

COYOTELAND

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Vee doesn't get why we don't just dash across the border. The cut-off between New Dirt and the Monument Valley Republic is wide open, at least to her organic eyes. It'll conserve resources, she argues, which is like-true. I explain that the MVR have trussed up their border in a landmine necklace, the kind that jump out of the ground and cut you in half. Even when you can't see them, there are walls all over. These sands are littered with legless ghosts. So instead of joining them, we roll up to the checkpoint all legal-smooth, like tourists.

There are three cars ahead of ours—plenty of time to scope out hazards. Russet desert unfolds in every direction from this coordinate, this concrete shell propped up over the only paved road for miles around. I count four armed guards patrolling, with no telling how many more in the adjacent guardhouse. German shepherds doze in the shade outside. Yawning, they flash chrome teeth. Squinting out at the wasteland where saguaros flail in the heat, I spy a truck waiting about a quarter-mile distant for someone to get jumpy and make a break for it. That, too, is a wall of sorts. Sometimes they come on wheels.

I glance at Vee in the seat beside mine. She's got an elbow slung out the window all casual-like, but I can almost hear her teeth grinding. The bone shines through her knuckles. I lean over to whisper. "Sit tight, strawberry. This is my daily commute. Far as their scanners can tell, this is all perfectly legal."

Vee sneaks a hurt look at me before resuming expressionlessness.

"Excuse me if I don't feel perfectly legal."

I don't need her panicking now, not when we've only just kicked off. It'd be a shame to have to cut her loose and miss out on my full fee. I want to say she's got nothing to worry about. I've brokered us the right visas, and even if I hadn't, the tricked-out '43 Roadsaw beneath us is a ballistic missile on four wheels. Her undercarriage is muscular with anxious nanofluid balloons designed to sop up shocks like a sponge. With her custom NERA plating, this puncher can walk off a missile. But I don't say as much because random danger is endemic to the Shattered States. I'll take her money, desert her if need be, but I won't lie.

"Relax," I say.

She doesn't look at me again.

The cars ahead are cleared to enter. I coast forward, stopping where traffic spikes arise to kiss my tires. The guard on duty is seriously thrashed with machinery. Real crudo gaj, a human junkyard. You can see the synthetic muscle through his skin—blue-gray soldered cheaply to organic red. Where wrist meets botproxied hand, the skin is sunburnt and peeling. He rests it on the roof and eyes me through tinted shades. "Real chido tar-puncher you got there, chica. How many horses is this monster pulling? Two hundred?"

"Two-fifty."

"Carrying anything I'd hate to find?"

"Only if you'd hate to find a couple of jainas, güey."

He rolls his jaw as if tasting for a lie. Glances back at the dogs for a reaction, but if I were moving drugs they'd be barking already. I wasn't lying—my ride is clean. This coyote don't move anything dirtier than people.

"All right, well. Let's check you two out. Put 'em up."

Vee and I raise our wrists and turn them out. The guard unholsters his handscanner and targets hers first, then mine. Our subcutaneous V-tags relay everything he needs to know. We are Jacinta Rivera and Trieu Thi Vinh, both newly minted citizens of The New Western Democratic Indigenous Republic, both without outstanding warrants. The other guards are watching closely, rifles not quite at ease. This is taking too long, and it's putting ants in my boots. Maybe they've gone to war in the last five minutes, I wonder. Some flash-feud that's suspended relations between New Dirt and the MVR and left Vee and me stranded in hostile territory. Only when I see the scanner's screen turn all-good green do I let myself breathe out. I slide my heel off the gas, lift my finger from the pistol strapped to my seat.

The guard signals with a flattened palm, and the others return to their patrols. Someone throws a switch, and the tire spikes retract into the blacktop. "Welcome to America," he says, waving us through.

"Funny," I say, "I just came from there."

I'm gone before he can get offended. I am a blade of dust slicing asphalt down toward the rust-red buttes of the valley. "We're good," I say. "Go on and unclench." With my go-ahead Vee bends double, her mask of indifference finally cracking. All her bottled anxiety spills out in a shuddering sigh. Me, I keep my eyes locked on the treacherous horizon. We're one mile down, with five hundred more to go.

* * *

Before

One after another, the coyotes slink out of the scrub.

Soft paws muffle their approach. Soft muzzles hide yellow fangs. They've scented the woman sprawled on the ground outside my trailer. She's bleeding from somewhere I can't see. Nostrils flare, fizzling with heady meat-stink.

Through my network of perimeter cameras I'd watched her come stumbling out of the weeds to collapse upon my doorstep. Until just now I'd been happy to bunker down inside until she stopped pretending to be dead. *Fucking bandidos*, I'd thought, figuring there'd be two more camping out of sight to gat me in the head when I came out to help. Can't let her get eaten though. The law here in New Dirt knows my game, looks the other way, but a corpse attracts both flies and police.

I grab a rifle off its rack, unbolt the door, and step outside. The coyotes pay me no mind. The alpha male's got his teeth in the meat of her shoulder. I gat him first with a shot through the neck. The thunderclap scatters the pack. I down another as it runs, to drive the lesson home. My territory is my territory, the wall here being me and my iron. Coyote's got to know borders better than anyone. When to stay behind,

and when to dart across. Death can be on either side. The smart coyote knows which. These ones weren't smart.

The woman stays unconscious long enough for me to lug her inside and tie her to my spare folding chair. The shot of autodoc I shoot into her neck speeds things along. Self-disposing nanobots galling through her bloodstream, clotting themselves over any holes they find and jostling her nerves awake. They find the breaker that tripped in her brain and switch it on.

Her eyes stutter open, and I can see her itemizing the inside of my trailer, glance by glance. Guns on the wall, dishes in the sink. She doesn't scream or nothing, just absorbs. We study each other like our own twisted reflections. She could be the me of a gentler life. Full cheeks, no scars, bodybasic, meaning no visible gaj, which is something rare all right. I'm mostly original, but even my eyes are botproxied, retrofitted with telescoping corneas and self-cleaning functionality. She some kind of Asian maybe? Never seen a real one. Dark as I am, at any rate. Me, I'm her dystopian counterpart, my crow's feet embossed in chrome, my choppy black hair raveled with beads and burs. I'm her scraped over asphalt and left to tan.

"You're Jacinta, the coyote." Her voice is weirdly tinny. Her lips aren't miming the right sounds. Must have some gaj in her throat making her words come out my language. Nobody picks up Inglat unless they're born into it—a southwestern creole as broken as these Shattered States.

"That's me, yeah. What's your dez?"

She tries to speak but can't stop coughing. I pour a peso's worth of clean water from my pay-per purifier and run it down her tonsils. Already, my charity is costing money. "Call me Vee," she manages. "I'm a doctor. Can you please untie me?"

All that and no thanks. "What's a doctor doing in New Dirt?" I ask. The New Western Democratic Indigenous Republic ain't much more than a few townships speckling a plot of scrubland the color of spat tobacco. Any doctors around are the kind that chop out busted guts for plastic proxies and tattoo gang names in neon cyber-glow. You want a hospital, you hike north to the Mount Pennell Socialist Collective, or way East, to the Central Plateau Federation. Pick your microstate, so long as it ain't this one.

"I'm here looking for you," Vee says. "They say you can get across the border."

"Feet are good for that."

"I need to get across alive and fast."

All business with this one. Can't complain. My income's been stringy these last few months, with borderstorms picking up in both frequency and ferocity. "Well shit," I shrug. "Then we're negotiating, looks like. You got feria?"

"Money?" Her eyes steel over to hide something. "Enough."

"All right. Next question is, where you want to get to?"

Sudden doubt clips her lips shut. Wherever she's from, it ain't nearby. She doesn't know me from all the bandidos around here shanking and sharking to stay alive. But I sense she ran out of options on the way to me. That's how it usually goes.

"This is confidential," she says at last. "Do you understand? I am carrying a vaccine for the Fist, and it is imperative that you get me to El Dorado as soon as possible."

At this I can only laugh, because she is the impossible asking for the impossible. "The Fist came and went, strawberry. It smashed everything to pieces and then vanished through the cracks. Ain't no cure for you to carry, and no virus left for you to cure."

Vee's cheeks flare like coals. "You're wrong," she retorts. "It's resurging. Sixty years dormant in the genetic background, but undergoing constant mutation. We have the evidence—" Her jaw claps suddenly shut. "Never mind. It doesn't matter what you think. All that matters is your price."

I'm starting to suspect that she and the dogs deserved each other. I've got her mapped out now: from the newness of her clothes, she's a stuck-up strawberry from up north where education persists, an academical piece of fruit who doesn't know how edible she is. It's an idiot job she's asking for. But it's one I need. I get why coyotes ignore the smell of gunsmoke for the smell of blood. Threat don't hurt like hunger does.

"Let's see your feria first. Then I'll tell you why you shouldn't give it to me."

* * *

The first thing a prospective traveler learns is, *don't fly*. There's no microstate that won't shoot you down, whatever your visas. If that traveler is especially wise, they won't drive either. You want to live long, stay home, and forget that anything exists beyond the horizon. A world can fit inside a wall, if you need it to.

Vee's people weren't especially wise. The wreckage of their armored transport is still smoking by the time we arrive. She hops out of my puncher while my wheels are still turning and jogs toward it. I park nearby and follow. They'd been coming down from Shoshone Nation, her, her partner, and the coyote they'd hired to visabroker their way. Whoever he was, he'd turned tail at the sight of bandidos and left the other two to fend for themselves. The partner had lingered to cover Vee's escape. The truck is smeared like hot butter across the desert; the partner is a khaki bag of flattened bullets a short crawl away.

Vee kneels beside them for a moment, head bowed, and then heads for the truck. The passenger's side is mostly intact. She lifts the door off its shattered hinge and clambers inside.

"Looks like a heap of slagfuck to me," I call over. "You sure my feria's in there?"

"Give me a minute, would you please?"

Well all right then. I find myself a flat enough rock and settle down to observe. "So," I say. "El Dorado. You know what you're getting into?"

"I've heard some stories."

"They're true."

Take a pane of glass and etch upon it a map of North America. Put your fist through that glass, and you've got the Shattered States, the razor-edged fragments of a huge and all-too-fragile empire too sharp to ever reassemble. The origins of the pandemic culprit are lost. Theories around campfires in place of ghost stories. Most say it was a prototype smartvirus designed to convert organic tissue into silicon, with military uses in mind. Others say aliens. The truth is probably recorded someplace, but locked behind too many border walls for me to ever know.

To the geographically quarantined, all that matters is the present. Reduced to the luckiest and the meanest, refusing central government by some feral consensus, that culled population had re-tribalized, claiming sovereignty over whatever territory they could defend. More than a thousand microstates now divided the former USA along barbed-wire seams, and nowhere more concentrated, more pressurized, than the Southwest.

"We're looking at twenty microstates between here and El Dorado," I say. "Twenty crossings. There's no density like that anywhere. No one's got the pesos for that. No one's got the electrofuel. No one's ever made it. It'll eat a soft little thing like you in one bite. So why there out of everywhere?"

"Like it's up to me," I hear her mutter. "That's where the virus is resurfacing. I work for the Northwestern Medical Alliance. We monitor and do what we can to respond to health emergencies in microstates where aid is insufficient or unavailable. We've been in communication with the Chicano Republic of El Dorado, and they've been reporting a surfeit of symptoms that resemble those of the Fist too closely to ignore. Acute skeletal polymerization. Creeping silicon eczema. You know."

I grunt an agreement. I come across their corpses sometimes, lingering where the Fist had gripped and molded them and planted them where they died decades ago. Even now, I can see one a ways off. It resembles a flat, crumbling monolith eight feet high, knifing through otherwise ruinless ground. Up close though, I'd see a human scream smeared long across a pane of silicon that once was flesh. Us coyotes call them *señales*—signposts, designating where you've wandered too far from safety, reminders that history is out of order. There is nothing that is not sequestered out here. Land from other land, reality from past.

"Years now, we've been working on a cure, for just this eventuality. If we can deliver it to the source of the outbreak in time, we may be able to cut the Fist off at the proverbial wrist. If not . . ."

She breaks off with a sigh because the ramifications are plain. Take a thousand jags of broken glass and break them again. That's what we'd be left with.

Vee reemerges with something under her arm.

"That your miracle cure?"

"Colder," she replies. "No, it's our funds, and your fee." She holds it out—a plastic case the size of a book with a handle on one side and no visible hinges. "This is a digital safe. Everything we have is stored here. It's got its own internal network, so it works even in a deadzone. Bulletproof, bombproof, tamper-proof. You're not getting in unless you're me. Here, take it."

I nod appreciatively. This kind of chido gaj would've come in handy before. I oblige, and Vee whistles a three-note tune. Next thing I know I'm on bloody kneecaps, still holding onto the safe, which has sunk itself an inch into the ground. I lift with my legs, but it's like trying to flip a truck.

"Gravity lock," Vee explains. "Turns heavy at my signal." She kneels to swipe her V-tag over the device. Her wrist implant projects a holoscreen on which a string of digits is displayed. "We've got one hundred million in Plastic Bonds—we can convert that to pesos, neutralcoin, cryptobits, etcetera. I'm willing to set aside a third for you. Is that acceptable?"

Thirty million. That's more zeroes than can fit in my head. It's enough to keep me in purified water for months. Enough that I could turn down work for at least a little while. *Feria* only gets you so far in the desert, but it keeps you in one spot real comfortably. *Clear water and free time*—a dream small enough to fit my small America. It's almost too much to hope for.

Tasting ash, I take that dream and snap it in two. "Gimme half up front, and you've got a deal."

I can make do with just that fraction, and I know better than to expect more.

* * *

Now

Luck drives ahead of us for the span of three microstates. An hour after clearing the MVR, we blow easily through the *Lower Monument Valley Republic*, and from there cross into the United Counties of True America without having to change citizenships. New Dirt's got solid relations with its neighboring terraliteral governments. Partly why I hang my hat there.

Tumbledown rock formations pass us by in parallel lanes of flat, beige desert. Fifty miles of flame-blue sky, each identical to the last. Civilization is all out of the way here; I know of towns, and vast solar farms paving the desert, but they are elsewhere. Nature did not come creeping back when humanity fled the Fist. Its red is as dead it ever was, and the coyotes never left. Coming up on the border of *Nueva Frontera*, I detour up onto a rock-cankered lip of earth to let the boiling engine cool off. I use the moment to double-check my visagraph, and see we've lost good fortune's trail somewhere along the way.

"Fuck."

Vee shoots up in her seat. "What? What is it?"

I hand off the instrument. The visagraph is a tablet the length of my flattened hand, its corners babyproofed with cracking rubber shoulders. Vee squints past the dirt-streaked screen into the incomprehensible puzzlebox of overlapping, intersecting, color-coded polygons. She shakes her head. "I don't understand. What am I looking at here?"

"These are microstates," I explain. "This oblong here, that's Nueva Frontera, where we're going. And this here, off to the side, that's the United Counties, where we are now. They're terraliteral, see, but overlapping them both, this six-pointed thing, that's the Western Gold-digger's Union. They're purely terradigital. State with no turf. These others here are like that too."

Vee nods. "I see. It visualizes the international relations at play."

Took her long enough. Any coyote who wants to get anywhere has got to be a visabroker too. Land is linear, constant, whereas the ever-shifting labyrinth of feuds and travel-treaties that articulates the Shattered States is an infinitely more convoluted dimension, and not without its minotaurs. "Right. Now, Nueva Frontera has a free-movement agreement with New Dirt, so I'm solid. Problem is, this says they've got this new treaty with the Gold-diggers saying you can't enter until your New Dirt citizenship is a year old. Guess they're trying to keep competition out. I get it. Point is though, you flounce in there and get scanned, it's open season on strawberries named Vee."

For most of history, the state was imaginary, existing only as solidly as its people could defend it. Following the Fist, territorial borders were redrawn in loops of binary instruction just brainsy enough to recognize themselves. The polity moved online, evolving out of the need for terra firma. These intelligences were given self-autonomy, interoperability, told to maintain the boundaries between their peoples. Linked to every handscanner, every kangaroo mine, every hunter-killer drone, states now guard their people, and with extreme prejudice.

"So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying we're going to have to roll gritty."

It takes her a few seconds. "You mean cross illegally. But you said there were mines."

"Back in the MVR, sure, but here, I don't think so. Drones yeah, but no mines. Drones we can outrun." *Though not every time*, I inwardly admit. My body is a shallow grave of ballistic debris.

Vee blanches. "I'd feel better if we bought me citizenship in Nueva Frontera."

I throw up my hands. This soft little girl is going to drive me crazy, paying for the right to tell me not to do my job. "Weren't you the one strapped for time?"

"I'm not sure it's worth the risk."

"It'll save us the expense."

Her knee shifts to protect the briefcase by her feet. "We have plenty of funds."

I snatch the visagraph back from her. "Listen, strawberry. We're not just racing against time here. We're crossing a dimension of money, too. It takes loco feria to get an entry visa, let alone bump up your citizenship. A tank of electrofuel can take you anywhere out here. A million pesos won't get you far at all. Want to reach El Dorado? Start looking at this like a game. Like chess. How do you spend the least number of pieces? How do you win in the fewest moves?"

Vee glances east, to where the Sun is beginning its descent. Deadsigns still litter the roadside, the rusting skeletons of extinct destinations, stubbornly advertising towns wiped out by the Fist, or absorbed into another microstate. I can see her trying to make it all make sense. Trying to know better than me, as she's convinced she

should. “A compromise,” she finally says. “Launder me in if we can. It’s my money, after all. It’s my say.”

I let my argument out through my nose. It’s her money, and it’s too hot to argue.
* * *

Forty minutes later, I’m wishing I had.

The rocket misses its mark by a hair. The detonation lifts a few meters of desert and blows on them like a dandelion, scattering superheated particulate in all directions. The car’s plastiglass window craters inward without breaking, its pliable smartmatter capturing grit like molten amber, but it doesn’t protect my paintjob. *Motherfuckers*. They might as well set my money on fire.

I swerve hard into the concussive force, letting it spin us around a full three-sixty instead of flipping us over, so that I end up facing the same direction. Ducking down beside me, Vee is bleating a string of curses her *gaj* can’t fully translate. *Chet me chet me you du ma fuck fuck fuck*—

I memorize every dip and ditch in the terrain ahead and then glance over my shoulder. The bandido’s truck is gaining ground, and I’m only now scoping the second bringing up the rear. I squint, and that organic impulse reroutes into a circuit controlling my telescoping implants. My vision magnifies the driver and his gunner, a pair of hulking roidborgs so thrashed with *gaj* I can’t tell what’s armor and what’s botproxy. Sex, race, age—everything human is locked up inside chrome helmets in the shape of snarling cats. *Jaguar warriors*, their chrome shoulders aflame with plumage.

Vee’s brains have come back to her. “Why are they shooting at us? We’re legal!”

Yeah, I’d like to know that, too. Rather than spring for costly citizenship in the United Counties, we’d used an old coyote’s gambit, and bought her a cheap citizenship in Free Alaska of all places, which has a built-in free-travel agreement with the UC. Laundered her in, in the trade jargon. I must’ve misinterpreted those knotted entrails, overlooked some twist in the tangle that closed the loophole around us like a noose. As bullets batter themselves against my chromed-out fender, I risk a look at my visagraph. “There it is,” I spit, flinging the tablet into the back seat. “These pinches basuritas are from Aztec America. Probably the same outfit that jumped you before. They do freelance border security all over—totally terradigital.”

I throw my wheel right and hurl my tar-puncher away from another rocket. A blade of solid heat digs up the earth directly ahead. I gun it, kicking the gas pedal into the floor, trusting my instincts to finesse the physics for me. That burst of fuel is enough to launch us over the crater and through the smoke. Smart coyote knows when to hop a border and when to stay behind, and right now there’s nothing more solid, more final, than what’s behind us.

“Looks like they’ve got a treaty with the UC to target certain foreigners. Folks from New Dirt are off-limits, but as for New Alaska—”

“You mean they have a treaty to *hunt me*?”

The bruised naïveté in her tone is almost offensive. Where in the fuck is she from, where safety is something *owed*? Maybe it used to be, but the thing is, humanity is a societal construct, and where we’ve fallen, in the cracks between, we’re all animals, prey-things. No desert critter can trust the sky to stay blue. Blink, and it’ll grow claws. “Fuck,” I growl. “You paid seven mil for the privilege.”

My rearview mirror lights up red and yellow as the Jaguar’s truck roars flame and lunges forward, gulping up a huge tract of distance, angling toward my passenger’s side. I cut sharp left, kick my speed up, but their driver’s a wheelfiend himself, and predicts my maneuvers as they leave my brain. “There’s a shotgun under your seat,” I say, groping for my own. “You’re going to want that.” I don’t know if it’ll work though: the armor on those bandidos looks mighty thick.

Vee doesn't budge. She's staring straight ahead like an antelope pincered between two headlights. I start to think she's gone catatonic when she suddenly turns to me, and it's like two slugs of buckshot have slotted into her eye sockets. "Get us close."

The Jaguars oblige on my behalf. Their driver throws his wheel left, and their spiked hubcaps gnash into my wheelguards with a squeal of flogged titanium, metal peeling away in pig-tail curls. We've got seconds now before they chew through and shred my tires. Meanwhile, Vee reaches down and comes up holding not a gun, but the digital safe. "Hold it steady."

She's got the window rolled down before I cotton on to what she's thinking. "*Fucking don't*—"

I'm too slow on the draw. With a snarl of effort, Vee flings the safe out the window. I watch it somersault twice before landing between the two Jaguars at the exact moment the last meaningful note leaves Vee's lips. The response is instantaneous; artificial gravity comes crashing down upon the safe like the finger of God. It becomes, in a fraction of a second, a fixture in space, while the truck continues to move at ninety miles per hour around it. My botproxied eyes catch every frame of it as the machine dissolves down to its nuts and bolts, and inertia launches its passengers into the distance to land like two paint-cans dropped off a building. My Roadsaw gets less hangtime off their corpses than she would a speedbump.

Vee deflates back into her seat. Her gaze tumbles to her knees like a pair of spent shells. "There." I detect a rattle in her throat I hadn't heard before. Damage taken from killing for what must be her first time. That sort of scuff don't buff out.

Swallowing, she asks, "Do you still think I'm soft?"

"Yes," I growl, and stomp on the brakes.

"What are you doing?" she demands to know as I scramble out of the Roadsaw and sprint back to the remains of the Jaguar's truck. I find the safe at the center of the blast without so much as a dent. Vee wasn't kidding when she said this thing was everything-proof.

"Get back here. They're catching up!"

That's the first thing she's not wrong about. The second truck is a vengeful comet blazing straight at us. By rights, we should be punching tar. But she can't see what I see—the barrier rising before us camouflaged blue and cumulonimbus white. Money won't get you far, but none of it gets you nowhere. *Lack* is the most insidious breed of wall.

"Not until you turn this thing off."

* * *

The safe back in hand, we continue on.

Vee keeps quiet until the border is behind us, and the Jaguars are trapped on the other side. Even then, it is only to ask *where are we now*, to which I refuse an answer. We're in the outflung tip of Navajo Nation, a docile strip of territory, if a brief one. Before long we roll up to the Grand Canyon, where I know there is a crossing. The region is disputed territory, the border between NavNat and The Republic of Terra Libre twanging like a guitar string as the two microstates' governing AI's debate each inch of land at the speed of data. That conflict has birthed nebulous haven for vagrants, scavengers, and coyotes like me, where the demarcation between states is too goopy to enforce.

Looping down an unpaved road, we drive into the midst of a nomad band preparing to ford the river. Dusty children splash in the shallows; the adults wrap gaj in plastic and kettle their goats. Los Errantes, that's their dez—the grandkids of Native and Mexican refugees who'd fled unrelated massacres into one another's arms. I leave Vee's useless ass in the Roadsaw to go negotiate; our patois interface easy-peasy. For the price of some audodoc shots and a cool mil, they're happy to make

room on one of their pontoon barges. Luck's apologizing for ditching us before; an hour later, and we'd be stranded.

The river is choppy today, so the crossing goes slow. Vee and me got plenty of time to stew together. We're halfway across when the heat I'd been keeping down peaks and boils out. "That was my fee you threw away."

Vee recoils as if slapped. I don't know what she was expecting—a fucking hug? "I saved our lives," she retorts. "In fact, I did your job for you!"

"You threw away our money. You threw away *my* money. Stupid Fucking American—"

"I am *not* American, for one. And there are more important things than money."

"Oh yeah?" I snort, "like your bullshit cure?"

She sticks her jaw out like a shield. "Yes."

I growl up a wad of dusty phlegm and spit it out the cracked window. "Come the fuck on. What would it even do? We'll all still be getting each other out here. It won't open the borders or disarm the mines. Money's the only thing that moves through walls. It ain't all there is, but it's all you get. You take it, or you get nothing. Take all you can, buy yourself a cozy spot behind the biggest wall, and die old behind it. That's the best anyone can do anymore. Free lesson for you, doctor strawberry."

Vee rounds on me suddenly. "Have you ever even *tried* a strawberry?"

The question catches me across the jaw. What's *that* got to do with anything?

"No," I sneer, to hide my surprise.

"I have."

She turns her gaze west, to where the canyon mouth is starting to swallow the Sun. It burst like a blister between sandstone teeth, spilling twilight across the sky. "Vietnam wasn't hit as hard as the rest of the world," Vee says. "We fractured, but we'd fractured before, so it was easier to heal. The United States used to grow much of the world's food. When your nation fell, we adopted some of that burden. My family was machinists; we maintained the agrodrones that maintain the farms. Before school, I liked to follow those robots through the fields, when the mist was boiling off the hills, and see green stretching to the horizon. Watermelon. Pitaya. Rambutan. Strawberries. Like little rubies on the vine. Do you know what sweetness is?"

"I've had chocolate," I say. I rummage under my seat and retrieve a torn-open box of VitaFeed bars. My breakfast and dinner most days, the government of New Dirt does them out from a big ration truck every other week. "They make them in vanilla, too." I don't know why I'm so eager.

Vee looks at the box, and her lips tighten unhappily. "That is sucralose and flavoring. It fills you up." Her tone is not condescending. Just sad, if anything. "Sweetness is the tang of what you do not know. The promise of more, just ahead. It isn't meant to satisfy, but to torture you always forward." Her eyes flick away, back to a memory hovering just out of reach. "I could run forever in that place and eat a new thing every day. My world was so big there."

They're playing guitar in a car nearby. Music sashays in through the window, followed by laughter. Someone plies percussion from a plastic pail. A smile tweaks Vee's lips. "There is happiness here too, but . . . it's divided. Everywhere, there are walls to climb over. I wonder how you can even breathe."

"Better a too-small life than none."

Angry cracks fracture Vee's brow. "Your logic is what destroyed the U.S.," she says. "Everyone chose to withdraw rather than fight the virus together. An infection of defections spreading ahead of the pandemic. The Fist killed millions, but it didn't break anything. That was human nature. It is gone now, but the fear remains—a *stupid* and pointless hostility. If we fail to eradicate it here, all these borders—these checkpoints and rivers and fences—will turn into concrete. It will crush any hope

of repair. But if we succeed, it will be the first step in reopening cooperation between the Shattered States. The first step in coming back together."

"It won't work," I say and am appalled at how automatically the words load between my teeth.

Vee shrugs, as if that impossibility is a poncho to casually shuck off. "Maybe so. But I have tasted sweetness. I do not want to survive behind a perimeter forever. I will not shatter my dreams into pieces that will fit. I want to live. What about you?"

At first, I don't hear it as a question. There is no uncertainty for it to dig up. I already got everything I want. Blue skies, clean water, government chocolate, a chido set of wheels. Money comes in like a tide, refreshing these things from time to time. I've got everything I want because I have everything there is to want in New Dirt. There is nothing else to have.

And then, on a whim, I try to imagine Vee's world, her garden of extinct things. That thickness of greenery is alien to me, so I florify those mist-drenched hills with agave and desert willow, things I know. I conjure a strawberry, a red and succulent heart, picture myself unscrewing it from the stem and twisting its flesh between my teeth. But there is nothing to grab hold of. I have no reference for the texture. I can't taste anything but the memory-echo of artificial flavoring, and I know this isn't truth.

What about you? What about me? I want to want it, but I can't. I don't know how.

New Dirt is in me, and my soul is inside it.

"Are you all right?"

"What?"

Vee's expression softens into a frown. "You went away a moment. Are you all right?"

Her sympathy stings, inexplicably. "I'm fine," I mutter. I turn to watch the shore inch closer and let the quiet grow tall between us. Silence is another kind of wall, one of the hardest to crack. One that, like all other walls I suppose, we put ourselves behind.

* * *

There's more to do on the other side of the river. Vee watches the Roadsaw while I barter for water and what electrofuel the Errantes can spare from their own tarpunchers. I cringe at every spent peso; in just twenty-four hours we've burned through a fourth of Vee's funds. Per my visagraph, we're eligible for entry into Terra Libre with the citizenships we got, and the international forecast looks sunny. Cutting straight through is our quickest route. We've come this far in few enough moves, and the price for two visas is only my second-born child. Rolling smooth would be faster than rolling gritty. I convince myself it's worth it. Anything to lose Vee a minute sooner.

What about you? I can't get her last question out of me. It digs in like shrapnel.

What about you? The desert never asked me that. The desert never cared what I had and what I didn't. A kindness, I felt; better than afflicting me with false options. *What about you?* Nothing about me. I got enough to worry about in my little America. I don't need her making it bigger.

I buy a few boxes of explosive shotgun rounds from a nomad named Tahoma, a burly hombre as garrulously proud of his mustache as he is his car. For the price, I let him lug the ammo back to my puncher; he gets to talk, and I get the news. A wasteland has its ecologies, invisible, fluxing intersections of politics and nature. Heatwaves down south are setting off famines way East, herding refugees toward neighboring microstates, triggering wars between Americas that will ultimately amount to nothing but some death. They're like dust devils—scribbling with sand across baked earth, but leaving the dunes unchanged.

I pop the trunk so Tahoma can pack the shells in between my tent and sleeping bag. “What are you hunting out here?” he asks. “Tanks or something?”

“Nah, güey. That’s for basurita bandidos. We’re headed through to El Dorado.”

He slams the hood, his moustache jumping like a startled cat. “A poco? You don’t want to go west. Us, we’re rolling north. You should come with.”

I frown. “What’s wrong with west?”

“Stories is all. But bad stories. *Like-true* stories. I’d go another way, mi amiga.”

“Well hold on now. What are we talking about? There a war on?” Wouldn’t surprise me none. The relationships that bind them all together are strung as taut and testy as tripwires. All it takes is a touch to set them off.

Tahoma shoos my theory away. “No, no, no, but an evil thing. Something alive. They say it moves through the land like a sidewinder, with dust devils following in its wake. They say it can smell if you got the wrong visa, and if you do, it’ll run you down and take you. They call it La Frontera de Caza.”

Now I know he’s trying to spook me.

“Really?” I snort. “*The Hunting Border?*”

Just then, there is a shout from above. All eyes turn to the sloping canyon wall, where a pair of Errantes have clambered up on top of a limestone outcropping. One’s already sliding down the incline on his heels, while the other cups her hands around her mouth.

“¡*Todos corran! Thunderbird! Thunderbird! Todos corran!*”

The Errantes are well prepared; there is no hesitance, no disbelief. In a matter of seconds, every engine on the bank is aflame, any unpacked goods ditched where they lay. I’m in motion, too, hurling myself inside the Roadsaw alongside Vee and firing up the ignition. She’s shouting over the engine’s roar, demanding to know what’s happening, as if that dezn—*thunderbird*—don’t say enough.

I look up in time to catch a shadow sweeping down the slope. Something with a wingspan unseen since dinosaur times that blankets the Roadsaw and turns my blood to slush. Vee and her pointless questions are thrown back into her seat as I stomp the gas and rocket us along the shoreline. Cars swarm around me, all of them knocking fenders to get themselves pointed north while I aim south. My wheels grind abandoned tents and crockery into the mud. It’s a gamble to split from the herd; I’m hoping that what’s coming will overlook us for the greater mass.

A shrill tremolo slits the air like a razor. The keening of some stupid-huge predatory bird. Vee is still talking but I ain’t listening. There it is—swooping low over the river, taking in the stretch of panicking cars all at once. It must be thirty feet from wingtip to wingtip, its underbelly camouflaged the same heartbroken blue as the Arizona sky. No head at the fore of its mass, just an unmarked ovoid, behind which two blades jut, moving minutely to parse the air just so. It is there, it is massive, and then it is gone, arcing back into the sun.

Vee’s urgent touch snaps me out of my trance. “What the fuck was that? What’s going on?”

“Grab the visagraph,” I reply. “Tell me what it says.”

For an absurd moment, I let myself believe we’re clear. Then I hear that shriek again, ricocheting between the canyon walls, and the drone is immediately beside us, abaxial fins licking the water, so efficient in motion as to seem motionless even as it keeps pace with my miles-per-hour. A cone of red light projects from its featureless head onto the shore, and I don’t got time to veer out of the way. The V-tag in my wrist makes a sound as we barrel through the scan-ray, a confirmation beep muffled by gristle and skin.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to look for,” Vee complains. She shoves the tablet in my face. “It’s all over the place.”

I tear an eye off our pursuer and glance at the visagraph. It don't take an expert to see we're knees-deep in shit. Normally stable, a complex but intelligible tesseract of nested relationships, the internationological forecast is now a single frame of an explosion—symbolic polygons dividing, spiking, impaling themselves on one another. I'm fluent in visagraph, but I'd need some kind of pinche artist to make sense of this. That alone tells me what we're dealing with.

"We're in a borderstorm."

"*A what?*"

"Hold on to something."

I haul the wheel hard right and wrench the Roadsaw away from the water. The cliff face here is time-eroded, its incline gentle enough to climb. We need to ditch the canyon and find room to maneuver. I watch the drone slow to a glide in my rearview mirror, then reorient to track us. A hatch in its underside ejects a silvery sliver of metal. There is a flash of light, a sonic boom, and the ground mere seconds behind me erupts in fire.

Vee screams, and I explain in as few, breathless words as I possibly can.

Microstates are inherently paradoxical. Generated out of mass-defection yet grudgingly dependent on neighbors for essentials. They set drones aloft to keep some out, but build exceptions to let others in. As terradigital states compound over teraliteral, as ententes wax and wane, these international treaties grow stressed.

If State A becomes an ally of State B, then State C cuts off free travel in retaliation, provoking rivals D and E to establish trade deals, and so on, just shy of infinity. These perpendicular strings tug against one another, yet as abstract concepts, as code, they can't snap. Pains are taken to ensure that one protocol does not gainsay another; new strands in the web are vetted rigorously. But not even the best AI's catch every contradiction. All it takes is one.

State D and E are amigos now, but at war with State F, who declares war on State B, obliging A to draw heat against their own ally, endearing it in turn to State C. A is now torn between two unbreakable and totally opposite sets of obligations. A physical construct would collapse. A cloud-based and semisentient model, however, has no choice but to go batshit crazy in the effort to understand itself.

The result is a borderstorm. Some new element in Terra Libre's skein of treaties has triggered a CCL—a Critical Contradiction Loop. The state, unable to decide which protocols override which, is chasing logic in circles, twisting the definition of legal residence into something unrecognizable.

Friends are now enemies. Enemies get shot on sight.

Vee has gone as white as her complexion allows. "What do we do?"

"Besides drive fast?" I'm wondering that myself. The desert is wide open, but equally lacking in anywhere to run. I flip a plastic cover on my dashboard and swat the button underneath. The Roadsaw bucks as a concealed panel in her armor slides open and dumps a cloud of chaff into the air. The fluttering scraps of aluminum will dizzy the drone's targeting, multiplying my radar presence ten thousand times. An emitter onboard bounces a signal off the cloud to similarly mask my doppler signature. That'll buy us time, but not much. These drones are brainsier than dogs and as dogged as a grudge. I've got another payload of chaff, but odds are, the same trick won't work twice.

"Vee," I say. "Do you think you could possibly drive this thing?"

She glances back at the drone, then at me, weighing her options, finding herself as destitute as I am. "How long do you need?"

I bite my cheek. I don't want to depend on her. The only d-words between us should be dinero and distance. Strawberries go splat under pressure. But I've got no better option, and neither does she. All we've got now is each other. "No idea."

A guided missile detonates overhead, taking a bite out of my chaff. We don't have long before we're the only moving target left on the open plain.

That gunmetal look in her eyes returns. That expression that can punch holes in walls.

"Then yes."

Vee gets a whole seven seconds of training. This pedal does this, this one that. Don't touch that button, don't shift to this gear. I wriggle into the back with the visagraph while she scrambles to get behind the wheel. I've got the digital safe on my left knee and the visagraph on my right. I swipe my V-tag over both, linking the three together. I push the drone far from my consciousness, losing it in the rear darkness of my hindbrain. I can't afford any distractions when navigating a storm.

My V-tag's holoscreen populates with two columns: downloadable citizenships in one, and their pricetags in the other, none less than six figures. I force myself to breathe deep and slow, to keep my brain juiced on 02. *Think of this as a game. Like chess. Only so many pieces to spare. So many moves. So few millions.* Despite the dez, a CCL is not a perfect loop. Somewhere within that cyclone of paradoxical protocols is a set of citizenships and visas granting lawful residence in Terra Libre—the eye of the motherfucking hurricane.

The option for Terra Libre is redded out. The storm has suspended their treaties with New Dirt and Free Alaska, so we can't immigrate directly. I riffle like crazy through alternatives. No choice but to circle the storm, leapfrogging from one citizenship to another in a tightening spiral toward safety. I got to think three moves ahead: the path forks at every intersection, all branches ending in dead ends but one. Twice I immigrate myself into a rut, and it guts me to burn all that feria to back out of it. *Forget it, I tell myself, keep punching forward. No looking back. Free Alaska into New Cambridge, New Cambridge into Neo Orleans, Neo Orleans into—*

"Brace yourself!"

Heavy ordinance thumps the Earth, and for a vertiginous half-second, all four of our tires leave the ground. Then gravity slams us back down, and my skull puts a dent in the Roadsaw's roof. I glimpse the drone sharking along behind us, maintaining an almost playful distance. Vee don't need me to tell her to dump the second chaff burst. She thumps the dashboard, and the sky goes all silver. I stake my eyes to the visagraph. Getting close now. No choice but. Got to be, reality be fucked. The rhythmic pounding in my head keeps time. God, but it's so hard, like doing two surgeries simultaneously with one hand apiece.

The drone don't take the bait. Vee performs an evasive swerve, rear wheels gliding over gravel. I roll in the backseat, storm-tossed alongside wrappers and cans, my body balled around the visagraph. Juddered and bruised, all monetary concerns are sifted from my head, and I achieve clarity—

I'm playing too safe, too conservatively. Hoarding like I've got anything to lose right now but my life. The future's cost doesn't matter. If I can't afford now, there is no future. Money is a wall of another kind: I've got to get past it if I want to live.

My mind emptied, the internationological mandala unfurls. My skull is a concave lens: I see it all and spend accordingly. *Terradigital to terraliteral and back again. Icedriller's Guild to Jefferson State, Jefferson to Vegasland, Vegasland to—*

"Got it!"

My fingers blur, downloading the correct citizenships into my V-tag and Vee's. The confirmation beep from my wrist right then is the most perfect sound I've ever heard. I sit up and look through the rear window, expecting to scope the drone veering away, and I do.

I see also the Roadsaw reflected in a missile's mirrored nose, my face centered like a bullseye.

* * *

I know I'm asleep because I have my eyes back.

The botproxies I have now are good. Pliable, self-moistening, I only blink out of instinct. They feel like-true, but only *like*. In quiet moments I can feel their tessellating hexagon surface rasping. My originals fit so perfectly I couldn't even feel them. You miss that when it's gone. Survival in the Shattered States demands more than nature can give. We must kill little parts of ourselves. Some buckle, willfully devolving into all-metal monstrosities, brains wired into turrets and treads. Others, like me, preserve what flesh we can, because it is the only reason to preserve anything. Only flesh can be gratified by the desert's sparse pleasures. But even a small sacrifice never lets you forget what you're missing. There is always that wrongish rub. My unconscious mind, at least, remembers what I am supposed to be.

Only dreaming am I whole.

I know I'm not dead because I've dreamed of here before. It is a blue hour of night that does not quite exist in reality. I am climbing up familiar dunes, sending sand ribboning to the ground. I'm trailing a coyote, eclipsing its pawprints with mine. It lopes ahead, glancing back to make sure I'm following. I don't know why I'm here; it isn't relevant. The narrative is a current, and I am water in it.

Time passes vaguely. The coyote and I come into a shining salt flat where a scattering of señales have cordoned off the horizon, each a slab of blue-gray metal bur-nished by sandstorm to a mirror's sheen, each its own grave and gravestone both. I walk among them, marveling at the terrible mutability latent in the human form. My fingers drift over eyes, noses, outthrust tongues. Tortured expressions strain against the bonds of two-dimensionality. The dream demands I become suddenly and inexplicably fearful. I look back, but more señales have arisen to bar the path. I can only go deeper into their midst.

Slabs of silicon deadness sidle closer together the further we go, until there is only a spiraling corridor left for the coyote and me to follow, funneled into a space with no exit. I know without looking that the way back is gone. I cross my legs in the salt beside the coyote. There is nothing to do now but wait to wake up. *Here we are*, I say. *Here we always are*.

But then, something new. A twist in the script. The coyote straightens, its ears daggering. It sniffs the air, and then trots past me, reeled in by some scent. It stops at the foot of a towering señal, probing with its nose at nothing I can see. *Give it up*, I say, *I've tried and you've tried*. It's not anything material penning us in, but the temporal—the past circling around us to throttle the future.

The coyote looks back, once more beseeching me to follow. Then, as if it is nothing at all, as if it should have been obvious, it steps *through* the wall and is gone.

I am alone inside circles, inside circles.

* * *

I flop onto my back and knuckle my eyes, forgetting half of everything I dreamed.

Someone's set up my pup tent and put me inside it. The telltale welt on my neck tells me they gave me a shot of autodoc too. A good trade for a much worse hurt. I close my eyes and try to remember what happened. I see fire, and then tent. No blank in between to plumb for memories. I'll have to find them somewhere else.

My joints are gelatin as I crawl to the flap. We've finally caught up to the night we've been chasing. The stars are out in their multitudes, sprayed across the sky like spittle from a laugh. A ways off, a fleet of cars and trucks has gathered for what looks like a tailgate party. All that neon underglow lights the desert up like a dance-floor. I don't know where Vee's gone, but I don't worry about that yet. I crouch there, observing, figuring things out. They've got music blasting in two languages, Inglat and Navajo. It clashes, but in a way that makes each leg want to kick to a different

beat. I smell beer, but no cordite. Someone is steaming tamales in a big steel drum. Buena onda all around.

I walk over, hands open to show I'm coming friendly. The crowd shuffles apart, and there's Vee, with plastic carton in hand "Oh, you're up," she says with a nervy smile. "I don't know where all these people came from." She sounds inexplicably abashed, like she invited them over without my permission. "I thought I'd—well, I'm glad you're all right."

Someone hands me a shot glass before melting back into the crowd. The denatured venom in the tequila leaves sizzling skid marks in my throat. "We're in a No Man's Land," I cough. "You get them from time to time. Borderstorm must've created it when it resolved itself. Right now, this spot right here belongs to no microstate. Won't last long. Maybe half a day. These folks must've seen it pop up and seized the moment. Looks like traders, ranchers. Maybe a few families split up by the border."

"It's wonderful," she murmurs. "People coming together like this, if only for a moment." Headlights swim in her natural eyes. I've been without them so long I don't remember if light feels warmer on real flesh than on like-true mimicry.

"Yeah. What's that you got?"

"Ah, yes! I bought you something. The lady who sold them says they came from a private grove somewhere East. They're getting soft, but they still taste good. Here, you can have them." Tenderly as I'd wax my tar-puncher she pops the lid. Inside is the lining of a treasure chest, plush red velvet, except that's all there is. No coins or treasures. Just a bed of strawberries.

I cup the box and lead Vee back to the campsite. Belatedly I notice the Roadswag parked behind it. My heart clenches to see the damage done. Her left rear flank is a splayed crater of igneous titanium. A few glass teeth are all that's left of her rear windows, and every panel of NERA on her body is blown out. Hell, the trunk won't even shut all the way. Vee took her this far though, so she must still roll, at least. That's something. "We got hit by a missile and you drove us out?"

"It wasn't a direct hit, but yes, mostly."

My only love has a hole shot through her, and I'm still half-smiling. "Not bad."

I leave my boots outside the tent. The stink of yellowed socks fills the inside, but can't quash the tang of the strawberries. Vee sits beside me, ignoring my funk. Her shirt is blotched at the armpits and neck. After the day we've had, her stink complements mine. Our worlds have moved a few miles closer.

"Go on," she says. "They're all yours."

I select a strawberry and pinch it until juice runs down my thumb. It's softer than I imagined, and only vaguely heart-shaped. The smell is like government chocolate, but sharper somehow, uncomplicated by chemical additives. Vee is watching intently. Her scrutiny starts to chafe, so I pop the fruit between my lips to get it over with.

Vee stays silent while I chew the strawberry into paste. When I swallow, its own juices help wash it down. I scrape seeds from my teeth, then reach for another. I eat them all, even the ones that deflate sourly on my tongue. I don't stop until I've licked the last syrupy drop from my lips.

"Your cure—" I say.

"The vaccine, yes."

"Your vaccine. It's for real?"

I look into her eyes and dare her to lie to me now.

"Yes it is," she says. There is a pause where she skirts a thing unsaid—the issue of *where it is*—but I'm certain: she's telling the truth. "I found a map app on your visagraph," she continues. "It looks like we're seventy miles from the border of El Dorado." She pulls on her earlobe, revealing a mirrored stud implanted just inside her ear canal. "Signal's good here; a few minutes ago, I was able to get through to my contact

there. They're going to try sending a pterochopper across the border to pick us up. They can only risk a few miles, but every inch counts. Anything I should know about the road ahead?"

I shake my head. "No clue. Never come this far before. Could be anything out there."

Vee glances worriedly at the digital safe. "We don't have much cash left."

"Yeah. And we'll need all of it." I feel around for the visagraph and pull up a map of the area. Arizona fragments into a hundred pygmy Americas crossed only by topographical contours and the curlicuing blue of the Grand Canyon. I retrace our route with a finger. "This here, this big spot. That's where we're headed through. That's NuSAFE turf."

"The what?"

"The New South American Fascist Empire."

A breeze bumbles against the tent on the way to elsewhere. Thermopockets in the canvas keep the internal temperature balmy. Even so, Vee trembles as a shiver statics from my spine to hers. "It'll take everything we have to roll in smooth," I say. "If something goes wrong, if we're hunted—" I trail off, unsure of what to warn against. With their exorbitant visa conditions, few are granted entry, and fewer leave. Rumors escape infrequently, smuggled out between bruised jaws. Whispers of desert death-camps and organ farms, of criminals stretched out across photovoltaic panels and left to cook. We'll be skirting along the northern border, rolling smooth as ice—*but*.

But is all I can say. *But*, followed by an indefinite blank in which anything could lurk. The terra incognita of a shattered age. Here there be dragons.

"—all we've got is ourselves." I finish, tiredly. "If you're going to turn back, do it now." I'm eager for this talk to be over. I can still taste strawberry on my lips. I'd rather do that than anything else.

Vee is mute for a few deep breaths. Then she gathers up the blockage in her throat and forces it down like bad liquor. Grimacing, she answers. "It's too late now. Not enough money, not enough time. We keep going. Whatever happens."

"Suit yourself," I shrug, and say no more.

Silent seconds pile upon us like motes of settling dust. Finally, Vee gets itchy. "How were the strawberries?" she blurts out. "Were they *'chido'*?"

I zip the tent up, but not before taking five silvery marbles from my pocket and tossing them outside. Skittering on thumbtack feet, the microdrones quickly form a pentagon around us and the Roadsaw. An alarm will blare should anyone cross the invisible grid between them—the minimum security I need to stretch out on my back and shut my eyes.

"Real chido," I mutter. "Now get some sleep."

* * *

The tailgaters return to their respective Americas as the temperature drops, and the border rolls like a tide back over their mayfly oasis. Vee is fast asleep by then. We lie shoulder to shoulder in what little room we have. Her soft snores breeze through my hair with the cadence of a lullaby. I'm using them to count the seconds until dawn. I can doze through a thunderstorm, but not tonight.

I'd come this far banking on Vee getting cold feet well before now, like any sane person would. I don't ditch clients unless I've got no choice, but she's not giving me one either. So what if her cure's real? It won't matter when we're both bleeding out in the dirt.

There's a voice in me saying: *be the smart coyote. Recognize that death lies ahead. Recognize that you've gone as far as you're meant to go.* I've got half my fee already, don't I? Getting half of what I want ain't so bad. That's been my whole life. Settling

for what's in reach. For scraps. What right do I got to start hoping for more? When was a full meal ever on the table?

I shut my eyes and will sleep to come. But when I've threatened all the thoughts from my head, what's left is a grove of strawberries, mist curling lovingly through their leaves. I know what they look like now, how they smell, and so the image becomes achingly vivid, a splash of red paint against the black behind my eyelids.

The only thing I can't picture there is me.

I haven't cried in a long time. When I start, it comes painfully out of me, cracking open tear ducts rusted shut. I clap a hand over my mouth so that Vee won't hear the sobs scrape out of my throat.

It doesn't work. "Jacinta? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I lie. "I'm fine."

"You don't sound all right."

"Fuck off. Please."

I hear her scrunch aside, making space. "There's nowhere to go in here. But yes, I'll try."

The silence builds back up between us. There is only the naked sound of my crying.

"Vietnam," I say, without thinking. My voice escapes me like it isn't even mine.

"Yes?"

"That world where everything's open. And green."

"What about it?"

Tears well up around my plastic eyes.

"Is it all right if I want to go there, too?"

There are all kinds of walls I've found. Hard walls, soft walls. The material ones—barbed-wire fences, guards with guns, burning sand—you learn to live with. The soft are more deviously intangible. Money, hunger, the shadow of a drone, the laughter of a fool who thinks she knows best—all invisible, until hope crashes you into them. The senses are some. Even amped with gaj, my eyes see only so far, and push so much of the possible world away from me. My ears filter everything but the echoes of gunshots and howling of dogs more lonesome than myself. Anything past my fingertips, anything that is not me, is barred from me by a barrier of will.

But I have tasted true sweetness now. It was smuggled to me in a strawberry, and its acids still sizzle on my gums. Vee was right—it is the flavor of everything I do not know, but that could be in sight, that could ring my ears, and maybe even fall into my hands. It is the flavor of outside. The taste of *more*.

And more than anything, I wish that I'd stomped those strawberries into the dirt. I know now how much there is to want, and it's all so far away.

Vee's hand finds mine, and I can't help but squeeze it tight.

"Yes, that's all right," she murmurs. "Of course it is. You can have my dream, too."

She holds me, and I let her do it. In this moment, I have nothing to put between us.

Somewhere in the distance a lone coyote bays, begging its kind to find it in the dark. There is no answer, and I imagine it calculating how deep the night goes, whether to go in search or huddle in place. The ground beneath it may be safe, but is cold and lonesome, too. A hard choice. Coyote's got to know borders better than anyone. Death can be on either side. Smart coyote knows when to dart across and when to stay behind.

It's the smart coyote who stays alive.

But it's the dumb coyote who lives.

* * *

There is no wall on the border of NuSAFE. That Vee and I have blown the last of our funds on the proper visas is no reassurance. The emptiness hangs there like a trippwire we can't see. We slink across at a crawl, just waiting for it to go off.

"There's got to be something," Vee murmurs. "Everything you said about this place . . ."

"Yeah. Weird." Coasting along at twenty MPH, I scan the horizon. The terrain here is primo gankturf for bandidos, broken up by stone formations rubbed smooth by a million years of stale wind, behind which anyone could be waiting to gat us in the back. I'm picking up a plume of smoke to the south; we weren't heading that way, and now we definitely aren't. "I got nothing." On paper, it's a straight shot to the next loop of the Grand Canyon and, from there, into El Dorado. Then again, *on paper*, we should have been there already.

"Keep your head on a swivel," I say, easing some weight onto the gas. "You see a roadrunner out here, assume it's got a knife or something."

Vee's snorting laugh gets me going, too.

Cleaned out of cash, the digital safe is just a box full of heavy in the backseat. Somehow, the car feels lighter without it. Digital dinero might have no mass, but I guess worry does. In place of funds, Vee's got a shotgun braced across her lap. I've got another slung over the back of my seat, loaded with the explosive shells I bought off Tahoma. I don't trust her not to blast my head off in a shootout, but I figure she can at least point the right end the right way.

We grind out a few tense miles before Vee speaks up again.

"Thank you."

"What for?"

Vee's eyes are slitted against the sun. "I haven't said it yet," she says. "I thought I should. It doesn't matter why you're doing this, just that you are. When we get to El Dorado, I'll try to have your reward doubled."

I chew on that one. The prospect tastes strangely dull. My palate is still stained with yesterday.

"I'm sorry, too," she continues, her voice stumbling. I hear more than she meant to give coming out. "For inflicting myself on you. I thought I could do whatever I'd have to do. I suppose I never understood what that meant. That people might suffer. I've put you through so much. And my partner, she . . . well."

Normally that shit would bounce right off me, but she held my hand, and that broke something. We're further apart now than we were in the tent, yet there's not as much between us. "I only ever did what I had to do." I say. "Way more than you. It don't hurt so bad when you've got somewhere worth going though. Don't make it all better, but it makes it just okay. And that's enough."

Her cheeks dimple like I've lifted a weight off them. I don't know about that. I'm just saying what I'm thinking. The right future apologizes for the past. What you leave behind hurts less. The trailer where I'd lived securely is weight thrown overboard for the sake of speed. All those years I wasted spinning in circles at least kept me where Vee would someday collapse.

"Thank you, Jacinta."

"You already said that."

Her gaze drifts past me and narrows further. Her smile sags. "That smoke. It's getting closer."

If she's seeing it with nude eyes, it must be true. I take another look to confirm it. The far-off plume has grown into a twister. The grain ain't right for smoke either. Got to be dust. "Here we go," I say, and start taking us up toward seventy. Whatever it is, I only want to meet it through my rearview mirror. But as the arrow on my speedometer climbs, the dust cloud visibly picks up speed, its angle sharpening. I do some on-the-spot physics and determine that it's maneuvering to intercept us. What advantage it lacks in speed, it's got in distance. The sight of it uncrumples the receipt of a memory I'd thought I'd thrown away. *The dust devils follow in its wake.*

The land dips, and I lose the dust cloud for a few moments. We rumble over a bed of stones and when we remerge, the cloud has evaporated. Half a mile away, where there had been only scrub, now impossibly stands a wall. I peg it at fifteen feet high, maybe one thousand feet long, indeterminably dense. Sunrays break into shards against its mirrored exterior. There are no features I can see beyond a gate cut into its base, wide enough for one car at a time.

It stands there, inexplicably, and waits.

I brake one hundred feet from the gate and leave the engine idling.

“What is that?” Vee whispers hoarsely.

I gnaw my cheek. “Fuck if I know.” Where’d it come from? And how? The ground is freshly rucked around its foundation, as though it had been lowered in a divine hand and wedged in place. There is no movement along its length, yet I can’t shake the certainty that it is preparing to pounce.

“I don’t see any guards, but . . . I don’t know. I think we should turn around.”

I’ve got ice growing between my vertebrae, despite the heat. My eyes aren’t detecting danger, but sometimes the hindbrain knows best, and what it knows is that this, all of this, is wrong. “Yeah, that’s good thinking,” I say. “We’ll find another way.”

I’ve only touched the gas when red light stabs from the wall and sweeps over us. There’s a familiar beep from my right, and I see Vee’s V-tag project a red holoscreen on its own volition. I catch a glimpse of the bold text scrolling down on loop before Vee smothers it with her palm.

PATHOGEN DETECTED

SURRENDER NOW

“Pathogen? What—”

“Drive! Drive now!”

I don’t think once, let alone twice. I crush the gas and send us hurtling toward the gate in the wall. Vee gasps as it begins to dilate shut, the wall’s solid matter flowing like gel. I grab her by the ponytail and bend both her and myself in two before we smash headlong into a space reduced by half. The wall is three feet thick, but thinner, softer, around that opening. With a shriek of tortured steel, we shear through, losing our side mirrors, most of the roof, and coming away with liquid metal smeared across the hood.

As I look on, the pieces stir, begins to flow against inertia, feeding tendrils into the car’s open seams and pouring themselves through them. Our rearview mirror gone, I twist to watch the wall collapse. As its mass bends toward the earth, it seems to snag on some perpendicular current of gravity, spilling sideways instead of down, into a river rather than a puddle, a river that hooks in our direction and begins to flow in whitewater pursuit.

I think of the autodoc in my system—an injection of medical nanomachines patrolling my arteries for injury, stitching over cuts, sanding down tumors—and snuffing out infection wherever they find it. A gut-wrenching eureka as I realize the moving wall is no different. Trillions of microscopic machines operating as a single-minded, voracious whole, a mobile and independently operating adaptive barrier against all that the microstate of NuSAFE was programmed to keep out.

La Frontera de Caza, Tahoma had called it.

The Hunting Border.

“What did it mean, *pathogen detected*—”

“God damnit it’s *me*,” Vee blurts. “I’m the vaccine.”

“What?”

Vee starts babbling. “We could manufacture all the doses we needed, see, but we couldn’t ship them across so many borders—it’s just not possible. El Dorado doesn’t have the medical infrastructure either, so *that* was out. We needed a way

to mass-produce the cure on-site. I was the solution. I don't look it, but I'm not bodybasic. They modified me on the cellular level to produce attenuated Fist viruses. Easier to move one person than a million vials, after all. Obviously not as easy as I'd hoped—"

"The fuck does any of that mean?"

"It means that I am an organic vaccine factory," Vee says. "That scan must have picked up the viral artifacts built into my system."

I don't got time to get mad. A shudder rolls through the Roadsaw, and her wheel starts bucking me. It's those pinches nanomachines under the hood. They're taking her apart, molecule by molecule. I go cold from the gut outward as I realize there is nothing I can do. My puncher is dead on rolling wheels.

The Hunting Border is coming up fast, sidewinding across the desert floor. It doesn't have our speed, but we're already shedding MPH, so real soon it won't need it. My eyes frisk the terrain for an escape. "Hold on to something," I snarl, and start grinding out every RPM from the old Roadsaw that she's got left. We're coming up on the lip of the Grand Canyon now. With both hands holding us steady, I give myself two hundred feet before I hit the brakes and wedge the car deep between two limestone outcroppings. On the other side I glimpse a slope of scree descending to a drop-off hanging over the river. That's a small relief: I'd figured we'd have to jump from all the way up here.

"Out," I bark, but Vee is way ahead of me, clambering over the windshield. Soon as we're clear, I back up and train my shotgun on the car. She's bleeding out, oil and electrofuel trickling over the rocks. I think of all the life I lived in that car, zigzagging back and forth across these Shattered States. More miles of tar than I can count, but I suppose in the end I never went very far. I wish I'd realized that sooner. I'd have done so much differently. If I'm going anywhere now, it will be on my own two feet.

The second I see that mercurial wall come slopping over my Roadsaw I give a shout, and me and Vee open fire. Explosive rounds scoop great, flaming holes out of the car, and after a few seconds of shelling, my puncher goes up like a Viking funeral, searing the brows off my face, and reducing the Hunting Border's snout to a fine metallic aerosol. Not a bad way to go out. Adios, mi carnal.

The burning wreckage makes for a temporary barricade. There's a quarter-mile more machine behind it though, so I grab Vee by the wrist and lead her in a skipping dance down the rocks toward the river. I don't care how we'll cross, what we'll do on the other side. What matters is that we keep going, keep punching through anything that comes before us.

"That 'chopper still coming?" I ask between breaths.

"Think so. No way they can reach us here though. They'll get shot down."

"Call 'em up and tell them to die trying. And while you've got them, I need another thing. Tell them to declare war on NuSAFE."

The Hunting Border is The New South American Fascist Empire incarnate, its avatar in the physical world. We can't reason with it, can't kill it, can't outrun it. If I'm right though, we can brainfuck it. It's smarter than me or Vee, but its intelligence is emergent from the same scaffolding of diplomatic if-then programs that controls everything from handscanners to drones.

"You want to start a borderstorm. That might work."

Yeah, *might*. Without my visagraph there's no way to know. All we can do is take the biggest wrench we have and jam it between the microstate's gears. "It'll have to."

While Vee puts in the call, I check our six. The Hunting Border has split in two, pinching around the burning car and cascading down the slope, where it rejoins into a flat plane fifteen feet high. This surface burgeons rapidly outward, aiming to cut off every avenue of escape. It wants to pen us in, assuming we'll be a couple of smart coyotes and know better than to risk the river. Which is why I prefer my bodybasic

brain: I don't have to know better. I sling my shotgun across my shoulder and turn, leaping over to where Vee is wrapping up her SOS. Over her shrieks I scoop her up under the shoulders and knees. Three strides take us to the cliff's edge; a fourth launches us into open air.

Vee screams all the way down. The river catches us like a bed of glass. We shatter straight through, shards of brackish water smashing us and folding over us. They tear Vee from my arms, clap the air from my lungs. I flail, blinded by bubbles. I can't tell up from down. Then a slender hand finds mine, locks tight around my fingers. I feel for the wrist behind it, and kick in that direction. Vee hauls me to the surface, and we down as much air as we can before the current drags us under again.

We tumble like that for a relative forever, caroming between bursts of daylight and darkness, each breath broken up by a hundred years underwater. When I feel my shoulders scrape across sand, I reach out and rake my fingers through it, making an anchor of myself. Screaming with the effort, I haul myself and Vee onto the shore, where we collapse and vomit mud.

"Where," Vee gasps, tongue salted with grit, "is it?"

We've washed up in a shallow cove budding off from the canyon. Walls of layered limestone collapse together overhead, sheltering a creek adjacent to the Colorado River. Other than that, I've got no idea where we're at. The only relief is that we're not wherever the Hunting Border is. I don't doubt that won't last long. "Got a time frame on that chopper?"

"I lost my gun."

She sounds dazed. I wonder if she cracked her head underwater. "I've got mine. Talk to me."

"They're going to try," Vee says. "As for the war, I don't know if they understood—"

"It's what it is. We've got to get rolling."

Vee doesn't budge. She can't seem to get off her knees. "We can't move fast enough," she says, her voice eroded into a pebble of itself. "We've got nowhere to go."

This ain't no time for her to start being me. I take her hand and hoist her onto her feet. "Then we go through nowhere," I say. "Start walking."

The way into the gorge is an uphill slog over laddered limestone ledges licked slick by the creek. I lead Vee by the hand at first, helping her keep pace, until she starts matching it on her own. Soon we're striding side by side. Fatigue boils off my bones; the Earth rolls like a greased ball beneath my feet. I'd always metered out my life in moves, hoarding them like a miser, seeing how far I could get going nowhere at all. Should've seen that caution for what it was—just another barrier I'd put myself behind. There are no walls that we don't allow to stand. The fewest number of moves is one move, an unflinching effort of will. Time, stone, dirt, and death all stand in my way, yet the distance never seemed so thin.

When the Hunting Border comes, it comes like an earthquake, announced by thunder. I turn back and there it is, funneling its mass through the gorge, filling it utterly. Together we run, Vee and I, bounding like antelope over crag and stone, barreling through walls of fear and inevitability. We squeeze ourselves through crevices too small for our ribs, toppling the barriers of bodies. When the Hunting Border squelches through behind us, I scalp it with an explosive round and cauterize the passage shut.

We flee until we have fled all places we can go, until all that's left is the grotto beneath a waterfall with walls too high to climb. For one person, at least. I kneel and show Vee my hands. "I'll lift you up. Come on."

She hesitates. "No, I can't—"

"I'll be right behind you." It may ring like a lie, an untruth meant to deliver her onward, but it's a fact to me. Want has taken me further in a morning than I have gone

in a lifetime. The end of the road won't stop me now. I won't let it.

"It'll kill you."

"I'm doing what I have to," I say. "Your turn."

Whatever Vee believes, she knows that our limitless world won't exist if she can't create it. She steps into my cupped hands and I leverage my body to give her the height she needs to just barely reach the ledge above. She scrabbles for grip, kicks her way up, and crawls out of sight.

The Hunting Border begins to bleed through the grotto's narrow passage. Its scanning laser sweeps the area, looking for two and finding only one. I rack one of my last few shells and unload into its face. The heat bakes it into a crust across the crevasse. It buys me seconds. The bulk of the hive-machine flows around the blockage, reabsorbing it, and spills into the grotto.

I give it everything I have, blasting away until everything sings falsetto, but it is like trying to kill the ocean: there is always more. I back further and further away, until the waterfall sluices down my neck. I consider the one shell left in the chamber, and then lift the barrel to my chin. I will not stop going. If my open world is not here, I will look for it elsewhere.

The Hunting Border gathers itself and lunges with a peristaltic flex. My finger contracts around the trigger. But just then, as two deaths converge upon me, the Hunting Border suddenly recoils. It slops from wall to wall as though it's forgotten why it's here. Quicksilver pseudopodia whip blindly at nothing, at the memory of something hunted that it abruptly can't recall. I'm just as confused, until two and two tumble together and I understand—*the borderstorm*.

Something shoots past me fast and close enough to ruffle my hair. A rifled harpoon has embedded itself between my feet. I follow its braided steel cable skyward, see it pulling taut between the Earth and the four blurred rotors of a pterochopper hovering overhead.

I ditch my shotgun and wrap my arms around the cable. I strain to hold on as it begins to retract, and the pterochopper pulls away. The Hunting Border boils with rage below. Soon it dwindles to a puddle, then a cup. Altitude bends the world into a dome. I can see where everything is connected and nothing ends. All walls on this map are drawn on, begging to be erased.

I look up, and there's Vee leaning out of the 'chopper, a smile carving through dirt and sweat and blood. She lowers a hand to me, and I stretch out my arm to take it. Our fingers touch, spark to fuse, and the distance between us and what we want explodes into almost nothing.

I can already smell strawberries.