

The muscles in my neck ached from staying motionless for so long.

The drone labored over head, its engines sputtering, dragging the small aircraft slowly over the ravaged mountains. Rocks pressed uncomfortably against my chest and hips but my life was more valuable than my comfort. I could nurse bruises later and be glad of it. If the Sweepers found me, they might very well kill me. Sweepers were supposed to regulate activity in the Bad-Lands. There was even a whole re-homing program for people like us but the most of the people who worked as Sweepers were jihadists. That only let them let them put the stamp of American approval on what they did; it was just an added benefit they were also paid for it.

I tried to see the drone from the corner of my eye, but it had flown on. I wanted to roll over. Dirt already encrusted my goggles, and sand, which had found its way under the scarf wound around my face, chafed uncomfortably.

Straining to listen, I could not decide if the drone had taken a straight path over the mountains or curved around them, following the river. The sound of its engines echoed off of the rocks, disguising it; that was how it snuck up on me in the first place. I had crawled up the hill to catch sight of it – startled to find the drone almost directly over me. Out in the open like this, my only option was flattening myself to the ground, willing myself to appear as any other bit of rock.

The minutes dragged on, punctuated only by the distant sputtering of the engine and the sounds of the startled wildlife coming out of hiding. I heard a bird flitting from tree to shrub and saw lizard scuttle over the rocks and across my glove. It looked me once in the eye, its tongue snaking out to taste the air, and then zipped away.

Slowly, as slowly as I could, I shifted my weight. The drones had cameras that sensed motion; if the drone had followed the river it would still be able to see me. It could catch sight of the village! I could only hope it was moving through the mountains, further into the Bad-Lands to survey the decades of damage and the strange creatures nuclear fallout had created. Once they had probably been deer or rabbits, maybe a bear or mountain lion. Whatever they were now, they were unnatural.

The sun beat down, baking everything to an intense crisp. My grandmother says that, once upon a time Colorado was a green wonderland. Snow still falls at night in the winter; sometimes it even sticks for a few days.

Lying on my side I could see the blue sky stretched out overhead without a cloud to shield the earth. The drone was nowhere to be seen. I breathed a sigh of relief and sat up, dusting my face and massaging the back of my neck. I could not waste time. The baked ground crunched underfoot as I crouched and slid most of the way down the hill. A large, flat rock stopped my descent, but stones and sand rained down over the edge. Below me, I could hear stamping and a snort as Sundancer shied away from the noise.

"Easy girl." I leaned over the edge, and looked at the buckskin mare. She laid her ears back and bared her teeth at me. "Oh don't be that way." Glancing left and then right, I found the goat track I had taken to get up on what had once been the bank of a river, but was now just a hill of golden sand.

Sundancer picked her way back down the belly of the dry river. For as ill tempered as she could be, she was the best horse I had ever ridden; she was my one possession, my pride and joy. I stroked her long, black mane as she navigated the last tricky part of the river bed.

This far down the mountain most of the big rocks had been turned into dust long ago. I doled out a bit of rein to her, which was all the encouragement she needed to spring into an easy lope. It felt good to feel her muscles bunch and release under me in quick succession; her stride was smooth and rhythmic. The thin leather saddle made small creaking sounds with each movement. I leaned down, her mane whipping the skin between my goggles and scarf as she responded by stretching out into the flying run that won us pride-of-place in the spring gathering. Not that it could be called much of a gathering this year; too many people were afraid to come now. Too many drones, too many Sweepers.

I needed to take the quickest route back to the village. It was a painfully open track, but usually after a drone went by you could breathe easy for a while. I sat up slowly, driving my hip bones into Sundancer's back. She tossed her head but obeyed the unspoken command, slowing her headlong race down the gully. I hardly ever used this track because it was so open, but dad was setting off soon and he should know about the drone.

It was little more than three staggered rocks leading up the bank; it was all the marker we could risk. I pointed Sundancer's nose at the bank and she laid her ears back in response.

For a moment I thought she was going to fight me. Sometimes she didn't like these trails. Under me I felt the quick bunch of muscles. I clamped my legs around her barrel and leaned forward as Sundancer launched up and forward, leaping up the bank. I lifted my seat up off of her back and held on for dear life, giving the mare her head and wondering what curse had drawn me to this beast! She lurched forward in bounds, sand and rocks cascading down the hill behind us. Sweat made her golden coat dark and flecks of foam dotted her neck. The mare pranced a few strides as the goat track leveled out tossing her head, neck arched; if I turned

around her tail was probably a black pinion.

"Show off," I muttered. One of her ears flicked back but before she could grab the bit between her teeth and charge down the path I gathered in the reins. Obstinate, Sundancer jiggled a little ways before settling down into a ground eating trot; she liked to run, but a horse could only maintain that pace for so long, while most could keep up a long-trot for hours.

It was almost an hour before I slithered off her back under the protective gaze of the village. By then Sundancer's golden coat was completely dark, her mane slicked to her neck with sweat and a layer of sand.

"Krista!"

"Dad!" My head whipped around. "I saw a drone, going through the mountains about an hour ago."

"That's not good." He bit his lip and scowled, coming to a stop an arm's length away.

"Grandma says if you keep doing that you're not going to have a lip anymore."

He stopped and reached out, pulling the scarf that swathed my face. "Take that off. I can't see your face." A reflexive shudder shook his shoulders. I tried to not think about the stories told about the faceless human-eaters that had come out of the Dead-Lands when my dad was a boy; some of them had a shape a little like humans but they covered their faces. Dad's best friend had walked right up to one, thinking it was just a hurt person. I wondered if it was his death Dad shuddered at, but I would never ask.

The goggles left sensitive rings around my eyes, but settled nicely on my forehead, cushioned by the turban wound round my head. A few tugs and the scarf hung around my shoulders.

"Where were you?" He pulled the brim of his hat lower, shielding his eyes; his own goggles held the cap firmly in place.

"In the gully, up that way," I gestured back off into the distance, "on the other side of the goat track."

"Why were you all the way out there?" He was obviously alarmed.

I took a deep breath and steeled myself. "Patrols, Dad. You're all leaving in the morning. Someone has to fill in the gaps. Edward asked me; I'm old enough."

"What?" His voice was loud enough that it made me wince.

Sundancer swung her head around, pinning her ears back and baring her teeth at him. I reached out reflexively, putting a hand on her bridle and scratched her like nothing was wrong. Sundancer snatched the edge of my scarf in her teeth and shook it instead.

"You weren't going to ask me?" His voice was a growl now.

"No, Dad, I didn't, because you weren't here. I asked Grandma because Edward asked me." He would have to accept it if Edward wanted me to do patrols; I did not have much choice in it either, but at least it was something I could do.

"My own cousin going behind my back." He looked like he had eaten something bitter. I did not blame him for being upset at Uncle Edward.

"I know. I don't like it either, but I couldn't really argue with him." I pulled the scarf out of Sundancer's grip and turned my back on my father. My fingers fumbled with the cinch, loosening it so Sundancer could breathe easier. She inhaled deeply and dropped her head to the water trough, splashing a bit before drinking.

"What would your mother say if she were alive?" His voice sounded hollow and

haunted.

Turning back to him, I wrapped my arms around his chest and hugged him. It was awkward. He patted at my shoulder, like he was unsure of what to do. I knew it was difficult for him. I knew he tried. And that was all that mattered.

"You should unsaddle her, rub her down and make sure she's cool." I let go. He coughed and took a step away, his eyes on the ground. "Come inside once you clean up. I'm going to go talk to Edward."

I unsaddled and rubbed Sundancer down in the meager shade of a stubborn tree and thought about my father. He did all the trading for our mountain. Our current home was deep within the Rocky Mountains in what Grandma called a resort; it stuck. This was Resort Village. On the mountain were six villages, and in early summer, after the spring rains were gone and it was safe to travel, Dad and the others who could, would take what we had through the mountains to the Underground where each year we traded with all the small pockets of civilization in Colorado.

"Hey Krista!" Clark stopped several yards away and waited for me to turn around and grin at him. "Sundancer let me come closer?" He was barefoot and covered in grime. Grandma regularly chastised Clark about washing, but he avoided it whenever possible.

I glanced at the mare, who stood lazily, luxuriating in the feel of the hard bristles on her coat. "Yeah, sure." He walked forward slowly. She was not the friendliest creature and her reputation preceded her; caution was best.

"I heard you saw a drone today! Your dad was telling Edward." Clark grinned like it was some great secret.

I grimaced, feeling at once all too like my father. "Yes," I said slowly.

"Is it going to come to Resort?"

"Why would you ask that?" I was suspicious; some of the kids had strange ideas of what constituted good ideas.

"Well because then Sweepers might come. They might want to make jihad against us, and then we could fight them!"

I cringed and turned to face him, brush in hand. "Clark that is a terrible idea!" Clark looked startled by my harshness, but I did not care. "If a drone saw Resort, we would pack up and head out as quickly as we could. We aren't going to fight Sweepers. Anyways, Sweepers wouldn't make *jihad* against us - terrorists would."

"But there's no difference between terrorists and Sweepers!" He recovered quickly, his jaw jutting out in stubbornness. "They're all alike! They just want to take America from us!"

"Clark, the president is Muslim. You've been listening to that lazy drunk Gabriel too much."

We stood face to face now which irritated me. Clark was maybe thirteen, if I remembered correctly, and he could already look me straight in the face.

"So? Gabriel wants to do something! He wants to set things straight!"

"Gabriel wants beer and for people to listen to him."

"You just say that because you're jealous!" Clark was getting red in the face, tightly clenching his hands into fists at each side.

He was just a kid; I kept reminding myself. He was just a kid who wanted to be an adult that was it. "Oh I am, am I?"

"Yeah!" Clark said, "You're just jealous that Gabriel didn't want you like a woman."

"What?"

Shocked, I could do nothing but stare as Clark turned on his heel and ran off. Me? Want Gabriel? Sundancer nudged me, reminding me that I had yet to finish brushing her. My hands moved automatically over her coat. What could Clark be talking about? What could Gabriel be saying about me? Shock was replaced by hurt. I might not want anything to do with Gabriel but no girl likes to hear that she is not - wanted. Grandma had warned me that I might feel this way some day, that eventually I would want a man and that it would be sudden and either unpleasant or blissful. I just had not expected it to be heralded by talk of Gabriel.

Unsatisfied with my day, I put Sundancer in a box stall and forked some of the spring's hay in for her. "Sorry girl, I know you'd rather be out in the pasture with the others, but I can't risk you getting pregnant on me; not when I'm going to need you for patrols." It was a pity; Sundancer had foaled a colt last year who took after his dam so well it was remarkable. Sundancer leaned over the railing and shook her head, the whites of her eyes visible as she let me know just how unhappy she was with the arrangement. "I'll see you in the morning, goofy."

We lived in what had once been a sort of cafe with several other families. The old cooking equipment had not worked in years, but made excellent hearths and from there we improvised. Some sort of four legged creature rotated on a spit while several pots steamed. I waved to Grandma, who was tending to the baking; no one could make bread like she could! Dad was nowhere to be seen, which was just as well; I needed a shower. The water helped clear my head even though it made me break out in goose bumps all over and set my teeth to chattering. Warm water was a luxury reserved for winter time only.

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I sunk down into the loose circle of girls as food was handed around.

"Krista, your cheeks are red!" One of the littler girls put a hand on my knee and peered into my face; I could never remember her name. She was adorable, with skin the color of coal and big, expressive eyes.

I smiled and tapped her nose, "It's okay, my freckles will just connect."

"But then you'd just be a big freckle!"

"Well I guess it's a good thing I like my freckles." I scooped another heaping spoonful of stew into my mouth and reached for some of Grandma's fluffy bread. I would never admit it out loud, but I liked the way my tanned skin made my reddish brown hair seem to gleam and the little freckle flecks made patterns on my skin. I used to amuse myself as a kid by playing connect-the-freckle.

"I like your eyes," the persistent little girl said.

Startled, I stopped chewing and swallowed hard. "Oh?" They were just brown. What was there to like about brown eyes?

The little girl grinned greedily, "Your eyes make me think of honey!"

"What's honey?" I asked.

The little girl looked at me, perplexed, and I looked back at her and neither of us said anything.

"Honey," one of the older girls interjected, "it's what bees make. It's sweet, kind of sticky and you know - Krista's eyes are the color of honey; sort of a light brown. That was very thoughtful of you Hope."

The little girl grinned and sat back down, tucking into her own food with interest.

"Thanks," I muttered, a bit dazed, to no one in particular.

A little while later, the mothers came around to gather the dishes. The few boys that lived in our building came over and inserted themselves into the circle in a tight cluster. Grandma sat in a chair while the rest of us sat on the floor, the littlest children at her feet. I was not yet old enough to escape evening lessons, even if I was going to be riding patrol.

"What are we learning tonight?" Hope demanded.

"Oh, well tonight we'll learn history." Grandma had been a school teacher when the Jihad War ruptured America. She was still a spry woman who would live on for many years to come; part of me counted on that. She taught us orally, because there were no books or paper; when dad was a boy they had used them for the fires in the underground bunkers. Most of us did not know how to write, or even read, but we could tell stories. So Grandma told us stories of how the world used to be, when people could live with just their own family in a house, when if you wanted something to eat you could go to a store, when people read for fun, and when we did not have to hide and scavenge to live.

Tonight she taught us about Europe. As far as anyone knew, the rest of the world was still unchanged.

"Tell us about the Jihad War," Clark said when Grandma would have sent us all to bed.

I glared at him from my corner, but he did not even look at me.

Grandma did not look upset. She merely settled into her chair and was quiet for a moment. "We call it the Jihad War, they don't. There is a difference between Muslim and the jihadists." Grandma pierced Clark with her eyes, and his mouth clamped shut on whatever he

was going to say. "The jihadists caused the nuclear fallout, yes. They had an elaborate plan to blow up nuclear power plants all over the country. The jihadists killed people by the thousands, yes. But there were many good Muslim people who came here to stop it, and helped rebuild America. It was Muslims who dug my family out of our bunker and helped us escape the earliest jihadists. Understand that Clark, not everyone is a jihadist." I squirmed, looking over the kids like Hope who were so young. Sure they needed to know these things, but now? "Jihad has done many terrible things to us, who call ourselves Americans, but not everyone is out to kill us."

"Then, then Grandma, why do we hide when we see the planes?" Hope asked, "Why do we hide from strangers?"

Grandma's eyes softened as she smiled at the young girl and patted her head. "Because honey, we can't tell the friendly folk from the unfriendly well enough to trust them to be kind to us. That's enough. Go to your parents."

The circle dispersed quickly, and soon it was just Grandma and I.

Grandma chuckled. "If you keep chewing on your lip, you aren't going to have any left."

I looked up at my grandmother and froze; I had not even realized I was doing it.

"So like your father," she said, sighing.

"Where is he? I didn't see him earlier."

"Oh, he's eating I would imagine."

I slid over closer to her feet and leaned back, propped up on my arms. "Clark - " I stopped, I did not know what I really wanted to say.

"Clark is about to become a young man. He wants to act like one, he just doesn't know

how."

I did not know what to say, so I said nothing and concentrated on not chewing my lip.

"Krista." I turned around and looked up at my father. He had walked up on us without me hearing him, which was not surprising. He was like that; silent as a shadow. "Come with me. I want - I want to talk to you."

I glanced at Grandma who was as unreadable as her son. I got to my feet, obediently following Dad into the next room to a table he had been sitting at. A bundle lay on the bare surface, wrapped conspicuously. "Something wrong, Dad?" There was something familiar about the size of the bundle. I felt my apprehension building. I was struck by the urge to back away.

He stood there a moment, just looking at me. After a moment, as if he had read something on my face he sighed. He started to speak calmly, but his words sounded practiced. "You're going to be riding patrols." I nodded, that was a foregone conclusion. "Well then I want you to have these." He unwrapped the bundle exposing a rifle and a six shooter. A weight settled into the pit of my stomach and I felt cold all over.

"Guns?" I said weakly.

"Yes. It's a bad idea sending a kid off into the mountains with guns, but I don't want you - I don't want you to - to get into trouble and not be able to defend yourself. You're a good shot; I taught you well - otherwise I wouldn't even think about giving these to you." He picked up the rifle, pulled the saddle holster off, and handed it to me.

I do not like guns.

"Take it," he said. "They're empty."

I fit my hands around the rifle, nestling the butt against my shoulder. My finger flicked instinctively over the safety. I lifted it and tested the sights because I did not know what else to do, I had seen men handle rifles often enough. Personally though, I would rather have been holding a snake or a Dead-Lands creature than a rifle. Sure, a gun would be nice if I came face to face with a jihadist, but I had no intention of that.

"Dad, I don't need these." I held the gun out for him to take back. It was probably my imagination, but it seemed to grow heavier, my shoulders weighed down by my fear.

He stood there, hands at his sides and looked at me. "You'll take it because Edward and I both say you will. There is ammunition here for both of them."

"If a Sweeper or a jihadist gets close enough for me to use these, I should just use a knife, or a bow, or a rock!"

"If you get close enough to a jihadist for those, they would shoot you." I bit my lip hard enough to taste blood and cradled the rifle against my chest. "I leave in the morning, Krista. I want to know that my only girl is as safe as I can make her. I love you, do you understand?" His voice was gruff, and I knew he was worried.

I nodded and reached out for the saddle holster. Checking the safety I slid it home.

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The next morning, the trading party was gone before I woke. They left earlier than normal. I never got the chance to say goodbye. I stood in one of the bigger squares where several of the streets came together, around what once had been a fountain. I looked back at my reflection dejectedly. After the drone yesterday, it was better to leave earlier than normal. I understood, but it did not mean I liked it. As a child I had always cried and clung to my dad's

leg when it was time for him to leave. I had never not been there to watch him fade into the dawn, a distant spot of darkness, sheltered by scrub and rock.

I plodded back to the stables to see Sundancer. Halfway there Edward fell in beside me, a quiver of dummy arrows under his arm. Dummies were only good for two things: showing children how to hold bows, and teaching signals; neither required real arrow heads or fletching.

"Morning Krista," he said briskly. My cousin Edward resembles what Grandma calls an Indian. Tall, with red skin like his mother, and the blackest hair and eyes, he can melt into scrub and shadows like a gust of air.

"Morning Uncle Edward," I said warily, eyeing the arrows.

"I want to go over the signals with you."

"I know the signals, Edward." I sounded sullen. I was sullen.

"Yes, but I want you to do them again." He was like a rock. I already knew that he would let me argue with him but in the end I would do exactly as he wanted. That was how I wound up in this boat in the first place.

Seated on rocks outside of Sundancer's pen, I did all of the signals - blindfolded! There were signals for everything. Water, fire, rock slides, but, most importantly, there were ones for Sweepers and drones. The signal we all learned patrols or not - was the signal for Run. I would have called the exercise stupid, except it was arrows like these that had saved our village several times over. If I could not make it back to Resort, if something happened to me, I could always put the arrow on Sundancer, tie it to her if I had to, and send her back here.

After I had properly displayed each - twice, no less - Edward picked the broken shafts up and smiled at me.

"You're quick. You're going to make a great patroller."

"Not if I spend all my time making signals with you." I stuck out my tongue and leaned on the fence. Sundancer came over and investigated me, smelling my clean hair hanging over my shoulder in a braid. She butted at me until I scratched her face in all the places only I could.

"Go out and ride along the river with Justin, will you?" Edward said. "Saw some deer up that way and it would be nice if we could get some fresh meat."

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Patrolling was never just riding and watching for signs of Sweepers, drones, or jihadists, of which we did plenty. For the next two weeks I spent most of every day in the saddle; I thought before that I rode a lot, well now I rode even more. I did not mind it though. Sundancer grew to be part of me, and even the dead weight of the pistol strapped to my hip and the rifle lumped under my leg became familiar. Some days I rode the river trails and hunted with the others. Other days I rode out in the gullies alone. There were more new people riding patrols. According to Edward, this was what happened whenever spring trading came around. It made me nervous. What if something bad happened? What if one of us missed something because we did not know what to look for?

"Hey Krista." Will rode his big bay gelding up close to me, but stopped out of the range of Sundancers teeth. Will was part of a family found traveling through the mountains in the dead of winter, looking for a place to live. Resort had taken them in. They were the only Asian family in Resort. Grandma had to explain to all the children that Will's family was not from the Dead-Lands. Their eyes slanted naturally. Will had been a good sport about all of it and the children gravitated to him.

"Hey Will," I said, and shifted in my saddle. We were supposed to ride the upper range today. I was a little uneasy about that. Will was not like Gabriel or most of the other boys my age, who were all too worried about appearing like men. Will was a few years older than me, and quiet. I never had any idea what he was thinking. He hardly ever spoke. Will was one of the only guys near my age with whom I did not mind riding patrol. But, after our last patrol together I was dreading today. Not for any reason I could put my finger on, I just was. It was something about the way he looked at me. He had never said anything – he hardly ever did – but I was uncomfortable.

"Ready?" He said finally.

I nodded as he gestured for me to take the lead. His placid bay gelding stood better chances of staying on Sundancer's good side if I led. Our horses' hooves made clapping noises on the paving stones as we cut through a side street. It had been cleared for easier access to the upper regions. In the summer, under cover of the thick blanket of trees, wolves, bears and mountain cats would creep closer to the village. We patrolled these areas to watch for signs because you could see out for miles around.

We did not stop until the sun was well past its zenith. When we finally did stop, we chose an area by a sluggish stream of water. After hobbling the horses, we sat down to eat.

"Nice day," he said, sandwich in hand and looking around us.

The view was breath taking. From our vantage point we could see back down at the bits of Resort that protruded from the trees. The river winked at us in the sunlight, winding through the mountains. Most impressive of all were the mountains; their bases baked golden and dead, slowly rising to be capped in bits of green. It was beautiful and strange.

I spoke to fill the silence between us. "Grandma says this all used to be green - year round. Even in the winter - except it snowed so much it covered everything with inches and inches of snow."

Will nodded and I suddenly felt self conscious. Why did I have to be out here with Will? He was sitting just a bit behind me, just enough that it was difficult to see him properly in my peripheral vision. Was it my imagination, or was he looking at me? There was not much to see; my scarf wrapped around my neck and a leather cap to shield my hair from getting snagged on branches.

"Krista," he said quietly. Will was always quiet; he never did anything loud.

"Hm?" I was resolute. I would not look at him. He did not say anything for a moment and then I could not help it; I looked at him. He was looking at me. "What?"

"Nothing." He looked down and poked at the ground with his finger.

"If you are done, we can go check up in that meadow for stuff." It was all I could think of to say.

"Sure."

An hour later we had both shrugged out of our jackets and were digging up potatoes; or something related to potatoes. We could not chance normal looking gardens, so things were planted where they could be folded into the landscape. Harvesting crops like this was not necessarily what patrols did, but no one had just one job in Resort. I had done my best to work away from Will and even had my back to him. I did not know why, but I preferred his silence to whatever he might say.

I was uprooting several potatoes when the toes of Will's boots came into view. I twisted

to squint up at him, my braid falling to hang over my shoulder. "What?" I sat up hastily, cradling two, lumpy potatoes in my lap. I could tell he wanted to say something, but obviously he was still thinking about it. He was not looking at me, but at the spot of ground next to me. I felt silly sitting there with him not looking at me. "Something the matter, Will?"

"I respect you, Krista," he said all at once, in a rush and then stood completely rigid.

I did not know what to say. I was not even sure what he had said - or really what he meant by it. "Okay," I said finally, when it seemed to me that he really was not going to say anything else.

"Okay," he repeated, finally looking at me. He looked utterly confused. "I - I - oh never mind," he snapped. I was shocked! Will! Will snapped! He turned and walked off down the line of potatoes and into the trees.

I did not know what to do. Was I supposed to go after him? I sat there for a moment, dumbly staring after him, potatoes in hand. I had just about decided I should go after him; neither of us should be alone up here. What if a mountain lion or a bear attacked? It was always better to stay together. I was getting to my feet when he came back; he was walking quickly and staring at me with determination on his face. Just when I thought he would barrel over me - he stopped.

"I like you, Krista," he said forcefully, his brows drawn together and his slightly shaggy, black hair shadowing his dark, slanted eyes.

"Um, I like working with you too, Will," I said. He was really starting to weird me out.

"No," he said with the same forceful manner. "I - I like you - I -"

And then understanding dawned. I knew what had been bothering me; I just had not had

words for it. I felt an intense burning sensation in my chest and my ears. I knew I was blushing; I could feel the heat from my face in my eyes. "You like me," I repeated, stumbling over the words as if I were speaking for the first time.

"I do! And what Gabriel says about you is wrong!" Will clenched his hands into fists at his sides and scowled at the ground, his face slightly turned to his right shoulder.

All I could think about was that I had never seen Will so much as unhappy before. Anything but what he had just said! "Gabriel," my lips curled over that one word distastefully. "Is an idiot."

"My father says that you should respect someone before you like them, and that only then you can really love them."

He had just used both 'L' words in the same sentence! I knew I was gaping at him. My face was burning. I could feel the breeze hitting my lips and the back of my throat, but I felt rooted to the spot.

He looked at me, with those dark, unreadable eyes of his. I just stared back, probably looking like a scared rabbit.

"You don't - you don't have to - to like me like that, Krista." He fumbled with his gloves, seeming to just discover them, clenched in his left hand. "But I want you to know."

I could not think of anything to say. What do you say to that? Sure I was feeling things, a lot of things, but none of them had names yet. When I did not respond, Will turned around and stalked back to the sack of potatoes. He picked them up, swung the bulging bag over his shoulder, and plodded downhill back towards the horses. I realized what he was doing and picked up the few at my feet following him at a small distance. By the time I reached

Sundancer, Will already had the bag secured behind his saddle and was slipping the bridle on his bay.

Sundancer whickered at me as I slid up next to her, putting her between Will and me. She grabbed the bit eagerly between her teeth and butted me in the ribs as I fumbled to get the headstall over her ears. With her hobbles off, I climbed on her back and let her turn her nose to home. Most of the trails only let us ride single file, so there was plenty of time to think. Will let me outpace him, putting just enough distance between us to be obvious.

The honest truth was that I did not know what I thought. Sure, I liked Will as a person - but like him like a man? Was I even old enough? Did I know anything about that sort of stuff? I had plenty of time to think about it on the way home.

Hours later, as we were about to enter Resort, I pulled Sundancer up in a flower dotted meadow and waited. His bay was slower than Sundancer, and I wanted to wait. I also did not want to say this where anyone else might hear and tell Gabriel.

The big bay picked his way out of the trees and waded through the grass and flowers towards me. Will was conspicuously not looking at me. Sundancer jerked at the reins and snatched a mouthful of grass.

"Hey," I said when he would have let his bay walk past me. He stopped so that he was perpendicular to me and had to look almost over his hunched shoulder. "I - I'm sorry about up there." I jerked my chin back up the mountain. "I didn't know what to say. I don't know if I - if I like you. I haven't thought about it."

Will sat up a bit in his saddle and really looked at me.

"I'm not saying I do like you - because I don't know - but - "

"But you don't not-like me?" He grinned at me and I knew he had won this one, whatever it was. I could only nod and feel myself getting pink again, I resisted the urge to squirm in the saddle.

~ ~ ~

If I would have known the day before that telling Will I did not know enough about him to like or not like him would mean getting a crash-course, I might have kept quiet instead.

Last night I had dinner with Will's family. It was different than the hearty stew I was used to, but it was good. Afterwards, I skipped out on going back for Grandma's lesson and went out to the pasture with Will. In the pasture, we sat on rocks and watched the horses mill around.

Today pulling myself into the saddle as the sun crossed the horizon, I felt the effects of too little sleep, but I did not mind too much. I secured the scarf around my face and settled my goggles as Sundancer did a jig, antsy to be off. I doled out only a bit of rein and let her dance forward. We were patrolling solo in the gullies today. There was hardly enough cover for one rider, much less another. I was glad for it. It would give me time to think.

I did not regret sitting up late talking with Will last night, but it was not something I wanted to make a habit of doing. Plus, what would my father say if I were out alone with a boy? Grandma had not asked - yet.

I stopped for lunch, pouring out a several measures of water in a small dish for Sundancer before I ate. The same thoughts dominated my sleepy brain; I felt something for Will, but I did not have words for it. I was tired, and the cold stone under me felt so good as I stretched out

after eating that I fell asleep.

~ ~ ~

There are few noises that constitute nightmares in the bad-lands; airplanes are one of them. I sat straight up, muscles protesting. The searing pain of moving limbs that had fallen asleep only made the moment more alarming. Sundancer threw up her head and glared at me in her equine way. Hobbled, she was still under the protective ledge. I froze and listened to the sounds of a plane flying over head. It was not flying near here, in fact, it sounded like it was farther east of Resort, but it was tricky to tell with the way sound bounced off the mountains. With practiced motions, I wrapped the scarf back around my face. I pulled the goggles down over my eyes and bundled up my things. All the while I strained to listen for the sounds of the plane.

When the sounds grew distant, I nudged Sundancer out from the shelter and gave her her head. The mare picked her way back out into the smooth gully floor and with little urging picked up a long trot.

I cursed myself inwardly for having fallen asleep. It was irresponsible of me to do that. I was so caught up in chastising myself, that it was Sundancer who heard them first. Her ears swiveled forward and her head picked up. I felt her intake of air to whicker and in the instant before she would have called out her equine greeting, I dug my right foot into her ribs. She danced sideways and I turned her nose into the shallow covering of shadows and stopped.

At first I heard nothing, but then there were voices. Men. Their language was not English, but some other tongue. They rode horses. Sundancer caught my tenseness and stood rigidly, unmoving. I wished the shadows were darker than they were. As the gully bent a little

ways north of where I was they came into view. These were not Sweepers. Sweepers wore uniforms of the US Army. At least with Sweepers there was sometimes mercy. No, these wore blue-gray clothing; and the tale-tell banded sashes of the jihadists. The number of bands on the sash signified kills; they wrapped them around their waists like banners of pride. The minutes crept on as the men, eight of them, passed by. At least they were not even trying to be quiet!

I felt my breathing, even my heartbeat, was too loud. They would be able to hear me. I fumbled for one of the arrows in my quiver, bent the fletching and broke off the arrowhead. I put it in my lunch bag and waited. If I were unhorsed, Sundancer could go back and warn Resort. Jihadists were coming.

I waited for a quarter of an hour before creeping out and heading away from them. I willed myself to be calm, to let Sundancer walk, quietly, down the gully. If the jihadists followed that gully north, it would meet up with another and eventually the river. They could follow it back to Resort. I did not let myself think about it; I only thought about warning everyone; that was what I was here to do. It was my job.

I wanted to cry by the time I saw the goat trail! I was so scared. All I wanted to do was get back home. I wanted to warn everyone. I wanted to hide. I wanted these men gone. Fighting back the panic, I scrubbed the tears away with my dirty sleeve. Sundancer seemed to have understood perfectly what was going on and picked her way up the bank quietly; no impressive leaps. Following the goat path I could easily outdistance the jihadists by taking a straight line back to the village. I alternated Sundancer trotting and walking for a while, taking several short breaks to listen.

My heart caught in my throat when I heard their voices again. Dismounting, I left

Sundancer in some scrub while I crept closer to get a better look. They had crossed the gully, probably at a low point, and were now sitting across the goat path. I could not decide if they were just resting or if they were stopping, but I did not want to chance it. I could circle back and cut across some ground I knew, but it would cost me time. My heart pounded hard in my chest as I crept back to Sundancer; I hid my face in her mane for a few precious moments, fighting back tears. With shaking hands I pulled another arrow out, and just in case, I snapped off the head. I snapped off the fletching, broke the shaft in half, and ripped the feathers out in a few places. I put it with the first arrow in my lunch bag. The mare twisted around and nuzzled my arm; she knew something was wrong.

If Sundancer returned without me they would search the bags and it would be clear that no one should come after me.

I pulled myself back up into the saddle and turned Sundancer back the way we had come. I took extra care to be quiet, which slowed my progress. Cutting across with no path was slow going, but it was the best I could do. The sun was creeping down close to the horizon before I felt any confidence in getting back to Resort first. I was about to break cover when I saw them. I wanted to cry! They were cutting me off and they did not even know it! They had followed the goat path and were now stopping. A few of them led their horses to the riverbanks while the others examined the ground. The path that ran next to the river was wide and well traveled; it was the main road in and out of Resort.

I had to do something. I grabbed the quiver, slung it over my shoulder and tied Sundancer's reins loosely to the saddle - and left her. In a few minutes she would realize she was not hobbled and then she would run for the stables.

My heart was in my throat as I flitted from lengthening shadow to rock until I was within range. I nocked one arrow; I had never shot at a man before. My hands shook, but I had to do something! I could not just let them walk up to Resort. I had to stop them.

I sighted, took a deep breath and let the arrow fly. The first one went wide; they did not see it sink into the river. I bit my lip and nocked a second arrow. I could not be so lucky twice that they would not see the arrow. The second arrow planted in one of the men's breast, a flower of deepest crimson blooming on his shirt. There was yelling. The next two arrows were off, flying before the men could figure out from which direction. They were my last arrows. I was done for.

I had hit two of them. I wanted to vomit! I turned, thinking to run and hide; maybe cross the river and try to outdistance them on foot. I only went a few yards when I smacked into Sundancer's shoulder, my forehead bouncing off of something hard and unrelenting..

"Damn you, go home" I hissed.

The rifle! My fingers clawed at the strings. I pulled it out at an awkward angle, stumbling backwards as it came free. I slapped Sundancer on the rump. "Go!" She swung around to look at me with her big, dark eyes; confused and hurt. I hit her with the butt of the rifle and she crow-hopped forward. At that moment one of the men saw her and yelled something. Sundancer's nostrils flared; she did not know their scent. She squealed and ran, inadvertently charging their horses and scattering them.

Sundancer would get to Resort before them. The village would be warned. Everyone would be safe!

But no one would come for me.

I wanted to cry for a hundred reasons right then and there, but I could not. I ducked. They could not have seen me yet, I was behind a boulder twice my size. I scrambled through the scrub and stubborn trees, cutting away and then back towards them, zigzagging my path in a desperate attempt to find an escape. I spotted a large boulder just at the foot of a small mound of rocks; a bit of high ground. I set my back towards the wall of stone; my clothing blending into the darker browns and grays. The lengthening shadows would hide me all the better. I could hear them crashing through the brush.

I thought about my dad, that I would miss seeing him when he came back. Poor Edward would have to tell him I died. I felt bad for Grandma; she would outlive us all. I wondered if Will would think of me after I was gone.

A figure in blue-gray stood out against the gray-green shrub. I sighted, clicked the safety off, and made sure I was not biting my lip; recoil sucked. I squeezed the trigger; the single shot reverberated off of the stones, making the ringing in my own ears all the more terrible. My shoulder ached from the kick. There was not time to nurse my shoulder. I cradled the rifle like my dad had taught me for running and moved. I knew this ground, I had the advantage; maybe I could get away. Hot tears streamed down my cheeks and my breath came in quick, ragged breaths. I was not even sure I had killed that one; I knew I hit him, but I did not know if he was dead. There was more yelling, closer now.

The dead weight against my hip felt alive; I had carried the rifle and pistol for so long, and completely ignored their presence until now.

I slid the rifle up onto a ledge of stone and hoisted myself up, rolling behind a small pile of large rocks. This time I used the rocks to steady the gun; the recoil had my whole arm

feeling bruised and battered and too unsteady. They were already there. Chances were they knew exactly where I was. I had three shots left; I had never reloaded the fifth shot after the one practice shot I had done at Edward's insistence. Three shots. I had to make them count.

Sighting, I squeezed the trigger. The shot bounced off rock next to the head of one man. Five shapes headed for my hiding place. I had two more shots in the rifle.

My arms felt cold, and I could taste bile in my mouth. The whole world seemed to slow down as I squeezed the trigger again. The sickening thud as the bullet tore through flesh and the unearthly scream made me lose it. I vomited. My hands were shaking. I forced myself to look through the sights even as my stomach clenched and protested. Bile dripped from my lips as I fired the last shot in the rifle at close range. He had been pulling himself up onto the ledge, maybe two feet from me. I pushed myself up and back, stumbling as my body revolted against me. I had just killed human beings. Me. Krista. I had *killed* people. I had killed them to protect Resort. Blinded by the tears and dazzled by the setting sun, I never had a chance. My shoulder and arm ached from the recoil of the rifle, my cheek hurt where I had hit myself with the sight, and I knew I was going to be sick - again.

The first one punched me in the face. My legs crumpled and I landed on the rocks. At first I thought I must still be falling, tumbling over the rocks but then I realized that they were kicking me and hitting me. I screamed as one grabbed me by my braid and hauled me to my feet. He roared something at me and spat in my face. Another one held me while the first one ripped the pistol from the holster on my hip. He hit me over the head with the butt of it; I only wished he had hit me hard enough to knock me out. Instead, I crumpled up, dazed on the ground. One of them rolled me to the ledge and kicked me off of it.

A small shrub cushioned my fall, but not enough to spare me. I landed on my right shoulder, driving it into the ground and getting cut with rocks. A hot, searing pain ripped through the joint and down my side. I chocked down a cry of agony and fought to get to my feet. I was scrambling, but I was so disoriented I could not tell which way was up or which was down. My right eye stung hotly and I could not see much with it. I wanted to be sick again. I wanted to cry. Most of all I wanted to know if Sundancer had made it back to Resort yet and if they were leaving.

Feet landed heavily by my head. A boot caught me in the ribs, knocking the breath from my lungs and sent me rolling. Stones and thorns bit into my flesh, catching my clothing and hair. I could taste blood and grit in my mouth. Struggling to get to my hands and knees, I pitched forward because my right arm simply could not bear my weight.

I heard more boots on stones, the others must be coming down from the ledge - but then I was looking at the man who had spat at me through my left eye. My breath made little puffs of dust as I struggled to breathe. He was not looking down at me. There was something very strange about him. He was lying on the ground and staring at me. That was not right. That was not right at all.

A hand gripped my shoulder; I could not help it - I screamed in pain. I did not want them to hear me scream, but it hurt so badly! Dazed, I looked up at a figure dressed in browns and grays - who was not wearing a stripped sash. I could not focus on his face but I thought that I knew this man, but why would he be with jihadists?

"Krista," Edward's voice said.

What was Edward doing with the jihadists? I did not understand.

"Krista, hold on."

I could hear other noises now. There was more yelling and the sound of a gun - my pistol! I struggled to sit up but Edward pushed me back down. He pulled an arrow out of his quiver, nocked it and sent it flying. In a few moments everything was silent.

"You shouldn't have come," I muttered. I curled up on my left side and cradled my right arm. It hurt so bad. "Resort – Resort needs to be safe."

Edward bent over me; there were tears in his eyes. "Resort is safe, you stupid girl. Resort is safe because of you. And what would my cousin say if I let his only child get herself killed?"

"But Resort is safe?" My words sounded slurred to my own ears, and each effort to speak hurt.

Another face peered down at me, one with worried dark eyes, with Will's voice and said, "You're safe, Krista, you're safe. You've saved us."

~ ~ ~

The next thing I remember was waking up and seeing Grandma's face. "That's a good girl," she said as she put something damp against my brow. Her voice sounded small and worried.

"What's going on?" I struggled to sit up, and look around but my right arm buckled under me. Carefully I lay back down. "Grandma, what happened? Grandma, the jihadists –"

"Shhh, Krista. Don't worry about them. You took care of us, now let Grandma take care of you." Her withered hands patted at my face.

"Grandma, what happened? The last thing I remember..." The last thing I remembered

was a gunshot and then the faces of Edward and Will. I choked back a sob, but the tears still came.

Grandma ignored the question and lifted a cup to my face, putting a straw to my lips. “Drink this,” she demanded. I did as I was told, though the muscles in my jaw felt tense and the drink tasted bitter. “They were coming to look for you, Edward and Will and some of the others when Sundancer practically charged them. They said when they didn’t see you with her that they knew something was wrong; it isn’t like you to be late coming back.” Grandma brushed a wayward piece of hair off of my brow and grimaced. “They sent someone back here and we started packing and the three of them went after you.”

“But – I sent the signal.” Tears streamed down my cheeks; Grandma patiently wiped them away. “They shouldn’t have come after me.”

“Krista, you’re as much a part of Resort as we are. You should know that your uncle was not about to leave his niece out there like that. Your father would have killed him.”

My stomach was tied in knots. I did not remember much after that last gunshot. “The jihadists – “

“– Are dead.” Grandma put a finger to my lips and looked down at me sternly. “Everyone’s packing. We’re going to move in the morning. That was just a little band of trouble-makers. Rest for me so you can ride in the morning, okay?” Weakly I nodded, even that feeble gesture causing pain to burn through the right side of my face and shoulder. “I’m going to get the rest of our things packed up. Sleep, Krista.”

I slept through the night, thanks to whatever concoction Grandma made me drink and only woke up when Clark grabbed my right shoulder and shook me. I came awake at once,

yelping in pain as I sat up straight. Clark jumped back and looked at me all guilty and terrified. “Ed – Edward says it’s time to go,” he muttered.

“Krista.”

Though my neck hurt, I turned in the direction of the voice and saw Will framed by the doorway, his dark eyes open and worried. I grimaced and tried flexing and moving most of my limbs. Clark took the moment to scamper away, leaving us alone. “You don’t take direction very well.” Experimentally, I curled my legs under me, which seemed to be only bruised and scrapped under clean clothes.

“Here, let me help you.” Will helped me extract myself from the pallet of blankets and tug my boots on; neither of us saying anything. He even steadied me as I stood, my head reeling in that light headed manner you get when you stand up too quickly.

I could not look up at his face; it hurt to look up and I did not want to see the way he was looking at me. I did not want him to know that I had thought about him when I thought I might die.

“We’re leaving Resort.” His voice sounded bigger in the empty room. I watched as the fabric of his shirt was pulled tight as he took a deep breath. Gently he put his arms around me, just enough to close the space between us but not enough to hurt me.

Part of me still wanted to cry. I lost something at Resort I never valued; my innocence. Tucked against Will I felt older, like I had aged over night.

“Come on.” Will stepped back and leaned down so that I had to meet his eyes. “I got Sundancer to let me saddle her for you. We’re going to the Underground.”

I nodded and let Will’s hand close over my left and lead me out into the bright morning

sunlight.

We left Resort that day and never went back. My shoulder never healed right, but I have never carried a gun again; I do not hate guns anymore because they let me save the people I love, but even that has a price.