

NORTHFIELD

NORTHFIELD

CALVIN FISHER

Northfield

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*To Bailey,
My greatest supporter.*

PROLOGUE

Despite all these years, the smell could still make Mark Northfield nauseous. He inhaled, and discomfort pricked his stomach like a sewing needle. The scent made him think of someone pouring sweat into an aged water bottle and holding the bottle to his nose.

While exhaling, he wondered why he continued expending energy on being annoyed at the gas mask. Had even one day passed when he didn't have a mask plastered to his face for however many hours a day? After pondering the thought, Northfield supposed that the mask only really bothered him on long escorts like this one. Being cooped up in a truck, plus being stuck sucking air out of a filter without a single break, drove him up the wall and then some. At least his gas mask only covered his nose, mouth, and cheeks; most people wore the full-face masks, and if he had to subject himself to such a stuffy and sweaty hell each day, he would've offered himself long ago as fertilizer for the vegetation outside that taunted the last stubborn remnants of humanity.

He turned his head on the torn leather headrest to look out the passenger side window. Short, stubby shrubs jutted out of the ground alongside the road, their deep-green leaves stabbing into the gas.

The gas. The omnipresent gas that acted like it paid rent, gently glowing in its ominous yellow-orange glory.

CALVIN FISHER

He looked out of the sideview mirror and caught a glimpse of the massive gray transport vehicle he rode in. Five wheels kicked up dust on the road. The barrels, neatly arranged in rows and columns on the flatbed, were covered by a black tarp, keeping him from catching a glimpse of any labels that might indicate what the barrels contained.

He stretched his legs as well as he could in the cramped confines of the seat. Why the designers of the truck couldn't have made a single inch of legroom in such a large vehicle was beyond him.

Sighing, he rolled his head to look at the driver. He was a burly man with prominent arm hair that weaved like waves, a man who carried himself with a brazen confidence that constantly threatened to break out of his puffed-out chest. Northfield imagined him waking up each morning and challenging the world to a one-versus-one bare-knuckles brawl, even though a bowl of soggy cereal could probably throw him down to the ground and pin him.

“What are you hauling?”

The driver turned slowly and glared at him through the glass lenses of his gas mask, his eyes burning with unwarranted contempt. Northfield had met more of this type of man than he could count. Enough to know the exact trajectory of the conversation he had started.

“I reckon that I'm payin' you to guard the cargo, not pester me about the contents,” the driver said. Pleased with such an adequate answer to what he perceived as a stupid and out-of-the-line question, he turned his eyes back to the road.

Northfield massaged his forehead and let his eyes fall shut, allowing himself one breath before reopening them. “Look, man, I don't personally care what you're hauling. Just a friendly piece of advice for next time: when you're taking these dangerous roads, and you're taking a flatbed truck with the cargo as exposed as it is, you really should hire two guards. Better yet, invest in a semi-trailer with a reinforced

NORTHFIELD

flatbed. Yellowbacks can hit from either side of the road, and I can't keep track of the blind spots well enough on a vehicle like this to make sure no bullets hit the cargo."

"What the fuck am I payin' you for, then? I thought you mercs were supposed to be the best."

"I can take on as many Yellowbacks as you can throw at me—if I can see them, that is. I can't take on a Yellowback humping some bushes while firing a couple potshots that hit an oil drum, blowing us all to hell. So I just want to know what we're hauling so I can figure out how to best protect you and your cargo and get us to the Network outpost in one piece."

"Best protect you," the driver repeated. "Let's get one thing straight, pal. I'll worry about me. I'm not payin' you to worry about me. You worry about the cargo. But find a way to do it quietly."

"Suit yourself," he muttered. Shaking his head, he thought, *As perfect of a day to die as any.*

Two more hours passed in silence, both inside and outside the vehicle. Despite Northfield's weary bones and lead eyelids, he kept a vigilant eye on the road and surrounding fields. Stubborn pride in performing his job well and the desire to keep himself and the driver alive, regardless of the driver's bullish disposition, prevented him from drifting off or succumbing to sleep. It had been a long drive, alright.

A brown blur rustled through the knee-high yellow brush past the bushes and skipped across the road in front of the vehicle. Northfield propelled his hand out and commanded, "Stop!"

The driver, reacting as if he'd been thrashed by a whip, slammed on the brakes. His eyes moved to the brown object, which now stood frozen dumbly in the middle of the road. After a moment, both men realized that they were looking at a deer.

CALVIN FISHER

“A deer? You’re stoppin’ me for a fucking deer? This vehicle could run over ten in a row without even wincin’.”

Northfield continued to stare, marveling for what seemed like the thousandth time at how nature soldiered on, unimpeded by the toxic gas. Meanwhile, humanity had to suit up in gas masks, surely designed by a sadist, just to go outside and walk across the street.

Northfield said, “Why run over a deer?”

“Oh, now you’re lax. Thought you were paranoid about my cargo. Ain’t you worried about an ambush?”

“Last I checked, the Yellowbacks didn’t train deer to run across roads as distractions. I’ll keep my head on a swivel, but we’re fine, man.”

As they impatiently waited for the deer to pass, Northfield noticed blotches of red on the side of the road. *The hell?* he thought, his eyes moving down the road as they followed a trail of blood consisting of intermittent pools with small rivers connecting them. His fingers tightened around the grip and foregrip of the Vector submachine gun on his lap. At the end of the trail, a man with a black gas mask lay face-down; the blood oozing from his midsection painted his white T-shirt like a crackhead’s rendition of modern art. The somberness Northfield felt at seeing the man was immediately replaced by distressed hope as he spotted the man’s ring finger twitch.

His head snapped around to the driver as he dug around his backpack for a first aid kit.

“Hang on. You see that wounded guy ahead?” Northfield asked.

“Yeah,” the driver said with complete apathy, like Northfield had asked him if he’d spotted a fly. “What about him?”

“When that deer moves, don’t drive off,” he said. “I’m gonna try to help him.”

“Are you crazy?” the driver cried. “Hell no! Stopping for a deer’s one thing. That guy is a whole ’nother world. That wound could be

NORTHFIELD

ketchup or beet juice as far as I know. He could be a Yellowback.” He punched Northfield’s shoulder. “And don’t you think of goin’, either. You damn well know that if you leave the truck and I drive off, that’ll be a breach of Network contract, and your ass is dead.”

“He’s not a Yellowback.” Northfield’s hands found the first aid kit. “He’s not wearing the uniform.”

“You’re decidin’ if he’s a Yellowback or not based on his fuckin’ fashion choice?”

“Yeah, I’d bet the farm on it. Uniform’s part of their whole cult mentality,” he said, pulling the first aid kit out of his backpack.

“Then he’s probably runnin’ from them, and I’m not about to sit here till they come.”

“Christ,” he muttered. The guy outside might be taking his last breaths, yet here he was, arguing with the driver. “I’ve seen enough Yellowbacks to know how they work. They’re not after him anymore. Look at him. He doesn’t have anything on him. They’d only kill him for his belongings. Without anything on him, there’s no point. They probably swiped his stuff already.”

“That’s your opinion,” the driver said, pressing on the gas pedal. The truck lurched forward. “I pay you for your gun, not your brain. Yellowbacks could be any damn where. Fuck him.”

“Wait,” he cried. “I’ll pay you, alright? You keep the money you’d pay me for this job. You hear me? Just let me try to save him and it’s yours.”

The driver braked. “All of it?”

“All of it.”

With a sigh, the driver shook his head. “Fine. Guess if I die, you’ll probably be dead, too. Small consolation.”

Northfield flew out of the door and sprinted to the man, submachine gun in one hand and first aid kit in the other. Upon Northfield’s

CALVIN FISHER

approach, the man let out a defeated cry, akin to a wounded animal watching encircling predators close in.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Northfield soothed. “I’m here to help you, alright?”

As gently as he could, he rolled the man onto his back, eliciting a groan. “I’m sorry, buddy. I know that hurt,” he said, his fingers fishing around the first aid kit. He didn’t have much inside the kit, only some gauze, antiseptic wipes, and painkillers, the last of which he couldn’t give the man without removing his gas mask and killing him. The best he could possibly do would be to slow the bleeding and help the guy hold out until someone who was better equipped could help. He’d somehow have to convince the driver to let the man tag along to the Network outpost, but he’d figure out that problem after he fixed the man up the best he could.

“This’s gonna hurt, too,” he warned the man, applying the wipes to his stomach wound. The resulting cries were sharper than the first, although paradoxically, they were more distant, like a drop of lighter fluid being poured onto a fading ember. Northfield wrapped the gauze around the man’s midsection as tightly as he could. When he pulled away to examine the man and assess what to do, his teeth gritted in defeat as dark blood spread across the gauze like a rabid infection.

“Damn it, I’m sorry,” he told the man, holding his hand for comfort despite fully knowing how inadequate the gesture was. He whispered a soft prayer as the man drifted off, holding his hand even after his soul had gone elsewhere. Northfield remained on his knees for a moment longer, staring off at nothing in particular before grabbing his first aid pack and submachine gun and hurrying back to the truck.

When he got into his seat and closed the door, the driver scoffed and said, “Bet it feels pretty shitty to lose those credit cards now, huh?”

“Nah, I’ll just strip on the side,” he muttered, his voice too soft and

NORTHFIELD

quiet to put much emphasis on his sarcasm. If exhaustion was a mouse nibbling on him before, now it was a bloodhound. Cognizant of his weariness, he doubled down on keeping his eyes focused on the road and his surroundings. If Yellowbacks were close, they weren't going to catch him by surprise—they weren't. He saw the driver shake his head in the reflection of the glass before turning his own eyes to the road. Neither of them spoke for the remainder of the drive.

CHAPTER 1

A high-pitched noise that sounded like the shrill cry of a robotic bird freed Mark Northfield from the frenzied grip of his nightmare. The dream faded from memory almost instantaneously, and he struggled to remember if he was falling, descending, drowning, or choking. It hardly mattered; while the scenes, scenarios, and characters changed, the overall formula of the dreams stayed the same, as if they were directed by a lazy filmmaker who made one good flick in his life and fundamentally re-created the same movie ad nauseam.

He remained still for a few moments, staring with no small magnitude of grogginess and disdain at the source of the high-pitched alarm: a gray rectangular device with an array of switches and blinking lights plastered to the wall. The device had two different alarms: one to warn if something was wrong with the power and one to warn if the air was unsafe to breathe. The latter alarm was significantly louder than the former. Seeing as he still had his ears, and seeing as he wasn't dead and didn't feel like he was gonna get there any time in the next minute, he gave himself a moment to take a breath and will himself to begin the day.

Turning on his side, he cast his gaze on a four-by-four-inch

CALVIN FISHER

picture within a rusted frame propped up next to his stained and decrepit mattress.

“Morning, Love,” he said to the picture, in which a brunette woman sat in the soft shade of a barren tree. She was surrounded by bright red and yellow leaves not yet disturbed by the inevitable hand of decay. The leaves ate at her white dress, which curved in the shape of a crescent.

He rolled off his mattress, which had no bed frame to speak of. He picked himself up off the floor.

After quickly stretching his back, he made his way across his log house to the blaring device on the wall.

Silence blissfully greeted him after he turned off the alarm. He examined the electronic display above the array of buttons and switches.

He read off the display: *NO INCOMING ENERGY: 20 HOURS OF SAFE AIR LEFT.*

He turned toward the picture on his floor and said, “Something from the storm last night is probably blocking the blades. I’ve gotta go outside and check. Wouldn’t want you to get stuffy in your frame, Jess. Or, you know, for me to die.”

Northfield’s log house was small, comprising one main room along with a small bathroom. He walked into the bathroom and looked at his reflection in the cracked, dirty mirror as he washed his face. He ran his hand through his long and ragged dirty-blond hair and beard, staring into his crisp, lightning-seared blue eyes to examine how much life remained in them.

“No graying. The rugged good looks haven’t left me yet, Jess,” he said.

He returned to the main room. Along with his mattress and the window, it contained a table with two chairs, a couch, a bookshelf, and a black chest. Ghost-white spiderwebs drooped off the wooden ceiling, both speckled by dust. The floorboards were illuminated by

NORTHFIELD

faint morning light that shined between a handful of raindrops too stubborn to dry on the house's lone window. It was bulletproof, which was always a weight off his mind; he didn't need to worry about some broken glass being the death of him.

He opened the black chest. He grabbed a baseball jacket, beanie, Oakley gloves, cargo pants, and boots. The jacket was light blue with light-red lines running across the arms, and the jacket had the word *Spoonbills* written across the center in red cursive letters. The beanie, similarly, was red and blue and had the Spoonbills logo across the front. After dressing himself, he reached back into the chest and grabbed a GI-17 pistol and a holster. He holstered the weapon to his ankle and reached into the chest one final time to grab two more items: his gas mask and an extendable rake.

He put on the gas mask, then proceeded to open the heavy steel door by twisting the handle, pulling out, then pulling down hard. Three high-pitched warning sounds shrieked from the rectangular device on the wall. He proceeded to push the door open slightly, just enough for him to fit his body through. The air filter hummed with exasperation as it worked furiously to purify the air contaminated by incoming gas from the opening. After he exited the house, he shut the door behind him, which clicked sharply as it automatically locked.

The gas, as always, inhibited his vision so that he could only see a couple of football fields ahead. The thick grass reached his knees, licking his calves and leaving crisscross marks of dew on his pants. Fifty feet in front of his dwelling, an oak tree rose out of the grass, its leaves weaving in and out of the gas. The blades of grass at the edge of the field brushed against the first row of trees in a forest, but he could barely see the thick line of trees due to the gas. He appreciated the forest; its greenness provided a visual break from the glowing yellow and orange. Plus, being so near the forest provided him a welcome degree

CALVIN FISHER

of privacy. However, his current area of interest was on the opposite side of his house as the forest.

Behind his house, he passed his motorbike, which was chained to the side wall. His boots splashed in a handful of small puddles surrounding his house. Along with a smattering of branches and leaves atop the grass, these puddles served as the only traces of the prior night's storm. By midday, the puddles would be entirely gone, but due to how wet this time of year was, the grass wouldn't stay dry for long.

Twenty feet away from the back wall, a river ran parallel to his house. Tubes snaked from a generator to the river, in which there was a turbine with three blades. The river's current spun the blades around the turbine's rotor, collecting energy that the generator converted to electricity to power the air filter in his house. The added water from the storm made the river flow faster than normal, but Northfield didn't need to step any closer to the river to see why his turbine wasn't generating any power.

A giant log, which looked like the better part of a tree, had gotten itself wedged in the river. One end of the log was jammed between rotors while the other end was firmly stuck in the widest part of the meander on the opposite side of the river.

Mesh netting held by metal rods was supposed to keep anything from getting near the blades. Evidently, the netting forgot how to do its job.

Rake in hand, he approached the edge of the river and stopped directly above the turbine. The semi-clear water was only a few feet deep, although the river still had a strong current.

Immediately, he could see that the netting needed to be replaced, even if the log hadn't busted through it. Intact strands of netting were stretched and thinning in many areas, and aside from the gaping hole left by the log, there were a number of smaller holes. Considering the

NORTHFIELD

condition of the net, it was a small wonder how the log managed to break through.

He looked upstream and shook his head. The storm ended hours ago, which meant that the log probably also entered the river hours ago, when the heavy wind was more apt to transporting logs.

After hours of traveling miles upon miles down the river, probably getting stuck and unstuck any number of times, the log had still somehow found the weak points in Northfield's net.

God's trying to kill me again. Northfield smirked. *Sorry, Pops, you're gonna have to try harder than that. Next time, try a bolt of lightning.*

He fetched a pair of brown waders sitting near the generator and returned to the river. He jammed the butt end of his rake under the log.

Using the rake as a lever, he pushed downward with a groan. The log stubbornly remained in place for a couple of seconds before the nearest end popped up. Now free to move, the log realigned itself parallel to the river and continued floating downstream.

The rotors didn't look damaged, and they started spinning with a low-pitched hum. He turned his attention to removing the net from the rods around the turbine.

Satisfied with his work, Northfield climbed out of the river and shed his waders. He went back to the heavy steel door. On the keypad, he typed a four-digit passcode, and after three high-pitched warning sounds, he opened the door and entered his house, then quickly shut it behind him. Upon entering, he examined the air filter, which now read, *POWER RESTORED. TWO HOURS UNTIL FULL BACKUP POWER IS CHARGED.*

He took off his gas mask but didn't put it back in the chest. Instead, he set it on the floor; he would need to put the mask on again shortly.

While he dug around the chest, he spoke to the picture near his mattress, "All done, Jess. Not dying today. At least not yet."

CALVIN FISHER

He pulled three credit cards wrapped in a rubber band out of the chest. A frown spread across his face. “Only three credits left. Gotta head to the outpost and get a new net. More importantly, I gotta see if they have any work.”

He set the cards down and rummaged through the black chest again. His fingers scraped across the bottom until he found a pair of electronic earplugs. Relieved that they hadn’t found a nice spot to hide, he inserted them. They were capable of lowering sounds of high intensities to eighty decibels while retaining the sharpness of his hearing; he could still detect faint whispers or rustles that were audible to him without the earplugs. Acute hearing was paramount to detecting Yellowback ambushes, and he took what precautions he could to protect his ears. Otherwise, he’d eventually be either dead or out of a job.

Next, he took a pair of quad-lens goggles out of his chest. The goggles had hybrid functionality, and they were capable of utilizing night and thermal vision. Night vision was useless during the day, but thermal vision could help him spot Yellowbacks if they tried attacking. He never liked traveling anywhere without them. The lenses rested well enough on his beanie.

He reached into the chest and took out an empty black rucksack before grabbing his Vector submachine gun. The weapon was converted to fire TAP rounds, total armor penetration, instead of the standard .45 ACP rounds. The TAP rounds, developed and used by the United States military before the bombs dropped, could penetrate every type of body armor he’d ever seen. Additionally, the Vector had a holographic sight, a laser sight, a black strap, and a silencer. The silencer primarily served to protect his ears in case he ever had to fire without earplugs rather than serving as a stealth tool, as the gun still fired loudly with it.

He set the weapon down next to the rucksack, which he filled with

NORTHFIELD

extra magazines in addition to food and water, flashbangs, smoke grenades, a spare gas mask, and other various supplies. He took off his Spoonbills jacket and put on a light armored vest before putting the jacket back on. The vest primarily defended against knife attacks instead of ballistics. The Yellowbacks had access to TAP rounds, too, which made vests that protected against bullets a moot point. Lastly, he put his three remaining credit cards in his pocket. Paper money fell out of style after the bombs; people preferred a less easily destroyed form of currency to compensate for the world around them. Credit cards, useless after the concept of credit disappeared, fit the bill for the new form of legal tender.

After closing the chest, he stood up and slung the submachine gun and rucksack over his shoulder. He looked at the picture and said, “I’ll be back in a few hours, Love.”

Northfield left the house and began his trek to the outpost, which was four miles away. Although he could use the motorbike chained to the side of his house, he chose not to; to say that fuel was expensive would be a gross understatement. Furthermore, the Yellowbacks often watched the roads on the other side of the forest. He’d heard multiple stories of travelers being robbed or killed if they put up any resistance. No other roads within any reasonable distance led to the outpost, so he had to contend with potential ambushes. The motorbike was loud; he preferred to make as little commotion as possible.

The outpost belonged to the Network, an organization established years ago, maybe two or three after the bombs dropped. Back then, various factions and groups constantly warred with each other in the anarchy that followed America’s fall. The Network surfaced—from whom or where, he didn’t know—and it served as a mediator between groups and their interests. As the years passed, factions formed and dissolved, but the Network remained constant, only growing over time. Today,

CALVIN FISHER

the Network mediated transactions between customers, shops, apartments, and hotels in the few rebuilt cities in the Midwest region's five districts, and it acted as the arbiter between parties for contract jobs in and outside of the cities. Furthermore, the organization produced and sold gas masks, filters, and filtration systems, items so widely needed that only the Network, with its vast resources, could adequately meet the demand. According to the Network, at least. Of course, the organization could have simply eliminated the competition; people managed to survive in the wasteland before the Network came along.

Despite the Network's growing power, the organization still pushed the "agendaless mediator and supplier" narrative. Northfield had his doubts; he knew that once you started climbing the ladder of power, it was hard to stop climbing. However, as a Network mercenary, someone who took contracts mediated by the Network but didn't directly work for the organization, and as someone living in the middle of nowhere, he had little concrete information about its goings-on aside from the contracts it mediated between private parties and mercs. These contracts were dealt to mercs through various Network outposts placed around the Midwest region. Jobs included protecting clients and their cargo and often escorting them across the region, usually as a safeguard against the Yellowbacks. A fair number of assassination jobs were offered by anonymous clients through the Network, too, but Northfield stayed clear of hits. Life in the former land of red, white, and blue might have descended into a nightmare of unmeasurable proportions, but he would let his body die before throwing his soul that far into the dirt.

As his shoes crunched on twigs, he thought, *Wonder why God would try to kill me this morning. What could I have done to incur the Big Mighty One's wrath? Maybe he's jealous that Jess is taking up more imaginary conversation time in my head than he is.*

NORTHFIELD

A crossroads lay past the forest, one of the Yellowbacks' favorite hunting spots between his house and the outpost. Before exiting the forest, he hid behind a tree and put his goggles over his eyes. He scouted out the crossroads using thermal vision. Determining that the coast was clear, he walked to the crossroads and took the most familiar road.

Hey, but I managed to avoid taking Network network jobs up to this point, and I haven't hurt anyone who hasn't tried to hurt me first. That's gotta count for something. God's gotta throw me a bone at some point, right? Maybe by casting me off this hellhole early to be with Jess.

The outpost was initially a faint silhouette obscured by the gas before he drew nearer. The main structure was a small, log-cabin-looking building enclosed by a barbed electric fence and guarded by a watchtower. Atop the watchtower, a guard manned a mounted machine gun at all hours. A dirt path led up to a gate in the fence.

He smirked behind his gas mask. *Or maybe I'm just bored as hell on this walk and I'm overthinking random crap to keep my mind occupied. Yeah, that's probably it.*

A wooden post with an intercom stood in front of the gate. He pressed a red button on the intercom and said, "This is Mark Northfield. Operator code 1285."

There was a pause before he heard static. A deep, gravelly voice growled through the intercom, "Gate's openin', Northfield. Hope it hits ya on the way in."

Classic Francis, he thought. Don't suppose you'd consider smiting him, huh, God?

A high-pitched creak pierced through the sky as the gate opened. Northfield could feel the guard studying him from the watchtower. He reached the building, where he heard three warning beeps before the

CALVIN FISHER

door opened; the building had a similar, albeit more advanced, air filtration system to his house, rendering gas masks unnecessary inside the building. He entered, and once the door closed, he took his off.

There wasn't much to the building's interior. In the main room, there were tile floors, white walls, and a few dim lights hanging from the ceiling. Two wooden tables with benches sat in the middle of the room. At one sat a middle-aged blonde woman who ate some sort of gray sludge that vaguely resembled something edible. On the wall opposite the door, a bulletproof window stretched from waist to head height. Francis resided past the glass, in a smaller room with various weapons mounted on the back wall. Through a closable opening at the bottom of the window, he exchanged credit cards for food, weapons, and supplies. In addition, he distributed jobs and assignments.

Francis was a portly man with patchy brown facial hair that had touches of gray. There was a black mole near his left nostril, and his beady little eyes always seemed full of resentment, an effect exacerbated by the perpetual downward fold of his bushy eyebrows. Currently, he was flirting with the woman eating her porridge. Northfield couldn't hear the last half of what Francis was saying, but he'd bet the farm that whatever drivel came out of Francis's mouth was sleaziness of the highest degree.

Don't get involved again, you idiot, he told himself. Shit like this always blows up in your face. Just let it go. None of your business.

He took a few steps forward and heard the woman say, "You're damn lucky I'm busy eatin' this slop and you're behind that glass. Say that shit again."

He studied her; aside from a rusted revolver in a waist holster, he didn't notice any other weapons on her person. The pistol indicated that she could probably take care of herself, but her lack of heavier weaponry led him to assume that she was one of the farmers struggling

NORTHFIELD

to feed the starving survivors both inside and outside of the boonies they lived in.

Despite the presence of the gas and its semi-opaqueness, which one might think would interfere with the photosynthesis of vegetation, crops could still grow. Rather, the chronic shortage of food in the wasteland could be attributed to the deaths of most farmers, like so many others, when the bombs dropped, leaving many inexperienced people having to fill the void. Not to mention, the machinery and irrigation systems necessary for running large-scale farms were either destroyed or rendered inoperable due to lack of maintenance in the following years.

Although the Network could probably alleviate these issues, the organization took no action, claiming a myriad of excuses that he didn't bother to remember. He'd bet a stack of credit cards thicker than a bus that the real reason had to do with power. People who were worried about getting their next meal didn't have the time or energy to concern themselves with the Network's machinations.

Even if she can take care of herself, that doesn't guarantee the next person to enter this outpost will be able to. Can't let this behavior slide and let a situation like this get worse. Not like last time.

He spoke up. "You better be talking about Network affairs, Francis, or we're gonna have some problems."

Francis directed his gaze from the woman to him, and with a scowl, he said, "None a' your goddamn business, Northfield. Who died and made ya watchman of the wasteland?"

He shook his head and said, "Not watchman of the wasteland—watchman of you. I'm not letting you pull your bullshit on another person. Don't need to see someone else go through that. Not again."

The woman, after finishing her porridge, put on her gas mask and stood up. As she walked toward the exit and past Northfield, she whispered, "Thanks."

CALVIN FISHER

He nodded almost imperceptibly, and the door opened and shut swiftly. *The fact that she ate her porridge here and stomached this overcooked Muppet's lechery probably means that she lives far away from this outpost and she needs food between the trip here and back. A long-ass journey, across some dangerous roads, just to order new tools and supplies.*

Francis said behind his bulletproof glass, "Don't make me have to report you to the Network, Northfield."

"Sure. If I kick your ass, you could report me. Get me in a lot of trouble, even. But if I kick your ass, you'd have to eat through a straw for a couple months. So there's that. Plus, I'm sure you'd love explaining your side of the story after I give mine."

They stared at each other tensely for a few moments. Northfield approached the bulletproof glass and softened his tone. "That's what I thought. Let's get this over with and we can both get out of each other's hair."

"Fine," Francis said, exhaling exaggeratedly. "What do you want?"

Northfield pulled out his three credit cards and said, "I want a week's worth of food rations and a net."

He slid the credit cards through the glass opening, and Francis slid the requested items through.

"Pleasure doin' business with ya," Francis said, sarcasm pricking each syllable like a porcupine's needles.

"Hang on. I'm not done," he replied. "I need a contract. What Network jobs are available? Any of my regulars?"

"I only got one," Francis said, grabbing a clipboard. "Assassination contract."

"You know I don't take those jobs," he said. "You don't have anything else? At all?"

"Stop bein' such a righteous pussy, Northfield," Francis said. "If

NORTHFIELD

you like eatin', take the job and stop bein' the only living blockhead in this hellhole whinin' about what jobs he will and won't take."

"I'll have to pass on your ever-enlightening advice, Francis. I'll check back tomorrow and see if you have anything else."

"Oh, what a joy for me," Francis growled.

Northfield left the outpost without spending another wasted word on him.

Along the way home, he thought, *Did I earn any redemption points for that one, God? Win myself any favors I can call in? If so, any chance you could stop logs from jamming my turbine? Or, the hell with it, maybe you should send logs into my turbine, take me out of my misery. I guess it depends on the day you ask me.*

After crossing the forest to reach his house, he connected the new net to the rods in the river.

Inside his house, he set his gas mask on the ground next to the black chest and pressed a small button located beneath the mask's chin. A loud hissing sound came from the left and right sides. The gas mask was a gadget, like his earplugs, that he'd spent a small fortune on. Most filters for gas masks protected the user for twenty-four hours of exposure before needing to be replaced; most people in the wasteland had to fork over large portions of their daily earnings just to buy bundles of filters from the Network. The expense, along with exorbitant prices for the scarce food and crowded living spaces, was a primary cause of poverty. His mask, in contrast, came equipped with reusable filters that could be cleaned by the mask itself. By pressing the button underneath the chin, the mask used energy acquired from small, nearly indistinguishable solar panels to suck in air and blast it at high pressures to clean the filters on either side and keep contaminants from clogging them. Eventually, the filters wore out from the high-pressured air, but they could last for months before having to be replaced.

CALVIN FISHER

Northfield had been accumulating the filters over time in case he couldn't get any more from the Network for whatever reason, be it a war that halted the Network's sale of them or if he ever found himself on the organization's hit list. With his current stash, he could last for years without having to visit another Network outpost. After stashing the rest of his gear in the black chest, he lay on his mattress and turned to face the picture.

"Francis was an asshole today, as usual. Caught him creeping on another woman. Can you believe it? I warned him, but I just pray that what happened last time won't happen again . . ."

He paused, then said softly, "Anyway, I missed you today, Jess. More than usual. Maybe it was just how big of a jerk Francis was. I don't know, but I just want you here with me. Or me with you. Either of the two works for me."

His eyes moved to the bookshelf next to the black chest, searching for escape in the cracked and bent bindings of the yellowing books. He'd read every one dozens of times at least. Books were a rarity in the toxic world, especially religious texts and fantasy novels. Whether the widespread disappearance of literature could be attributed to Network tampering, hatred for stories borne out of bitterness and resentment for how the world turned out, or the world's tendency to destroy ever since the bombs dropped, he wasn't really sure, but he nonetheless lamented the lack of stories to melt into, and he made a point of acquiring new books at every opportunity.

He snatched a copy of the complete *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy off the shelf and returned to his mattress, starting the story from the beginning. He let himself fade from his mattress and materialize in the Shire, hours passing as the pages turned.

Feeling a headache spawn in the center of his forehead, along with a good dose of tiredness, he returned the book to the shelf. Glancing at

NORTHFIELD

the picture of Jess one final time, he said before closing his eyes, "I'm gonna sleep, Love. As always, I hope you'll be in my dreams."

* * *

Four miles away, just before the end of Francis's shift, a truck arrived at the outpost. The gates opened, and the truck pulled up to the main outpost building. A man stubbier than a cigarette butt exited the truck with a sheet of paper in hand and entered the building. He took his gas mask off and approached the bulletproof glass windows.

"Two new contracts," the man said, sliding two slips of paper through the opening to Francis. "Escort mission and assassination mission. The first is protecting cargo from a possible Yellowback assault as it travels to Michelle's outpost. The second is a hit in Cumulus."

"Thanks, George," Francis said as the man turned around and left the building. He attached the slips of paper to his clipboard.

He looked down at the two new contracts. Assassination mission. Confirmation number 4456. Escort mission. Closed. Confirmation number 3328.

He smirked and muttered bitterly, "See ya tomorrow, Northfield."

