I personally took offense to that, but stayed hidden. She, her captives, and the soldiers walked out of town. Out of sight I could still hear the two men struggling. I peaked out of the alley, and I could see just outside of the town's wall that a tent being used for a bonfire. I withdrew to my hiding spot. Not listening to the life-threatening screams that rang out.

When the soldiers came back, they were empty-handed. The captain ordered for them to follow her to where she had found a Wreck Loose merchant. I stopped listening when I saw that she dropped my savings bag. It took a long, hot while before I was the last living person. The fires had died down, and even the roaring bonfire was nothing more than a flaming growl. I then crept out from between the still-intact houses and dashed to my money. As I got close, the thick smog-like stench of burned hair and flesh wafted over me. I gagged but didn't look at the

charred bodies ahead of me, and I didn't stay long enough to join them. I grabbed my money and snuck home.