

## Our Little Utopia

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We didn't have hope. We didn't have a prophet. We didn't have a binding leader, a grand vision for prosperity tied onto words.

Instead, we had Prince.

Prince didn't bring hope. He brought food. He didn't bring salvation. He brought beds and roofs.

And yeah, sure, there were speeches, but in the end, he understood that the way to bring people together was 1, give them something to do, and 2, give them something to fear.

The fear was easy, it was already everywhere. He just made it simple to fear it.

Nothing like a 50-meter drop into the ocean to make you afraid of water.

The something to do was a little masterstroke. Most have forgotten it at this point but once food is settled, you need stimuli. Once you know you can live for a year, your mind needs impulses. So he gave us paths.

I chose charting. I ain't much of a writer, not able to pick two colours apart, and running for time seemed pointless; running for a ball even more so. Charting makes sense to me. Not that it's more useful than anything else. I get that. I've been on both sides of that conversation. We're just charting areas to have them charted. We make the excuse that's it is to find new places to live, new caches of supplies, but really, I know I'm here because I like doing it.

But when I left today, it wasn't just because I liked doing it. I really needed a fucking break from home.

"Here," Cima says. She hands me the ropesling and I take it.

Charting is done in pairs. If one falls or their airjack breaks, one can pull the other home. Cima has been my partner for about 5 years now. She was new when I picked her up. She's not so much anymore.

"Not in the mood?" I ask.

"You look like you're more in the mood."

She isn't wrong about that.

I line it up and fire the trigger. The ropesling packs a punch, sure, still does. It flings the rope out, curling through the air, the sound breaks, a clamp dust raising up, flurrying out into the air. You get good arms, doing this. It's bright morning, but the grey prevails, always. Thick clouds are always among us, causing constant fog. It always smells like salt and concrete. But the best part comes as the ropesling latches on, I prepare my airjack, and then it pulls *me*. I fall over the ledge and freefall, limp down towards the eternal water that I can barely see through the clouds.

The wind hits everywhere. My clothes rattle, my cheeks flab, my eyes water, as I pummel. I can only hear the air, whistling around me, performing a concert of spikes, as I spin around and try to line myself up with the string as it folds above me. Underneath me, pointing me towards my only salvation. It doesn't feel like falling after a short while and then I crack open the airjack and thunder sideways, a new set of strings fly out and

snap at the nearest post of concrete. We know it holds, it's held over years, and I hurdle sideways, spinning around, still down but with momentum now, as the airjack begins working on the downward rope, pulling it up and launching it around, giving me friction.

It launches me into spirals, and my descent is slowed as the airjack waddles me into motions rather than movements.

Once I'm slow enough that I can touch the rope with my gloved hands, I wire myself down some more until I'm lost enough that I don't remember what direction I started in. The rope is hot, but quickly cools in the air. I grab hold and stop, redirect my momentum onto the siderope and fling myself off, airjack bound to only the side now as I swing across a chasm and land on a platform. Light thud. Concrete.

I give the longrope two tugs to let Cima know it's clear and look around.

I landed somewhere in the upper end of a building, at first glance like many I'd been in before. The high-rises spread out around us. I catch a glimpse of another one across the chasm in a movement of the cloud. This platform has been carved out, a rock or something falling into the side, tearing off part of the outer walls. It's shielded from wind, as it comes from the other side today, through the building instead. Only light gusts bring distant bird cries.

Someone's been here before. It's marked with a little M on the pillar next to me. I sit and catch my breath as I try to figure out where I landed. It is somewhere in the Lim region, but I didn't remember falling down this far before.

I hear a rope tug and tumble as Cima shoots down from above, before she swings down next to me.

"That was quite the fall," she says.

"Not a unique one, though," I say and point to the mark.

She walks over and looks at it. The second jump is far easier on the body, since there's very little actual airjacking. I pull myself together and approach it too.

I recognize the mark.

"Mae's handiwork," I say.

She's taken aback. "Then it's old."

"At least twenty years," I say, "Yeah."

Mae was one of the first to go. She had a lot of disagreements with Prince. She decided to leave... amicably. At least, as amicably as she could, after what happened. It wasn't pretty. I wasn't close to Mae back then, but since then... I've heard my share.

I may have stared at it a little too long because Cima interrupts me.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," I say, shrug it off.

"The trial getting to you?"

She knows what's up, of course. Not really able to hide it from her. She always had a knack for reading people.

"It's fine," I say, one last attempt. I look away, but I can sense Cima's expression.

She goes back to the siderope and secures it, roping it around a pillar, and lodges it in with a hook.

“How far you think she went, Mae?” she says, nice enough to redirect the conversation. “Check the maps.” I peek down the platform, the walls, ruins, broken glass on both sides. “She was on early expeditions, so she can’t have gone far.”

“Back when they were scouting?”

I nod. “So this might not be charted well, either.”

She crouches down and pulls out her mapper. A little brown box, with winches on the sides, with a flat surface on the top that rotates, lights up in beige as she spins it, ticking metallicly.

“Let’s see,” she mumbles, as she spins it around to find the spot.

It was a challenge, for a while, to figure out how to take the two-dimensional technology they used to map with and turn it into something we could use. Horizons don’t matter much anymore when most of your exploration is spent travelling vertically.

We settled on an imperfect mapping, translating verticality into a two-dimensional plane, from which we could extrapolate using codes.

Lim 45. Coordinates 4. 42,32. 7. 36,6. 2. 37,2.

She finds our spot, and sure enough, the plateau is there, but not much else.

“FER,” she says, questioning.

“Further Exploration Required. Old acronym.”

Abandoned for newer ones that are more informative than “we should probably look here.”

“Well, we got our mission, then,” she says with that wry smile.

She packs up the mapper and checks on her ropes. “Got another two blocks to go.”

I nod. More than enough.

We walk down the long platform. Hallway, is more apt. Concrete brick walls build up on either side, holding some parts of the roof together, but the above is mostly visible, for a bit, until it rejoins and closes into a roof some 5 meters above. It is darker down the path, the light only coming from the side we came from, small cracks in the walls above, and the far end where new light crashes into the scene. But it’s far enough away that it’s only a guide and not much else. It’s a big building, and fairly intact. Very little sway, almost no creaking. The walls are dry. The rooms next to us are visible, but only accessible by crawling over steel beams, and weaving in between them. Lichen and vines have begun to grow down here, eating their way up through the buildings from the water, some of them allegedly growing from the sea.

“This is nice,” Cima says as we’ve walked a bit down.

It’s very empty. The rooms have been scavenged, the furniture disassembled, the electronics taken apart and removed. It’s just open hallways and old spaces, where people used to work, now infested by wind and silence. The salt is less oppressive inside, replaced by a burrowed puff of growth.

“Don’t think it was us who took this stuff, though,” I say.

“No? Who else?”

“Precamp, maybe. Or wanderers.”

“It’s not that far from camp.” She peers down under a beam, into a large low-ceilinged room.

"It's far enough. You weren't out when we had skirmishes every other week."

"You're a bit pissy today, aren't you?" She continues walking.

I grunt. "Sorry."

We walk a bit more, but I can sense a question, and have no way to deflect it. "Did Prince tell you something?"

I sigh. "It's nothing."

"I know the trial isn't easy," she says.

"It's not the trial," I spit. A little more forcefully than I want.

She pauses and looks at me. Her brows furrow.

"Okay... sorry," she says. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not now," I say. "Let's just keep going."

"All right," she says. Knowing I ain't going to say anything else on that matter. That's comforting.

I wish it was just the trial. That's bad enough. There's going to be punishment. Even if we don't do punishments. This time it's bad enough, Prince knows he needs to do what only he can do and be the bad guy.

"Look here," Cima says, off in a corner.

I go over. She's bent down on a wall, a tiny piece of concrete jutting out, and on it, a little mark is there too.

"She was also here?" she says, and pulls out the mapper again. "But that's not on our..." she fiddles with it a bit, until she scrolls sideways to the part we're at. Still the vertical coordinates, but just inside. It's blank.

"Why not fill this in?"

"Dunno," I say.

"But she was definitely here, right? Mae?"

"That's her mark."

I look at it, doublecheck my memory as well as I can, but come up no wiser. That's Mae.

"These... early expeditions. Was it common for them not to chart their movements? Or at least note down that they had been here?"

"No. Charting was necessary back then. It was a... we needed to know our surroundings."

"Unlike now, where we're just doing it for fun," she says, ironic twist in her tone.

"Exactly." The younger generation still considers charting useful. Hell, it helps with recruitment if nothing else.

The sign is next to an opening, a bent in hole in the wall, made by something big and terrible.

"Wanna follow it?" she asks.

"It needs to be charted anyway. We're here. Makes no sense not to."

Almost as if I need a reason. As if I'm trying to convince myself.

Cima crawls in the hole. It's dark enough that we need lights, which she turns on. Bright, shoulder-mounted flashlight, illuminating cones in front of her. The room is much the same as the hallway. Big, abandoned, empty, quiet. Grey. The broken glass at the other

end let the wind easily in. It's stronger here, carrying in clouds of mist from outside, making the ground damp.

We scour around a bit, as she makes dots on her mapper, doing the grunt work required to eventually slot it in as a chart. Marking out the pillars, the walls, lasering the distances, so they can be filled in later, and detailed into a real object.

The sounds of our footsteps and her jotting vanish in the light gusts. I fasten the rope behind us in rough knots, keeping our return route safe, and securing us in case the floor falls down from under us. Not a huge risk in these buildings, but it's procedure. And it's there for good reason.

"Who was Mae?" Cima asks.

"Founder."

"What was she like?" she corrects, knowing that I knew that's what she meant.

"I didn't know her well," I say.

"Better than me."

"She was a right tough one. Always meant for more than living in a small camp."

"What's that mean?"

"Let's say it was no wonder she left. She never really fit in."

"With what? With Prince?"

I walk behind a pillar, stop at a surprising amount of debris and need to turn around.

"Yeah. Wanted the camp to be... more. Like, try to connect with other camps, try to build up bigger... communes."

"How would that... even work?"

"She was ambitious."

"No shit. Why'd she leave then?"

"Prince disagreed. Still does. You know what he thinks on size increases."

"The plateau wouldn't support it," Cima says, matter-of-factly.

I nod when she doesn't look. That's what he says. I know why he says it too, and she wouldn't like the answer.

"What was her plan then? Leave and found a new colony?"

"I doubt she had one," I say. "She just needed to leave."

"Why? I don't understand risking leaving for something like that."

"It wasn't that simple," I say, hoping that's enough, knowing it isn't.

"What? Would you leave if you had the same idea?"

"No," I say, almost laughing. "I'm not Mae."

"What then? I don't get it."

"You're too young. It was more common back then to leave camp. It wasn't such a big deal. We also got more incomings."

"Like my parents."

"Yeah."

Like her parents.

We reach the end of the building and look out the skylines. The wind grips but doesn't hurt. There's another building, as tall as this one immediately over, its roof stretching above what we can see in the clouds. The others immediately close are lower, but there

are more, farther away. There are always more. In all my time charting, we have yet to find the edge of the heights. We've done straight treks, gone as far horizontally as we can, and we still haven't hit it. Our roping equipment isn't built for horizontal travel, either.

"There," Cima says, and points down to a broken piece of glass on the opposite building. Signs of entry from the outside, very clean break. Typical of rope-use.

I fasten the back-rope and begin lining up my ropesling. I pull out the scope and sit for a bit, adjusting its angles in relation to the wind. Pretty steady today, at least.

As it lines up, it shoots over, rope flinging across the gap, twirling through until it hits the wall. I missed a little bit, hit just to the right above the premade, but the claws cling out and stick into the concrete just fine regardless. Glass shatters and tumbles below, into the beyond.

I test it and gesture to Cima. "Wanna go first this time?"

"Fine," she shrugs. She doesn't waste any time, and climbs up on the rope, secures the airjack and shoots across, rope whirring and rattling with the movement. I wait until I hear the thud of landing and the flick of the rope as it loosens, and then repeat it.

It's just a short skip, nothing we haven't done before. The rope twists and chugs at the wind, as I blast through it. It tugs a bit as a gust comes right as I cross, but it holds.

I slow down the airjack as I approach and land right next to Cima, who's already bent down near something new.

I untie myself and double-check the rope before I go see what's up.

"It's her," she says.

Indeed. Mae's sign again. A breadcrumb trail.

"This is..." I say and pause, making sure I'm certain. "This is the way she went. When she left."

"Really? How can you tell?"

"There's no other reason she'd leave a trail. The map would be enough, normally."

"Right. That's why it hasn't been mapped. It's only her who's been here."

I nod and look around. Why would she go here? Did she have a plan, or was it just a random direction? Was she just trying to get away or did she already know where to go?

"So, what. You still want to follow her?" she asks.

"We should map this out."

"Sure, but what are you hoping to find?"

"Unmapped area."

Cima sighs. "She did this unanchored, right? So pretty quickly we'll hit a stop."

"So?"

"I'm just saying."

"What, you think I'm hoping to find her?" I say, scoffing. "I'm not stupid."

"No, I... How far are you planning to go today?"

"Far enough."

Cima twists. "I've never seen you this eager to leave camp."

I shrug. "I... needed to leave camp politics for a bit."

"I've gathered that much," she says, annoyed. Keeps her glare on me.

I grimace. "I'm sorry. It doesn't concern you."

"Camp concerns camp," she says.

She's right. I don't like lying to her, either. But right now, I should keep quiet. So I am.

"Is Prince being an idiot, again?" she pressures.

"Always, but that's not actually the issue here."

"Fine, then."

She gets up and looks inside the building. It's dark. Not as cracked as the previous one, so less light permeates through it. We really need flashlights now.

"Thought being shielded from camp politics was a thing of the past" she says and heads off, without giving me time to respond.

Fair enough, really. She was right. I was shielding her. Wasn't even entirely sure why I was doing it.

I flick on my flashlight and walk after the wandering light.

The trial was an issue, true. It had only happened once before in our entire camp history that someone had stolen from the public stash. And never in our recorded history, although it was a known story. Back then, it had been swept under the rug, hid and forgotten about. The perpetrator (Mae, but not everyone knew that) dealt with herself, so that was easier.

This time, it wasn't someone like Mae. And it wasn't public yet, who it was. It was Baquell. A long-term member, he'd been there since the beginning. One of Prince's friends' friends. He'd been Cima's ward, during her child years.

Stealing from the stash was stupid. There was no reason to. It was selfish and hurtful.

Prince had to punish it. But Prince also knows, that by punishing it, he will assert himself, demand power, forcefully get his will. *Tyrannize*.

His entire power was contingent on people knowing he wouldn't abuse it. Trusting that he wouldn't overstep, and demand too much. Punish too harshly. He was only allowed to be there by the graces of those who didn't want to take responsibility themselves.

Which were most folk. It was a lot easier to criticize bad leadership than lead yourself.

So why'd Baquell do it? That was what the trial was about. In part. I know, though. It's as simple as it gets. He was high. Drugged outta the sky. It was that easy. He didn't have a reason, other than he was a selfish, non-thinking idiot who wanted to get wasted.

And that might have been fine, if that was the only issue. If all he'd done was steal a bit of moonshine. But the part that *definitely* wasn't public yet, was worse. Baquell was a bad drunk. He knew it, everyone knew it. But him, high, omitted it from memory.

It wasn't until he woke me up, screaming, with a knife at my throat, that I knew what was going on.

Baquell has never liked me. I never much liked him. I was never part of management because I cared, but because I had been there long enough. He hated me. He got it all out there, slurred speech and all, shouting at me how I was a disgrace, how I didn't deserve to be here, how I had taken advantage of the camp's kindness for years, how I had abused my power as a charter, how he *knew* I had been embezzling from stash for decades and no one knew.

He spewed a lot of nonsense, but also some truth.

I am worried they're going to sweep it under the rug again. Omit everything at the trial and just judge his theft. Call it an out-of-body experience. Pretend all he did was a mistake. Let him be.

And hey, you can say I'm running from it. That I should be at the trial, witnessing.

Telling everyone this story.

But I ain't.

Cima spots something in the corner, bends under a broken tube to check it out.

*I ain't.*

I go after her. It's another building of the same nature, a lot of long hallways intersecting big, open-plan rooms, some with grown-in tables and desks too worthless or big to drag up to anywhere. There's not a lot of scavenge, either, same as the one before. We were definitely not the first. But Mae couldn't have taken everything with her.

Cima stops and looks back and forth between a branch in the road. No signs this time, no marks.

"Did we miss some?" she says.

I hadn't paid attention, to be honest. Thought she was. "Don't think so."

I am still running dragrope, so we can back-track, but Cima doesn't seem like she wants to. She doesn't want to stand still much, so she picks left and goes with it.

I stand a while longer, wondering if we should split or I better just follow her. She probably doesn't care. I go right.

I pull out my own mapper, and begin jotting down notes, taking consistent measurements, writing them down, sketching out the rough path to be filled in detailed later, back home. With all the measurements, that was easy. The trick was to be as thorough as possible out here.

Walk five steps, pull out the mapper, spin it, drag out the tape, pull it to the wall, pull back, note down the number, walk five steps, repeat.

It's boring. It's repetitive. It's great. I barely noted the time, after a few rounds of that, felt part of my head go to sleep in the motions, lay dormant as I kept working through the simple movement. It helps forget, and soon I'm not back in camp anymore, getting screamed at, I am just here, doing a routine exercise.

The hallway ends. There is a big gap, as if a giant claw had come down and torn the building apart. The gap is too big to jump. The hallway continues on the other side. But the hole also goes down, at least with clear openings into the next 4 levels.

I pack up the mapper and prep the drag rope, fasten it to an impromptu hook I make in the wall, out of a bent metal pipe.

I look around for Cima but don't see her flashlight immediately. She's off, somewhere.

"I'm going down a level!" I yell. It's so quiet she can hear that in the other building. The wind just barely tugs in here.

The rope stretches as I tug myself down, leaning over the side and let my weight transfer from my feet to the rope, turning 90 degrees, then falling, wiring downwards. I flash in the hallways, looking for signs of travel, but I don't see anything. I don't want to get too far down, so I swing my hips and begin jogging the rope back and forth until I can grab the floor, two levels down. As I reach, I loosen the rope, letting it drop me but I



hold against with my hands, pulling myself up on my feet. The floor is rough, easy to grip on to. Quite dry in here.

I stand, secure the rope again, and look. Flashlight is needed again, as the hallways crawl in on themselves, the interior hole I went down is not proving much outside light. I pick a way at random and begin walking, ready the charter and continue the work. I'm missing a floor, but the data can be extrapolated from what we have. Walk five steps, pull, spin, drag, repeat.

It's a bit strange I haven't heard Cima say anything in a while, or heard her move around. If she did a similar trick to me, I'd have heard her ropesling. Or her airjack if she had gone completely. She must still be right above me.

The air almost dies in these buildings. It's nice. This was some of the best parts of charting. Finding these little pockets of space, where the wind almost didn't enter, where the darkness was thick enough that it's just you and your flashlight, where you could almost blink and forget that you were above fifty meters of air above endless amounts of water. Here, the world just sat, for a while, non-existent. No other people talking, their voices naturally picked out or distorted by echoes, no windmills running, spinning in their endless cycles of metal. No smell of salt (almost, the salt is everywhere), no stench of dye or manure tossed on the plateau-farms. Just the oil-burn of the airjack and my own sweat.

There are few things better than only being able to smell your own sweat.

What. I'm a loner. Always have been. We do charting in pairs for safety, not because I want to. If I had my say, I'd go off alone. But I know that if I did, they wouldn't let me back in. No saying where I'd been if I went off alone.

But at least, Cima knows this, and seem to want some alone time, too. All too rare, in our little utopia.

As I'm walking, I try to think up where Mae could have gone. Where I would go if I was her. Down, sure, but how far? You don't want to make it to waterline. Do you? Did she? Maybe she did. Maybe that was the point, just get it over with. I hadn't travelled without anchoring in a decade. Our ropes could reach the water, but there'd be no point. And even, her road for it was a bit strange. Straight down is easy enough. She hadn't done that.

I haven't thought about Mae in a while, too. It's weird, like unlocking a part of my brain again. I intentionally sheltered it away. It wasn't... I wasn't afraid of it. It was more fruitless to think about. Didn't lead anywhere nice. Mae had been an important pillar of the place, and her leaving was a reminder, at the same time, how fragile it all is. So I didn't think of it, because it was nicer to think that the world was safe. That we were good.

"Found another one!" I hear, muffled, from above.

"Coordinates?" I shout back.

A little pause. "4. 42,33. 9. 32,6. 3. 94,2." The voice is enough to point me in the right direction.

I write down each number as she says it in my charter and compare to my current position. I'm pretty close. Just two levels below. And a little to the east.

I turn back and take a right where I went straight earlier, and march until the numbers match.

“Okay, I’m right below!”

We’re shouting more than we probably have to. But not like there’s anyone who hears us.

“Do you want to mark them on the chart?” she asks.

Right, we should’ve talked about that when we saw them first. Didn’t expect to find so many. I think about the repercussions. The camp has mostly forgotten Mae.

“Let’s not!”

“Why not?”

I sigh. This is not the way to have this argument, between two levels of floor. “Why bother?”

“It’s important, is it not?”

Whatever. “You do what you want.”

I search around for a faster way up, to loop the rope around. A little way across the room there’s a crack in the ceiling above, just tight enough to squeeze through.

“There’s a crack here, pull me up,” I shout.

I hear her shuffling over, and I throw the rope up.

“It’s secure,” she says after a few seconds. I activate the ropewheel, slowly, wiring me upwards towards the tight fit. The rope pulls at my body through the harness around my waist and chest. It feels comforting, to be carried. Safe. I’ve always thought that. I slow down once I get there and push myself up with my legs on the wall as the rope helps, loosening it for the final ascent.

“Hello,” she says, slight smile. She’s already back at the mark, working at her mapper.

I untie the rope and sling it back. It funnels down the crack and whirrs around on the below hallway, back to me the other way. It’s a little risk, always, to loop like that. If the rope gets stuck, you have to go back and get it. But the ropesling has a powerful pull, it requires more than just a bit of pebble to get the rope stuck.

The mark is indeed the same. Drawn a little more comfortably, as if she was getting more used to it. Or slowing down the further away from camp she got.

“But you didn’t mark the two others we saw,” I say. Maybe a last attempt.

“I remember where they were.”

Pointless, with her, of course. She has a frightening memory. One of the reasons she liked mapping. And one of the reasons I liked having her with me—generally.

It’s fine.

Mae isn’t going to be the biggest problem when we get back to camp.

Cima stands up. “My guess, by how the other ones’ve been, is the next one is on the edge of this building. West side. She looks that way, onwards from the rest. I peer at her mapper. That indeed would follow as straight a line as possible from the previous ones.

“Where does that line go?”

She knows what I’m really asking. How far until that line enters uncharted area?

Sure, this specific building was unmapped, but the area still was known. This building is

designated, number and identification. But venture far enough away from camp and that system begins to falter.

"As long as it's straight...", she fiddles with the mapper, getting it to show her, "about up to the WR14's. Then uncharted."

Western Rim 14 is the farthest we've gone west.

"We don't have rope for long-travel," I say. Especially not with the route we've taken. We haven't been as direct as those who went to WR14 were. There is a reason we have an outer rim, and it is as far as our ropes go.

"You wanna turn back already?" she says.

"No," I say, quick to dismiss it without a decent follow-up. "Thought you were the one who said we weren't gonna catch her."

"We ain't," she says. "But it's still part of the job to map out possible routes. Her route is a possible one. She was a good mapper yeah? She must've picked it for a reason."

"She wasn't mapping, and we aren't following it for the same reason she was."

"You sound like you do want to turn back."

I open my mouth but she's right. I stop. I am arguing nonsense. I sigh, and go over to pretend to inspect a nearby wall.

"I don't think bringing the news that we found Mae's route back to camp is a good idea," I say.

"Oh," Cima says. As if that's all. As if I suddenly make sense to her.

"Oh?" I ask.

"So we're just going to cover it up? Throw bricks on it and wait for the vines to grow long enough that we can't tell who it is? Pretend no one ever left camp?"

My face tenses. I sense my mouth frown and I don't try to stop it.

"What good would it do? No one remembers Mae fondly. She left without saying goodbye. She didn't want to be remembered."

"That's why you leave a trail. To not be remembered," she glared.

"All I know is that a lot of people would rather forget her than otherwise. Bringing this back would only hurt."

"It doesn't hurt me. It doesn't hurt anyone I know. It's not like we're bringing Mae *back*. It's not like everyone doesn't know she left."

"And why leave a trail like this? For others to follow her. You think that's going to happen without incident?"

"Why would anyone follow her?"

I scoff. It takes a minute to realize she believes that fully. Why would anyone, indeed. I shake my head and resign. Sit down, on the rubble.

"Sometimes, people want to leave, Cima. Doesn't mean they have good reasons. Doesn't mean they shouldn't have stayed. But we can't expect everyone to *want* to be in camp forever."

"So what? What's that have to do with Mae's trail?"

"I'd rather people leave separately than in the same direction."

"Wait, you're doing this to... protect those who leave? Or Mae? Who, for all we know, died several years ago, leaving a trail to her long-since looted corpse?"

I feel a tug. I ignore it first. "This is to protect camp."

"From what?"

Then she gets a tug. Which I realize because she violently turns in reaction as if someone is standing behind her, before realizing it was the rope.

I get another one.

Cima looks back at me.

They want us back to camp. Then I get a third tug.

"Fuck," I say.

Three tugs means urgently. Something bad happened.

Cima begins packing up her mapper immediately, and checks her rope for clearance. I do the same, but mine just wound in so I'm good.

"You're not showing it when we get home. Not now."

"Let's see what the situation is first," she says.

Right. It can't have been the trial that caused the emergency. Not just, at least. Triple-pulls are rare. There is almost no reason to pull charters home immediately. This is bad. She's ready before I think the thought through and begins rushing back the hallway, following the rope back, me right behind her.

I try to think what stupid things could have happened, but I know it's pointless. I'm not going to be right regardless. Better just come back and see what's up. And react then. When we reach the edge of the building, she hooks up her airjack and flings off immediately, jumps as if into the grey abyss. I wait the safety three seconds, so we don't tangle mid-air, and jump after her. The rope hurdles until it reaches its bottom and tightens, grips me with a jerk that's softened only by the airjack beginning its pull in the opposite direction, whirring with a spinning sound of metal as I begin soaring upwards. The only way I know that though, is because I feel the wind hitting me from above instead of below. The greyness is total until the previous building comes into view. I slow the airjack gently and begin ascending to the hallway hole we jumped out of before.

Cima is just finished and begins walking back as I knee my way up. My knees aren't quite what they used to be, and she's almost running.

But it goes faster backwards as we're just rewiring the rope out in front of us, making sure it doesn't get stuck on anything silly. Back home they can see it retracting so they know we're on our way. They could also pull us manually if they really wanted to, but in most cases that'd be lethal. They have no way to know what situation we are in. In all my time charting I had never heard of anyone getting manually pulled home. While they were still alive.

Maybe they all found out what Baquell did and want me back to testify? Maybe Prince is angry I left. This bugs me, I can feel it creeping up, sitting in my stomach, making my fingers twitch. It's only because I have something to do, movement to follow through, that I'm not letting it get to me. But I can feel it. Nagging. This better not be anything silly. I'm going to throw something if it's another of Prince's "ideas".

We get to the next edge. This was the long-fall. The one I had done. The one that landed us here, in front of Mae's trail, by accident. I glance one last time down at the mark she

left, those many years ago, wondering if I'll ever come back here. There wasn't great reason to come back to the same spot as a charter. Sure, there were still unmapped regions in this building, but I'd enter somewhere else then. One of the strange natures of the profession.

I look at Cima one more time before the jump. She doesn't say anything. She knows just how weird this situation is, even without all I know.

I jump.

I sense a flurry, something odd, coming from the above greyness. Not my rope, though. A little to my left. My own movement makes it hard to understand. I'm already gone by the time I hear a tumble, a scream—Cima's—and something else. Muffled by the wind now. What the fuck. I fall longer, at the mercy of gravity until my rope tightens, I wrestle with the airjack to set it back up and wire me upwards, trying to get the ropesling to angle back in the direction I came.

The fog has gotten denser, but I can still find where it was. Mappers are useful for something, aren't they?

I have to go a bit more up, the airjack pulling me up gracefully, as I try to gauge the speed I need, and the height.

I hear a voice, another shout. Something strange. Another person, at least.

I aim the ropesling. Fire.

The rope slings straight into concrete with a slam. It is pretty close still. The airjack immediately begins work as I readjust it to go downwards again.

As I enter view I see another person over a lying down Cima.

I shout, getting the attention of who I now see is holding a knife. I land, tumble, not gracefully, as I didn't release speed from the airjack in time, but rather come crushing down on the floor. My knees didn't like that either but I get up again, looking at the scene.

He's standing up, not directly threatening her, but with a knife in his hand. Cima is still lying, now looking at me, with surprise.

Her rope is already cut.

"Baquell," I say, looking at him.

He looks resigned. Tired, maybe. Standing at her feet with a sorry look. He hasn't slept much, judging by his eyes. Maybe he's still fucking drunk.

"Hey, Sander," he says. His voice is the same gravel it always is, trying a little too hard to pretend it's youthful.

"Get the fuck away from her."

"I ain't gonna hurt her," he says, and lifts his knife. "I just need the ropetools."

I piece it together. He's leaving camp. That's the emergency. But he escaped, using our ropes as path, and came straight to us. I look at his equipment. He came down without an airjack, which is impressive enough in itself. There is a discarded ropewheel next to him, which he must've used to get down. Fortunately for him, we had only been going down, so he could just fall. Can almost smell the heat of the rope burn on the wheel, the internal brakes doing work to cause him to not die as soon as he landed. It had dealt Cima a blow though.

"You okay?" I ask her.

She nods, with effort. "What are you doing here, Baquell?"

Oh yeah, she doesn't even know.

He doesn't move.

"I said get away from her."

"Cima, sorry," he says.

She's baffled, still. "What the hell's happening?" She pushes herself up on her elbow.

"I need your ropetools," he says.

"You're leaving camp," I say. "Running away from your trial?"

"Sander, I ain't taking no shit from you. Not now," he spits. "I'm leaving. You get rid of me. You'll fucking love that, and I ain't here to listen to you gloat."

"Yet you're asking for our ropetools," I say.

"Why are you leaving camp?" Cima says.

Baquell blinks at Cima, glances back at me, confused for a second why she's asking. Then he realizes, looks back at me. Almost winks.

"How little did you tell her?" he says. "Almost thought *you* were running, with the speed you left this morning."

His knife is still pointed at her, as if it's the only thing he has. The same fucking knife.

"I can't believe Prince let you escape."

"Runner's Right," he says.

Everyone is allowed to leave. Camp is not a prison and yet, leaving is never the best option. For most.

"I'm right this close to pushing you off if you don't back away from her right now." I raise my voice, but try to keep it under control.

"Look," he says. "You can get back to camp with one rope. It's just a skip up there and you can practically walk the rest of the way. I'm just asking for one here. I'm not leaving you for dead. We can go each separate way, and never see each other again."

The speech distracts him. He waves the knife around one too many times and Cima punches up, grabs his arm and twists it out of him. Picks it up with the other hand and gets up on her knees, then feet, pointing it at him.

He screams at first, then breaks. "Woah, woah." He raises his hands. "I'm not gonna hurt you!"

"Why the fuck are you leaving camp?" Cima shouts.

"I am, okay?" he shouts back. "Ask this idiot you call a partner why. When I'm gone."

"You don't even have the decency to explain it yourself? To me?"

His hands lower a bit. His face twists. "I'm sorry. I..." He breaks a bit. I see his old expression, how he looked when he was her ward, the ward of several children like her.

"I made a mistake," he says to her. "It's my fault. I'm leaving to make it right. To give the rest of camp a... to let y'all be."

"Bullshit. It's the trial right? Prince is pushing you out," she says. "Well, he can't do that. Not without our consensus. *You* taught me that."

"Cima..." I say.

She flutters to me, then back. "What?"

I don't say anything.

"What are you not telling me?" She turns the knife to me. "Speak."

I look at Baquell, hoping he'll tell it. As much as he's right I'm happy he's gone, it also doesn't feel right to make him the villain. He isn't. I hate his guts but he's not a bad person.

"He stole from stash," I say, hoping not telling the whole truth will let him trust me.

The words make Cima frown. The knife, uneasy in her hands, wavering at me still, but unsure.

"What did you steal?" she says, looking back at him.

"Dumb shit. Booze. Food," he says. "I wasn't thinking straight. But I was also tired. I'm leaving, Cima. It's fine. No one needs me there anymore."

She doesn't outright object. She hasn't spoken to him much in the last few years. Not after she became a charter. But it does pain her to not say anything.

"We can go back. We'll talk with Prince. I'll talk with the rest. It's fine. You made a mistake."

Baquell shakes his head. "We're not all three getting back. That rope can only support the weight of two," he says and points at mine, still hanging up in the air, safely tied to home. "I don't want to go back. There's a very easy solution here."

I don't know if it's true that a rope can only support two. We've never actually tested it with three. The weight *should* hold. But I don't object.

"Why cut my rope? Are you crazy? I could've died if I was in freefall."

"I knew you weren't. I was looking at the tension. I came down. I didn't cut it until I landed."

"Did you even attend the trial?" I ask. "Or did you run before?"

"I made a deal."

That was code for "I made a deal with Prince". The deal was that he ran, and Prince got to keep camp under his ostensible control. The same deal he made with Mae. I'm not sure Cima read all of that. But I'm sure she read some.

"We can remake the deal," she says.

"Cima," he says.

"People don't leave camp," she says, echoing old lectures, "Those who leave camp are wicked or stupid or..."

Thieves. Is what she didn't say.

"Exactly," Baquell says. "It's best I leave. For everyone's sake."

"But that's bullshit," she says.

"Yeah," he says. "It is. But if I stay, it's worse."

"So you're just gonna leave? Like Mae?" she says. First time we mention Mae. It does get a furrowed brow out of Baquell. "And we're just gonna pretend everything is fine."

Except, what we now know is that we can get thrown outta camp for just one offense."

Baquell grimaces. It was always like that, he wants to say. I want to say it. Neither of us do.

"Take mine," I say. "Take my ropetools."

I begin unfitting them from my rope, tying the rope down and releasing the ropesling. It clicks and a weight falls off me, rope thumping on the ground. I feel lighter, but less... prepared. My shoulders expecting to carry a missing burden.

Cima frowns, wants to say something. Almost puts the knife to me. But she doesn't. She lets me continue. Slowly. It takes a bit to do, the stuff is tied on well. Can't have it fall off in freefall. Can't have the ropesling get stuck. Release the harness and feel it loosen around my chest, my lungs expanding to the new room. I pull it out under my leg and place it in front of me on the floor with a clang. Then the same with the airjack. Untie the carabines, unwrap the metal latches, then place it down beside. I secure the free rope on my arm.

There. Baquell approaches, wary of Cima's actions, but he takes them, lifts them up and begins appropriating them on himself.

"Your rope," he says, as he does so. "Cima. Please."

It's still rolled in her airjack, ready to fire, despite how the end dangles beside her.

"This is Prince's doing, isn't it?" she says.

Neither of us answer. Baquell holds out his hand, waiting for the rope.

Cima rips it off, biting her lip.

"He can't keep getting away with this," she says.

"He can and he will," Baquell says.

"No."

He doesn't answer. Tired of this argument. An argument we both recognize. We've both been on both sides of it. Leaves it to me, too, to calm her down. To do the hard job of explaining why it's better to have one man we can blame for the hard decisions.

"The mapper, too," he says, looking at me.

I waver for a second, but then unhinge it from my waist and give it to him.

"Thanks."

He checks it briefly and then begins walking.

"We found Mae's trail," Cima says.

Baquell looks surprised. She points down at the mark.

"These," she says. "She left these along it. I marked them on the charts, too."

"Huh," he says as he confirms it. "I'll be damned. At least that gives me something to follow."

"She's probably dead," I say.

"I'll tell her that," he says. "Bye, Sander. Bye, Cima. Don't fall in."

Then he begins walking, geared up to follow in whatever direction he chooses.

Unanchored. Unmoored.

Cima looks at me. Still holds the knife. Would've thought he needed that. Or just wanted it. It is his.

Was.

Right. "Let's go back," I say.

She lingers a little longer, but then begins refitting my rope to her tools.



It takes a little bit. And a duo-lift is never comfortable for either party. But we make it work. It happens slowly, not wanting to put extra strain on the rope with the double weight.

The greyness is massive, lumbering, as we ascend bit by bit.

“Why’d you give him the mapper?” she asks.

“Why’d you tell him about Mae’s trail?”

“I shouldn’t have?”

It’s getting later, the air is warm and humid.

“No, it’s fine.”

“Do you think anyone will take him in?” she asks.

No. “Depends.”

The wind circles us, lets us be, swinging back and forth gently, as the rope stretches and heaves us up. I’m tied to the back, rope around my waist, and thighs, running through her airjack, ropesling and around her harness, so it’s carrying most of the weight.

It was a long fall, and it takes much longer to get back up. The ocean is somewhere far below us, way too far to see. It’s always below us.

I wonder what we’re going to say when we come back to camp. How much they all know. If they even know that Baquell has left. How we’re going to explain having lost a rope. How Prince is going to explain a missing accused at a trial.

But I know most of those questions don’t matter. They’re practicalities in a world more concerned with actualities. I would’ve been concerned about that, some years ago. I would’ve been concerned about Prince’s reaction, some years ago. When Mae left, Prince broke. Took him a long time to recover. He didn’t speak much, took terse decisions that weren’t for the best. He’s going to handle it better now. But the rest of camp? People of Cima’s age, who grew up without the fear, without understanding why Mae left? Without feeling that same sense of injustice, of longing, of worry... It’s going to be harder to explain to them. Maybe impossible. And I don’t think Prince has realized that yet.

We reach the end of our slow travel, and step on the first parts of the platform that leads to home. Prince has known the entire time camp was dependent on a mutual expectation of fragility. We all knew it could break. As soon as we forget that, we’re done. Cima goes first, in more of a hurry than I am, to see her home.