

A
Cord of
Three Strands



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A Cord of Three Strands
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*Though one may be overpowered,
two can defend themselves.
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.*

Ecclesiastes 4:12 NIV

Chapter 1

“I dare you.”

Even in the summer sun, I pull my sweater tighter. Our warmest temperatures in ‘Prase usually don’t break the 70s, but Luther’s challenge is what makes me shiver.

“But I’m so much smaller than you, and those boys are—well, they’re mean. Besides, I’m a girl. You want your partner to be fast if you’re going to win.”

“You are fast, at least, fast enough.” Luther swipes at his black hair. It needs a trim as usual. “The key to a three-legged race isn’t speed. It’s coordination. You and me, we make a good team. Those hotshots don’t know how to work together.”

I glance across the street where my older brother Darius leans against our porch, talking with Luther’s brother Jotham. Today is Sunday, our day off from school. It’s the one day a week I actually see my brother, who doesn’t return from his internship until after my bedtime each night. Once he graduates and receives his work assignment next month, I’ll have fewer chances to spend time with him.

I see Luther every day at school, every day because he lives next door, every day because he never leaves me alone.

This morning, Darius promised that he’d take me to our favorite place, a pond deep in the woods. He said he had two surprises for me.

Darius’s surprises are always good. I don’t want to miss them because of some three-legged race.

But he and Jotham are arguing in their typical way. I wonder how they can be such good friends when they disagree on everything.

“Come on, Cotton, make up your mind.” Luther taps his foot in the dusty road. “They’re going to start, and I’m not about to be the only boy in our cube without a partner.”

I stick out my chin, remembering his dare. “Maybe if you ask nicely and use my *real* name, I’ll say yes.”

Okay, perhaps Luther and I argue as much as our brothers do.

He rolls his eyes. “Cotton might as well be your real name.”

“Oh really?” I cross my arms. “Then how come Dad calls me Portia?”

He shrugs. “Jotham told me Portia means pig. You’re not a pig, but you do have the whitest blonde hair of any girl in town—just like the ‘white-gold’ the Harvesters reap in some other cubes. They call that stuff cotton. That fits you better, unless you want me to call you pig.”

“You’re a pig!”

“Then let’s have a three-legged pig race, shall we?”

“Fine.” He’s such a brat. He always wins.

Luther runs to the group of boys, our classmates, and announces our entry to the race. The thick boy in charge laughs and sneers in my direction.

Rudy makes me cringe. He’s the class bully who beats up smaller boys and girls alike. He only leaves me alone because Luther told the whole class he’d slug him if Rudy touched me.

Since Luther is four inches taller, Rudy hasn’t. I just hope Rudy never catches up to Luther’s height.

Luther returns with a grin and sets the potato sack on the ground. At least I’m wearing an old jumper and not my school dress. I’m allowed to wear play clothes on Sunday, at least until I’m thirteen. I’ve got another four years to go.

I stick my left leg in the sack and let Luther tie a leather strap around our knees. Well, it’s around his knee and my thigh. He’s already a good two feet taller than I am.

I slip my arm around his waist, and he links his right arm around my shoulder.

“This is silly,” I laugh as we wobble toward the start line, a scrawl some boy drew in the dirt. “You’re going to wish you had a taller partner.”

He winks down at me. “Not so. I bet all the boys wish they had the prettiest girl in class strapped to their leg.”

I wrinkle my nose and tense as his arm squeezes my shoulder. “Boys are stupid.” I mutter. “We’re still never going to win.”

“Yes, we are.” His dark eyes twinkle. “I’m going to match your speed, and we’re going to win. Those losers will run their fastest and get themselves all tangled up.”

I blink. “You’re going to follow my lead?”

“Sure, you’re fast enough to beat two runners strapped together like bucking horses.” He nods to the duo on our left, already arguing about who’s setting the pace.

Rudy and two of his friends straddle up to us. “You don’t have a chance of winning, Danforth.”

I never understand why boys call themselves by their last names.

“Don’t I, Pratt?” Luther scowls. “She’s the fastest girl in our class.”

One of Rudy’s friends jeers. “I think you mean the shortest.”

Rudy puckers and then jams a whistle between his lips. “Maybe the prettiest. I’m stealing a kiss when my friends beat you to the finish line.”

I grimace and pull back. Boys really are stupid.

Rudy's friends laugh and step into their own sack.

"You can kiss my powder," Luther taunts, "cause you're going to be eating dust."

The boys' faces flare, and I tug at Luther to move away. He doesn't budge.

Rudy blows his whistle in Luther's face and then backs off. "To your places!" He shouts as his friends move to a different spot in the line.

"Ready?" Luther whispers, his eyes fixed on a small flag a boy holds three dwellings down. Even from the distance, the ASU emblem shimmers on the fabric background. The first Friend of the American Socialists United had chosen a child, scroll, and olive branch for our flag.

My teacher said they stand for new life, order, and peace—the hope of a reborn land.

"Ready." I copy his example and focus on the flag.

"On your mark!" Rudy cries behind us. "Get set. Go!"

Clutching Luther's waist and straining with all my might, I dart from the start line toward the goal. Though nearly twice my size, Luther adjusts his strides to match mine, and soon, I don't see any other pairs in my peripheral.

"Don't look back." Luther spits out the words between gritted teeth. "Focus on the flag."

As we near the finish, something pelts my leg, and I cry out, nearly pulling us down.

But Luther doesn't let go, and rights us both before we lose too much time. "What's wrong?" he gasps as we pick up our speed again.

"Something hit my leg." I wince at the spot which smarts beneath my jumper.

A moment later, he grunts as well. "Someone's throwing rocks. Come on, we're almost there."

There's shouting behind us, but we ignore it and cross the line—first. Another team finishes right on our heels. Only then do we see the rest of the line-up, many tangled together and others limping to finish.

On the ground beyond them, Rudy yelps in a cloud of dust. My brother is on top of him, belting him. Rudy's partner claws at the strap on his leg to get away from the scuffle.

Jotham pulls Darius off the boy, who's crying like a girl now. "You know better than to beat up on kids."

Darius still grips Rudy's shirt in his fist. "He asked for a good whipping."

"Let kids work out their own fights," Jotham says.

Darius glares at him. "My sister can't fight a bully like this, and she shouldn't have to." He swings Rudy to face him. "Now listen here, boy, and grow up to be a better man. Never throw rocks at girls, and never hit my sister again. Do you understand me, boy?"

Rudy whimpers and nods his head.

"Good. Now get out of here."

My heart swells. I untie the strap, trip out of the sack, and run toward Darius. Luther can claim

the flag on his own.

I throw my arms around Darius's waist, and he stoops to inspect me. "Are you okay? I saw that brat hit you with a rock."

"I'm fine," I say. "Did you see? We won!"

He tousles my long hair. "I did. You're quite the runner."

Luther rushes over to join us. "She's a good partner."

Darius slaps his shoulder. "You're pretty good yourself."

Before Luther can reply, Jotham jerks him away. Luther tries to squirm, but his brother slaps him. "It's time to go home. You shouldn't be spending so much time with people who don't respect the rules."

"Oh, so you'd rather let bullies be bullies?" Darius places a hand on my own shoulder to keep me from running to Luther.

"Let the enforcers do their jobs."

Darius shakes his head. "There aren't enough Gages to right all the wrongs in one cube, let alone one nation. And half the time, they use their Tasers and tactics on the good guys."

I don't think they're talking about Rudy anymore.

"And how do you plan to single-handedly solve that problem? We both know we're cut out for the draft. The Dome is the only place we can make a difference—you can make the difference you want to see."

Darius scowls. "Difference? There are no differences made in the Dome. They're all cowering puppets. No, thank you. I don't want someone pulling my strings."

"That's dangerous talk. I hope you reconsider." Jotham twists Luther's shoulders and shoves him toward their home. Luther swings his head back, his cheek red from where Jotham hit him.

But he's still smiling. He gives me a reassuring wink before disappearing.

"Is—is everything all right?" I ask. "Why is Jotham so angry?"

Darius squats and wipes some dirt from my face. "Don't worry about him. Are you still interested in going to the pond?"

"Yes, please!"

"Then come on." He holds out a hand. "Let's get something to drink, and then we'll head out."

I grasp his hand and smile, forgetting about Luther and Jotham. I think only of my brother's two surprises and what they can possibly be.

Chapter 2

The first surprise glides across the pond like a water spider. I lean over the side as Darius rows us farther away from the bank.

My freckled reflection stares back at me, though it's distorted by the wake. I dip my fingers in the cool water and dance them across the surface.

I'm too happy and too scared for words. Making boats—or anything, for that matter—without permission is forbidden for Toolers.

That's what both my dad and brother are, or what my brother is training to be. But today isn't the first time either has broken the rules.

Dad says some rules are meant to be broken. He's carved little wooden animals for me to play with, and I keep them hidden beneath a loose board in my room.

This boat might be harder to hide.

Darius rows us under a low outcropping of trees so that anyone passing by won't see us. After dropping a makeshift anchor, he pulls back the canvas in the boat's belly to reveal carved poles and a small pail.

I squeal in delight but cover my mouth. I don't want anyone to spoil this moment. "Oh, Darius, they're beautiful! This is the best surprise ever."

He hands me a pole, already strung with a hook and bobber. I shouldn't know what a bobber is, but today isn't the first time Darius has taken me fishing, another off-limits pastime. The cube enforcers want us to receive all our food rations from them. Dad says it's a control issue.

Darius grins. "I'm glad you like them." He stretches toward me with a small jar in his hand. I stick my hand in and pull out an earthworm to bait my hook. I know what to do. I help Darius catch them in the dark some nights.

The worm squirms as I wrap it around the hook, careful not to prick my finger. Then, I cast just outside the boat and hope not to catch any fallen branches that hide beneath the surface.

The panfish don't take long to bite. They're always hungry, like some of my classmates from poorer cubes who have to take the train to school.

We call these quick biters panfish, because we usually need half a dozen to fill my cooking pan back home. The first one I reel in is meaty.

“That’s a keeper,” Darius says. “Good work.”

In less than fifteen minutes, our pail is full, and Darius throws back some smaller catches. I’ve caught most of them. He’s not using a bobber because he wants to catch something bigger, but so far, he hasn’t had a nibble.

He flings another small catch over the side. “Why don’t you take a break from catching panfish and try to catch a bass or catfish?”

“Okay.” I reel in my line, and he helps me take off the bobber. I replace the drowned worm with a new one and then cast my line again.

And wait.

A light rain starts, but we’re mostly protected by the trees. Besides, Darius says fish sometimes bite better in the rain. He stares into space as if he can see through the canopy, as if he can see somewhere much farther.

“What are you thinking about?” I whisper. “Does it have to do with what you and Jotham were arguing about earlier?”

He looks over at me and smiles. “I was thinking how much I’m going to miss you.”

“Miss me?” The words catch in my throat. “But you’re not going anywhere.”

“I graduate next month.”

“Right, and you’ll get a work assignment in our cube, and we’ll still get to see each other.”

He shakes his head. “If only it were that simple.”

My heart flops in my chest like the panfish gasping in the pail. “What—what do you mean?”

“It’s something Jotham said, something I’ve already known.” He sighs. “You know there’s a draft.”

A thick droplet smacks my forehead, and I shiver. “Yes, but only a handful of students from all the cubes in ‘Prase are selected for that.”

“I think I’m going to be one of them.”

The droplet slides down my nose until I wipe it away with a hot hand. “But why? I heard you telling Dad your grades aren’t great.”

He chuckles. “No, they’re not great, but that’s not because I’m stupid. It’s because I’m trying to outsmart the system, and well, it isn’t working. I could have finished my coursework two years early. I’ve been dragging my feet, hoping to buy myself more time, but I haven’t done a good enough job covering my tracks.”

I crinkle my eyebrows. Buy more time for what?

“You see, Portia, my professors aren’t stupid either. Once, I made the mistake of showing them the kind of work I can do, and they know I’m hiding my best from them.” His jaw tightens. “They know I never plan to give them my best.”

“But maybe if you make them happy ...”

“That’s called pacifism, Portia. You never win when you pacify. You slowly bleed to death.”
Is that a tug on my line? I’m too tense to tell.

“Jotham thinks the draft panel will call both of us. I think he’s partly wrong.”

I exhale. “That’s good. Maybe you’re wrong, too.”

He smirks. “What I meant is that although Jotham’s scores are high, they’re not high enough. But I think mine are too low, if that makes sense. My professors have notified the panel I’m hiding my best, and I think they’re going to call my bluff.”

“What are you going to do?”

He glances behind me at my pole. “I think you have something. You’d better see what it is.”

I tighten my grip and stare into the dark waters. Something pulls at my line, and this time, I pull back.

“Hook him!” Darius cries.

I yank harder and reel fast as my pole bows. “He’s going to break the line!”

“No, it will hold. It’s new line. Just don’t let go.”

I lean backwards to hand Darius the pole. “Here, you should bring him in.”

He pushes it away. “No, you’re going to do it yourself.” Brothers. They never let their sisters do things the easy way.

The fish finally breaks the surface. It’s a bass, a beauty.

I reel harder until he’s fighting at the boat’s edge. Without warning, he bolts from the water, so high that my line catches the low-hanging tree, leaving him suspended in air.

Darius laughs and uses an oar to pull us closer to the fish. “The crazy fellow hanged himself.”

Hanged. The word makes me wince. Darius seems to notice and gives me a sad smile. I wonder if he misses our sister as much as I do.

Darius sticks his hand in the bass’s mouth to retrieve the hook. Then, he adds him to the pail. “I think we’d better call it a day. Dad’s going to be impressed.”

I lick my lips. Fresh fish with Dad’s forest herbs will taste amazing.

“Before we go, though, I have one other surprise for you, but it’s more a secret I want you to keep.”

Secrets and surprises. This day can’t get much better.

Darius reaches inside his chest pocket and pulls out a small, round object. He hands it to me.

The coin is a dull silver color, and most of the face has been rubbed off. It must have been an important person to have his face carved on it. Above the face are the faint words, United States of America. To the left of them, I can make out only two words: in God.

“But what is it, and what does it mean?”

“It’s a coin from a civilization before our own,” Darius says.

I stroke my thumb over its rough surface. “What did they use coins for?”

“For money, of course. We only use paper money—the dolari—now. Back then, they had a very precise currency, one that was actually backed by something. People decided how hard they wanted to work and in consequence, how much they could earn. It was a free place.”

“We’re free, aren’t we?”

He scowls. “That’s what they want us to think. If we were free, we could decide what we grow up to be.”

Darius threads the hooks tightly on the poles. I never thought of him being anything but a Tooler. That’s what Dad is, and Dad says Darius has natural skill.

Our professors surely know best. They help us find our strengths and focus on them. Even though I’m only nine, my professor praised my love of books and language skills. He said I might make a good teacher or maybe, if I applied myself, a Revisionary someday. I’d never heard of one before, and he said Revisionaries work closely with Court Citizens. They must have something to do with the big court building in our capital cube.

I tease the pail of fish with a half-drowned worm. “What would you want to be, if you could choose?”

Darius covers the poles again with the canvas. “I would be free to make and invent anything I want. I would ...”

A twig snaps behind us, and he spins in his seat, his hand on his knife. He made that, too.

For a moment, I think it might be a doe, come to drink by the water, but deer are quieter than this creature.

“Luther!” I gasp as he steps on the small bank and tries to free his hair from the branches. “What on earth are you doing here?”

He smirks. “Looking for you.”

“But how did you find us?”

“Aww, that’s easy. You two are always somewhere you’re not supposed to be, doing something you’re not supposed to be doing.”

I close my hand over the coin before he sees it, and Darius winks at me.

Luther peers inside the boat. “Whatcha got there?”

“Fish,” I say.

“You know fishing is illegal.”

I make a face and say in a sing-song voice, “Yes, Jotham.”

He cringes. “I’m not Jotham.”

“Well, you sure sound like him.”

He shrugs. “I won’t tell as long as you invite me over for dinner to help you eat them.”

Darius laughs. “You are quite the negotiator, but I’m afraid your brother doesn’t want you hanging out with us. He thinks I might *corrupt* you.”

Luther snorts. “Jotham left to visit his prissy little girlfriend and won’t be back for a while. I told Mom and Dad I was eating at your place.”

“Well then, climb aboard!” Darius grins.

“Can I really?” Luther’s eyes widen. “It’s a smart boat. You made it?”

“Sure did.” Darius rows us to the edge so Luther can climb in.

He whistles at our catch, then grows quiet. “I wish I had a brother like you. I never see you hit Portia, and besides, you do what brothers are supposed to do: get into a little trouble.”

Darius ruffles Luther’s hair. “I always wanted a brother—not that I’d give up my sister for anything in the world, mind you.”

I giggle. I can’t imagine having Luther for a brother, but then again, maybe I can. He’s already trouble.

Luther isn’t smiling, though. His face looks like grown-ups do—serious.

“Do you mean it?”

Darius’s face sobers as well. “Yes, I do. In fact, I was just wishing I might have a brother who can take my place watching out for Portia—if my work assignment takes me far from here.”

“I already watch out for her,” Luther says.

I start to protest, but the two seem to have forgotten I’m right here.

“I know you do, but this would be like a pledge. It would be your word of honor, brother to brother.”

Luther nods and puffs out his chest. “You have my word.”

Darius sticks out his hand. “Let’s shake on it, bro.”

I roll my eyes. “I can take care of myself.”

Darius reaches for the rope to pull up the anchor. “It’s nicer when you don’t have to. We’re kind of like this rope.”

I follow Luther’s gaze to the rope. It seems rather ordinary to me.

Darius lifts the make-shift brick anchor into the boat and holds out the rope for us to see. “I wove this cord out of three strands. Separately, each strand wasn’t all that strong. But once I put them together, they’re mighty hard to break.”

“So, we’re each like a strand, stronger together?” Luther asks.

“Exactly,” Darius says. “Now even if one strand gets taken away, two will still be stronger than one.”

“And one is better than none,” I add.

Darius frowns. “Yes, but I feel badly for the one left on its own. Our world has a fierce pull sometimes, and by itself, the strand is liable to break.”

“Then let’s all stay together.”

He grabs an oar in each hand and guides us out from under the canopy. “I hope that, too.”

Chapter 3

“You have to be more careful, son.”

They argue in muffled tones, but Dad’s voice has been rising over the last hour. It woke me, and now, I cling to the stair railing and huddle on the steps to listen.

“They’re just some fish.”

“Fishing is illegal.”

“But you trap.”

“It’s not the same. I trap at dusk, not in broad daylight. And besides, what if the Danforth boy says something? You said yourself that Jotham and you aren’t on good terms these days.”

Darius grumbles a response. All I make out are the words, “Luther won’t tell.”

“Let’s hope you’re right. Graduation is two weeks away, and you don’t need anyone else to have a bone to pick with you.”

“I don’t care what people say. No one can make me go.”

Something drops and clangs on the floor. It sounds like our kitchen pot. Dad’s reply is so low I can’t hear it.

“I won’t!” Darius cries.

“You’ll have to.” Dad’s voice rises again. “Think of what will happen to our family if you don’t.”

“They won’t do anything to you. It’s me they’ll be after.”

“How little you know of the world.”

“But someone has to take a stand. Why not me?”

“There are other ways to resist, ways that might not get you killed.”

“Oh? Like what?” Darius’s voice steams like a tea pot on a hot stove. “You haven’t done anything to protest the noose they’re tightening around the people’s necks.”

Noose. I shiver and hug my knees. The word reminds me of my sister Candace.

“Watch your mouth, Darius. You don’t know the half. If you’re patient, you might learn.”

“I’m not going.”

“You might have to.”

“No, I’m not!” Darius shouts.

“Then you’re trading a leash for a noose. What good will that do anyone?”

I gasp. Why would anyone hurt Darius?

My ears pound, and the argument blurs. I’m rocking myself and trying not to cry when boots thud at the base of the stairs.

Darius grabs the handrail to keep from toppling over me. “What are you doing here?”

“I—I heard loud voices downstairs, and I …” I gulp. “I don’t want anyone to take you away.”

“Oh, Portia.” He stoops down and scoops me up. “No one’s going to take me away.”

“But Dad said …”

“Don’t you worry about a thing.” He kisses my head and carries me up the stairs to my room.

He still smells like fish and fresh air. His strong arms make me feel safe but soon slide me onto my sheets. He turns and walks to the door.

“Don’t go.”

“It’s late, and you need to get some sleep before school tomorrow.”

“I have something for you.” I reach under the mattress.

He takes one step back inside my room. “Is that your book of rhymes? I haven’t seen you writing in a while.”

“My teacher said I’m not supposed to, unless it’s for class.”

He looks over his shoulder and closes the door. “That’s right. You’re not.”

“But you do lots of things you’re not supposed to.”

A trophy-bass grin spreads over his face. “So, what do you have new?”

“Just this one.” I slide a finger through the fragile paper and hold open a page. “I finished it after dinner. Here it is.”

I scoot over so there’s room on my bed for him to join me. He takes my little notebook and whispers the words out loud.

A cord,

Not one or two

But three strands, made strong

By the silent tie that binds them.

Promise.

“Do you like it?” I hold my breath.

“I love it.” He kisses my head again. “You and me, we’re cut from the same cloth.”

I fidget with the edge of my sheets. “Promise you won’t go anywhere?”

He sucks a breath and then blows it out. “Don’t you worry. No one’s going to break our cord. Now get some sleep—and don’t tell your teacher or anyone else about your little book.”

I let him tuck me back in. “Not even Luther?”

He hesitates. “Maybe some secrets are best kept to ourselves.”

That was a week ago, and I had hoped to forget the arguments and the nervous strain in Dad’s eyes, but they stay with me, even as we all get ready to board the train.

It’s graduation day.

I squirm in my school dress on the train to the capital cube in Chrysoprase or ‘Prase as we call it. The other twelve squares have their own annual graduation ceremonies, too.

Dad and Darius sit on either side of me. It’s just been the three of us riding the train since my sister ... Well, that was two years ago. Years before that was Mom. I can barely remember what riding on her lap felt like.

I gulp, wondering if the train ride reminds them of our shrinking family. They both look tense and uncomfortable in their uniforms.

Darius’s is a navy blue. He said all the graduates receive a special uniform for the day. He keeps pulling at the collar as if he’s sweating. I don’t know how he could be. It’s one of our regular cool mornings.

He and Dad seem to forget about me. I wish there were clouds in the sky. Candace used to help me find fun shapes and animals, but today, there aren’t any.

Why did Darius have to skip the train car where Luther’s family was gathered? Luther would be someone to talk to, but my brother acted like he didn’t even see the Danforths.

At last, the train reaches the capital station, and Dad grabs my hand. Darius says something about finding his classmates, and the last I see, he’s talking to a pretty girl in blue like him.

Not far from the train station is the courthouse. The towering building stands like a scolding teacher at the top of a dozen or so steps. I shrink closer to Dad. I’m not sure I want to work in such a place and hope my teacher is wrong about my future assignment.

Dad picks a spot at the back of the crowd for us to watch the ceremony. He promises to hold me on his shoulders when it starts, but until then, I find some pebbles and invent a tossing game.

“Abram! Why, I thought you would have found a space up front.” Luther’s dad appears with his wife and son. Luther moves next to me and asks what I’m playing. I explain the object and give him a few pebbles while the adults talk.

“Our sons are going to make us proud today,” Mr. Danforth says.

“Yes, they are.”

“I want a front row view when Jotham’s draft gets called. Would you like to join us?”

“No, the long ceremony is hard on children. I’ll watch from back here, so Portia can play. If you’d like to leave Luther with me, he’s welcome to stay.”

“Nonsense,” Mr. Danforth says. “Luther needs to watch. It will be his turn one day. Luther!”

He aims a stone and throws. “Yes, sir?”

“Come along, and stop that silliness.”

Luther’s shoulders sag as he drops the rest of his pebbles. “I guess I’ll see you later, Cotton.”

“Bye.”

I finger the pebbles left in my hand. I thought it was a fun game. Why did Mr. Danforth call it silliness? The adults around me all look bored. Doing nothing seems sillier to me.

“It’s okay, Portia, you can keep playing,” Dad says as the Danforths walk away.

“But playing with someone is more fun. Darius would play with me if he were here.”

Dad bends down on one knee and still towers over me. Even Darius isn’t as big as he is, but they both have the same kind brown eyes.

“Tell me the object.”

I pick up the stones Luther dropped. “See those three circles? The smallest one is worth five points, the middle one is two, and the big one is only worth one.”

“Let’s see how well I can do.”

I grin and watch him throw. He’s not very good at it.

I feel sorry for Luther. His dad has no imagination.

A mic squeals, and Dad straightens. “We can play more later. The ceremony is starting.”

I stuff the leftover pebbles in my dress pocket. Dad reaches under my arms to lift me on his shoulders for a better view. Actually, it’s the best view. Few are taller than my dad.

“I see Darius! He’s on the front row, next to Jotham.”

A man begins the ceremony and then leads us in the pledge.

We pledge allegiance to the Friend and citizens of the American Socialists United,

And to the virtues for which it stands: equality, civility, and fidelity.

We pledge to lose ourselves for the public good and serve

Our one united nation; apart from which, we are nothing.

Darius’s lips are hardly moving, and his face pales.

As soon as we finish the pledge, I lean toward Dad’s ear. “Darius doesn’t look very good. Is he sick?”

“It’s a big day,” Dad says. “He’s probably nervous. I was when I graduated and learned my job assignment.”

What if Darius’s assignment takes him far from home? I start to feel sick, too.

One by one, a man calls the graduates’ names and says their work assignment. They all reply the same. “With honor, I accept.”

Only two graduates so far have been “drafted.” The crowd always applauds extra loudly for them, but I don’t understand why anyone would be excited to leave home.

I grow tired of sitting on Dad's shoulders. "Why hasn't that man called Darius yet?"

"He's going in reverse alphabetical order," Dad says. "It was the toss of the coin, remember?"

I don't. I never pay much attention. Every other year, Darius and I would play games together in the back. Today would be much more fun if he were here with me and not sitting on stage.

"It's Jotham!" I cry as Luther's brother stands.

"Danforth, Jotham," the man at the mic says. "Court Citizen candidate." There's a brief pause. "Report to the capital cube of Chrysoprase for your assignment on Monday."

His shoulders sag, but he juts out his chin. "With honor, I accept."

Dad blows out a puff of air. "Danforth is going to be disappointed."

"But that means Jotham gets to stay home?"

"Some people don't care much about home, Portia."

A few candidates later, the man calls Darius. I hug Dad's neck and hold my breath.

"Abernathy, Darius: Tooler and Coast Guard Controller candidate."

"A dual major?" I whisper. That hardly ever happens.

But Dad doesn't answer. He's holding his breath for the announcement of Darius's assignment.

"Draft to the Crystal Globe."

I gasp. "No!"

Dad shushes me and squeezes my legs tighter.

A hush falls on the crowd as the people wait for Darius's reply. Everyone knows what he's supposed to say, but he must say it first before they can applaud.

"Respectfully, I decline."

Murmurs ripple through the crowd, and Dad pulls me down from his shoulders.

But now, I can't see anything. "What's going on?"

His face hardens like stone.

A shuffling noise comes from the stage. Then, as if nothing had happened, the man calls the next candidate's name.

As soon as the ceremony ends, Dad takes my hand and pulls me toward the train platform.

"Aren't we going to wait for Darius?"

"Someone escorted him off stage. I don't know where he is, and I've got to get you home."

I have to run to keep up with his long strides. "But where did they take him?"

Dad presses his lips together. "I don't know."

When we reach our house, Luther's windows are dark. His family must still be traveling from the ceremony.

But if they were home, would they let him talk to me? Jotham had wanted a draft and didn't get called. Darius hadn't wanted it and turned it down.

The gulf between my brother and Jotham spreads wider. I can't let anything come between Luther and me.

I watch from my window until Luther's bedroom light comes on and then slip down the stairs and out back to my swing.

Dad wouldn't like me being out after dark. Mongrels don't often bother our cube, though they could.

But I'm more afraid of losing my friend than facing a mongrel.

Half an hour, maybe more passes. I'm shivering, and my jacket isn't warm enough for me to stay outside much longer.

A lanky figure ducks under Luther's porch light, casting a long shadow as he leaves his yard.

Luther stops at the edge of the swing. "It's freezing out here."

"You could have come sooner. You had to see me from your window."

"I'm not supposed to talk to you."

"That's stupid. Why not?"

He hesitates. "I think your brother's in trouble, and my parents don't want me mixed up with you."

I gulp. Darius still hasn't come home. "I'm scared."

He kicks his shoe in the dirt. "Yeah, me too."

"But you'll always be my friend, right?"

"Now that's a stupid question. Of course, I will. I promised." He glances at his house. "But I've got to go back. Jotham just came home, and my parents are talking with him. They'll miss me soon."

"Okay, bye for now." I hop off my swing. If Jotham just got home, maybe Darius will be here soon, too.

I gently close the kitchen door and then blow hot breath onto my hands. There's a light on by the table.

It's Darius. He looks up when he sees me. "I thought you were asleep. Dad's in his room."

I run and hug him. "I was so scared when you didn't come home with us."

He tries to laugh, but there's a heaviness to it. "Everything's all right. I'll have to deal with some grown-up bullies for a while, but things should simmer down."

I pull back. "You can stay?"

"It seems that way. I'm getting an assignment at another cube in 'Prase and should be able to commute on the train like Dad does."

"I wouldn't be so sure." Dad joins us in the kitchen. "People like Bertrand Matteson don't just look the other way when someone tells him no."

"Who's he?" I ask.

“He’s the president of the Crystal Globe University and head of the draft panel.”

“He was the one calling out the names today,” Darius says. “Don’t worry about him. I’m going to be fine.”

Dad opens his mouth to reply, then nods at me. “You’d better get to bed. It’s been a long day.”

I kiss Darius and then reach for Dad. He squeezes me and then shoos me toward the stairs.

My heart feels light as I mount them. I slip into my nightdress and slide under my covers. My family is still together. We’re going to be fine.

Chapter 4

Crash! Wood splinters. Boots stomp.

I shoot up in bed and clutch my sheets. What is that?

In the darkness, I squint at my door. The pounding boots grow closer. They're climbing the stairs.

Like a train without breaks, they hit my door. Someone kicks it open. I scream and duck under my covers.

"Try the next one." The men move on, leaving my door sagging on its hinges.

Darius's room.

My brother shouts at the men. There's an argument, a scraping noise. Something hits the wall with a thud.

The men return, their boots heavy on the wooden floors.

I peek out from under my covers. The house remains dim, but I can see shadows moving.

They're dragging someone.

"Darius!" I fling off my covers. Squeezing between my broken door, I rush down the stairs after them.

Dad catches me at the base of the stairs. "Where are you taking him?" he demands.

The enforcer in charge ignores Dad and waves his hand at the two men holding Darius who hangs limply between them. "Wait outside with the prisoner," he tells them.

He then turns to Dad and me. The enforcer is almost as tall as Dad, and his eyes lock on us like a hawk might on field mice.

"He defied his draft and is an accused traitor. He must answer for his actions and will be tried tomorrow." His voice scrapes like stubbed chalk on a board.

"No!" I whimper.

The man snorts and disappears into the night.

"Go after him! Get him back." I cry and try to push Dad away. Why doesn't he do something?

He holds me tighter. "I would, but it would do no good—and then who would care for you if we both were gone? I don't want to think ..."

Dad's sobs rise against the yellow walls of our living room. "Oh, my children! Must they all

be taken?”

We don't move for a long time. When Dad finally pulls me to my feet, my teeth are chattering.

No wonder. The cold night air claws inside the broken door. Dad tries to patch it back in place, but the whole thing is ruined. He will have to replace both it and my own bedroom door. Maybe Darius's too.

Dad doesn't make me go back up the lonely stairs. He tucks me in bed next to him and then locks his bedroom door.



The nightmares don't end when the sun comes up.

Dad and I ride an early train back to the capital cube and reach the courthouse by mid-morning. We mount the solemn steps we had passed just yesterday.

The court building is a scary place with enforcers—Dad calls them Gages—and people wearing long black robes. I try to hide behind Dad as a Gage tells us to follow him.

His boots clank on the marble floors. The man's face looks cold and hard. Maybe he's part marble himself.

I tell myself we'll be okay. Dad said we would see Darius soon.

Good. Maybe he can come home with us.

When the man opens two large doors, I peek around Dad.

Hard-backed benches line the room. It's full of robed teachers, some of Darius's classmates, and other cube dwellers. How did they know to come? Why are they all here?

I peer down the long aisle to the front. A robed man in a high seat faces the room. A bound man with reddish-brown hair has his back to me. It's Darius.

“Dad.” I tug his arm, but he pulls me into a pew. He won't let go of my hand.

In the row ahead of us, a boy twists around to face me. “Hey.” His hair still needs a cut.

“Luther!” I gasp. “What are you doing here?”

“Shh!” Luther's dad puts a finger to his lips and a hand on Luther's shoulder.

Luther gives me a worried frown and turns away.

Someone starts talking, but I can't see. I climb onto Dad's lap for a better look.

A man Dad calls the prosecutor walks toward Darius. “Young man, this is your last chance to listen to reason. The Crystal Globe has drafted you to the final level of your training. This draft carries the greatest honor and demands your respect. Men of your mechanical prowess must invest in the resources of tomorrow. Fueling our state are stakes larger than you can understand. Pledge yourself to its service, and it will reward you.”

“With what?” Darius’s voice echoes in the long hall. “All I am asking is for the right to choose a simple life, a free life. You can offer me nothing to tempt me beyond that.”

Murmuring grows to a roar. I shrink into Dad as the robed man—Dad calls him the Court Citizen—bangs the mallet. I don’t understand why everyone is so angry.

Dad pets my hair and shelters me under his arm, which muffles the next argument. I scan the seats and find only one smile.

Luther peeks behind his father’s shoulder and winks at me. He gives my heart hope.

The Court Citizen bangs his mallet again, and I sit straight to listen.

“The defendant is accused of misusing his intellectual property, rightly belonging to the state, thereby committing treason against it. He refuses to fulfill his draft to the Crystal Globe, the greatest honor our educational system can bestow. The jury of peers will now determine his sentence.”

I glance at Dad. “What peers?”

He gives me a weak smile. “There are two peers and the Court Citizen who will rule for or against Darius today.”

“Do they all have to be on his side?” I peer between shoulders to see who is walking to the stands. Two people, a young man and young woman, approach the front, but their backs are to me.

“No, we just need two—one peer and the Court Citizen—to judge him not guilty, and then hope the Court Citizen passes a moderate sentence.”

The two who have joined the robed man in the front now face the room.

“Look! It’s Jotham.”

Dad’s breath catches.

“It’ll be all right,” I whisper. “He’s Darius’s friend.”

“But not on good terms these days.”

I shake my head. Jotham and Darius may fight, but they’ve been friends all their lives. I remember Darius’s anchor. A cord of friends isn’t easily broken.

The first peer, a girl from Darius’s class, rises. She’s the pretty girl from the station. She seems to be shaking, but she holds her head erect. “Not guilty.”

Murmurs fill the room, and I tug on Dad’s sleeve. He offers an anxious smile.

Luther’s brother is next. He rises slowly and sets his jaw. “Guilty.”

“No!” I cry and jump to my feet. There must be a mistake.

Luther twists to face me. His eyes fill with tears, and he starts to speak, but his father slaps his face. He slumps in his seat.

Dad reaches for my waist and pulls me back.

The robed man rises and says, “Guilty.”

I don’t know what this means for Darius and start asking questions. Dad shushes me to hear

the Court Citizen.

“The court hereby sentences Darius Abernathy to a life sentence at the Baytown Satellite ...”
Satellite. I thought only really bad people, maybe murderers, went to satellites. But Darius isn’t a murderer.

The double doors behind me open with a whooshing sound, and four Gages wearing dark green uniforms appear.

If they’ve come to take Darius away, I can’t let them.

Before Dad can stop me, I dart into the aisle ahead of them and run toward the front, straight for Darius. The man beside him tries to stop me, but I’m small and squeeze past him too.

I grab my brother.

“What are you doing, Portia?” He bends down. “It’s not safe for you here.”

“I won’t let them take you.”

“You can’t stop that.”

I clutch him tighter. “Then, I’ll go with you.”

Behind me, someone grumbles. “Get her out of here!”

Darius cradles my cheek. “Listen, you have to be brave—and smart. Smarter than everyone else. I’ll never forget you, Portia. I’ll find a way—”

A claw-like hand tears me away from Darius and drags me back down the aisle.

“Leave her alone!” Darius shouts as two Gages block him from view.

I bite the man’s hand. Hard. He curses and throws me against the wall. There’s a snap. I struggle to stand and crane my neck just in time to see a Gage shove Darius through a back door. I’m too late. He’s gone.

“Portia, watch out!” Dad’s voice trembles.

I duck away from the wall just in time to miss the Taser blast and roll to the floor.

A pair of black boots steps in front of my face. Above me stands the Gage from last night. Panting in anger, he clutches the weapon and aims again.

Dad shoves between us. “Forgive the child. She’s upset.”

“I could arrest her for assaulting a Gage.” The voice rasps.

There’s a commotion behind us, and I hold my breath.

“Gage Eliab! There’s a riot outside the courthouse. We need you. Now!”

“She’ll be sorry.” The Gage mutters and runs after the other man.

Dad reaches to lift me up. “Are you okay?”

“My back hurts—but my heart hurts worse.” And I crumple into his arms.



We make a lonely pair on the train ride to our home cube. Dad sits beside me, clutching a brown envelope, as I scribble on a napkin. He's been staring at the envelope ever since we boarded the train.

The Gage from the courthouse had not said very nice things when he handed it to him.

At long last, he shoves it into his coat pocket and leans over my shoulder. "What's that, sweetheart?"

"A riddle. Darius loves my verses."

"Didn't your teacher say you shouldn't write them?"

"I think that's why Darius likes them."

He sighs and looks around. No one on the train takes an interest in us. "What does it say?"

I smooth the crinkled edges to show him.

Someone

Who sticks with you

When others don't—But no,

No one is like that, no one but

A brother.

Dad reads the words, then gently folds the napkin.

"Do you know who that someone would be?" I ask.

He smiles sadly. "Who is a friend?"

I nod. "And we have none."

"Why don't you give rhymes a break?" He hands the napkin back to me. "Let's play a game instead."

"What game?"

"Let's call it *Forget and Remember*."

"That's a funny name. I don't feel like playing right now."

"Give it a try." Dad's face is worn and wrinkly, like my napkin.

I tuck the scrawl into my pocket and find the pebbles from yesterday. Maybe a game won't be so bad.

"How do you play?"

"First, you think of a memory you want to forget—a memory you wish never happened."

"Does it have to be a very old memory?"

"No, but let's not talk about today."

"Okay, I have one. What then?"

“Think of a memory you always want to remember, and then replace the bad with the good.”

I press a finger to my lips. “Can the good memory be from today?”

“If you want it to be.”

“I’m ready.” I tuck my feet underneath my skirt and face him. “I want to forget how clammy Candace felt when I found her swinging from a rope in her room.” Dad gasps, but I continue. “And I want to remember how alive Darius felt when he last touched me.”

“Oh, Portia—” He grabs me in his arms, smothering me. “The last of my children.”

I slip my hand into his coat pocket and pull out the crinkled brown paper. “What’s in the envelope?”

“More troubles.” He sighs. “It’s our rations—they’re being cut. I will have to work extra shifts at the base, which means I will be away from home more.”

“Is this my fault?”

Dad takes my hand, envelope and all. “No, sweetie, of course not.”

“But that mean Gage handed you this.”

He sets his jaw. “We won’t worry about him. We’ll manage—I’ll work harder, and you’ll have to do well in school.”

I squeeze his hand. “I will. Darius said I had to be smart, smarter than everyone.”

“That’s a good girl.”

“But then, won’t they draft me too?”

“Let’s not borrow tomorrow’s trouble.” He slips the envelope from my hand. “Maybe when you graduate, things will be different.”

“Different? How?”

Dad shakes his head. “I’ve failed two of my children. I’m going to do whatever it takes to make a better world for you.”

“Maybe I can make it better. What would the smartest person do with herself?”

He laughs and tips my chin. “Well, now, let me think. You could be a Court Citizen—like the man behind the judgment seat today.”

I wrinkle my nose and pull back. “No, he was so serious. He wouldn’t like my rhymes.”

“Ah yes, your rhymes,” Dad smiles. “You do like to scribble. Perhaps you would make a good Revisionary.”

“That’s what my teacher said.” I focus, trying to remember her words. “She said they *interpret* and *amend* our law book—she called it a funny name.”

“The Codex?”

“Yes, that’s right. She said they make life better for the people.”

Dad hesitates. “Yes, in theory anyway.”

“Then I’ll be a Revisionary,” I snuggle into his side and try to ignore the tingling feeling in

my own. "I'll fix things so Darius can come back."

"Sweetheart, about Darius ..."

His words get lost in the space between waking and sleep. It is the only place to find the lost faces I love.

Chapter 5

Luther didn't come to see me that night. I waited for him on the cold, stiff swing until Dad carried me inside. And then I cried next to my open window until the frost numbed the pain.

Somehow, I manage to crawl down the stairs and back to the swing the next morning. Still, Luther does not come. Again, Dad finds me and carries my rigid body inside.

"Eat some breakfast." He sets me down by the table. "It'll warm you up."

We eat in silence, and then Dad goes to get my uniform for school. It's easier than lugging me up and down the stairs. For some reason, I can't climb them. My back and legs aren't working right.

Someone knocks on the door. At least Dad managed to fix it yesterday. There's still a crack or two, so I can see through. I hobble toward it, hoping to find Luther.

I fall back. It's not Luther. It's a Gage.

"Dad!" I call upstairs. "Someone's at the door."

He appears seconds later with my dress and school bag, stuffed fuller than usual. "I know."

Squaring his shoulders, he answers the door. I hide behind him.

"Abram Abernathy," the Gage says.

"Yes."

"Your new orders and address." The man hands him an envelope. "Report to Cube 1519 immediately. Leave your key here in the door." He clicks his heels and then walks away.

Peeking around Dad's thick build, I glimpse a gray vehicle at the edge of our yard.

I stare. Vehicles are only for important people. Why would this Gage have one?

The enforcer opens his side door and slides in. There's someone in the driver's seat.

I catch sight of his profile and shudder. It's the Gage from yesterday, the horrible man who

...

Dad closes the door and exhales as if he's been punched.

I fall backward and grip the edge of our couch. "Dad? What's wrong? What's in that envelope?"

"We have to leave."

"For how long?"

He stares past me and doesn't answer. He doesn't have to.

I dig my hand into the fabric. This place is the only home I've ever known. I was born here. Mom died here. Candace hanged herself here. Darius was taken from here.

Dad shakes himself. "I've got to get some things together."

I nudge my school bag with my foot. "Did you put something else in it?"

"I packed what I thought you would need." He pats my head.

"Then you knew?"

He sighs. "I had my suspicions. Get changed, and wait here until I'm ready. You won't be going to school today." With that, he disappears inside his room.

He may have packed what I need, but I have to get something else. After wiggling out of my nightdress and into my uniform, I grit my teeth and attempt the first step. Pain shoots down my leg, and I fall into the railing.

Panting, I slide onto all fours and slowly knee my way up the stairs. I crawl into my room but can't figure out how to stand without the pain coming back.

That's okay. I just need to reach the mattress. I crawl past the secret panel with my carved animals and to my bedframe. I pull out my rhyming notebook and a flashlight Darius gave me.

My arms ache, so I lean against the bed and hope for the pain to go away. I try to memorize a picture of my room with its pale blue walls and white curtains. It isn't fancy, but something tells me my new room will be much different.

The wood floor creaks downstairs. Dad must be moving around, packing. I'll wait here until he's ready.

I glance at my window. If I could look out, would I see Luther watching for me?

I pull a loose thread from my jacket. I tug on both ends, and it snaps in the middle.

No, there is no more Luther. Darius was wrong. The cord he said would never break already has, and I'm the only strand left.

How soon will I snap, too?

I shut my eyes and clutch my notebook. Without warning, I start to cry and lower my head into my knees.

"There you are."

I didn't hear Dad enter my room. Maybe I fell asleep. I hug myself and wipe my face with the back of my arm.

He bends next to me. "We're going to be okay, Portia. We have each other. Nothing can change that."

"How can you be sure? Because yesterday, Darius ..." I start crying again.

He scoops me up. "Because I won't let you go."

The stairs creak a sad goodbye as we descend. Dad sets me down at the door. "Can you walk?"

“I think so.”

“Once we get to our new home, we’ll have your back checked out.”

I fidget with my dress. “I’ll be fine.” But I don’t understand the pain, or why one spot on my back is painful to touch. Something seems to catch. Maybe it will go away.

Dad hands me my small bag, and I stuff my soggy notebook and flashlight inside. Then, he follows me out front and inserts his key into the lock.

We start down the road, passing Luther’s house. His front door is open, and through the frame, I can see Jotham, arguing with his father. I wonder where Luther is and then stop myself. He never came when I needed him most. He must be as false as his brother.

They are so busy with their argument they don’t even notice us leave.

I start to say something but notice the far-away look in Dad’s eyes. “Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a fatted calf with hatred.”¹ He sighs. “It’s something my granddad used to say when I was little and we didn’t have much. I used to think he was wrong. If we had more, we would be happy.”

He smiles softly. “But now, I know he was right. The Danforths will have everything they can possibly want, yet I think they have lost more than I. After all, I still have you, and we can be happy together.”

“What do you mean they have everything they could want?”

He hesitates. “Jotham—well, he received the draft he wanted, the one Darius turned down.”

“But how?”

Dad shakes his head. “It doesn’t matter now.”

I narrow my eyes. “I hate them.”

Dad grips my shoulder. “Hating will hurt you, not them.”

“But it hurts.” I blink back salty tears and start to turn my head for one last glimpse of our home, the home I will never see again.

Dad’s hand moves from my shoulder to the back of my head. “Don’t look back, Portia. The only way to live is forward.”

I straighten my face and focus on the road ahead, leading to the train station and an uncertain future.

He pats my cheek and lowers his hand to find my small one. I may be tired, hurt, and angry, but somehow, I feel safe when he’s holding my hand.

“But Dad, if I can’t hate them, what can I do?”

“You can live your life. And you can fight.”

We reach the wood platform. As I climb the first step, something catches, and the sharp pain

¹ Proverbs 15:7 NKJV

returns. Dad clutching my hand is the only thing that keeps me from falling.

I cry, and my legs cave beneath me. Dad drops his sack and sets me gently on the wood planks. “Portia, what’s wrong?”

“My—my—ba-back!” I sob, twisting to find a comfortable position.

His knobby hands gently feel up and down my back. “Where does it hurt?”

He patiently waits until my sobs settle into soft whimpers. “Right there.” I wince as he touches a spot on my lower back.

Not caring about my pride, he pulls up my dress. His eyes darken. “You’re black and blue. Why didn’t you tell me?”

I claw at my dress to pull it down. What if one of my classmates were at the station? I don’t want any schoolboy seeing my underwear.

Dad brushes it back in place and then reaches under my arms. “I’ll carry you.”

“But you’re already carrying everything else.”

“You don’t weigh a whole lot.”

“I’ll be—fine.” Even as I say the words, I wonder if they’re true.

“Yes, yes, you will be.” Dad agrees, too quickly. “There will be Healers in Cube 1519. We’ll pay them a visit as soon as we get settled.”

He holds me on his lap while we wait for the train. I snuggle into his chest. Maybe he’s right. As long as we’re together, we’re home. But without Darius, it will never be the same.

The distant whistle blows. I squint to see the train grow bigger as it approaches. Parked by the track is a gray vehicle I hadn’t noticed before. It’s the one from this morning. Though it’s empty, the Gages can’t be far away.

I clench my fists. “Dad.”

“Hmm?”

“How can someone as little as me fight?”

He brushes several strands of hair from my face. “You won’t be doing any fighting as long as I’m around.”

“But you said not to hate but to live and fight.”

“You do the living. Leave the fighting to me.”

Maybe he is right. What can a girl with a cracked back do anyway?

The train pulls to a stop in front of us. It isn’t the passenger train that took us to the ceremony. It’s a work train, and there’s only one passenger car, full of smelly men with stained clothes. They smell like the upper-grade boys do after their physical education classes in the afternoon.

I shrink further into Dad’s chest. I’m the only girl on board, and they’re all looking at me.

“Who are they?” I muffle my question, hoping no one hears.

“Shipyard workers,” Dad mutters back as one of them steps closer.

“Pretty little girl.” The man’s teeth are cracked and grimy. “Bet her mama’s even prettier.”
Dad tightens his grip. “Her mama’s dead.”

“Well now, ain’t that a shame. What are you doing taking a creature like her on this train?”
Dad’s jaw tightens. “Relocation orders.”

The man chuckles. “Relocation? This train ain’t going anywhere nice, leastways no place your little angel girl belongs. She sure is a pretty little thing.”

Dad shuffles away from the man to an open window facing the station as the train groans back to life.

It’s about to take me away from my home, from the boat Darius hid in the forest, from anything that reminds me I have a brother.

And it’s because of those enforcers.

The parked gray vehicle comes up on my left. Just beyond, the two Gages walk past the stationmaster’s booth.

My hand dives into my jacket pocket and grips the pebbles.

I throw them—one, two, three. Thump, thump, thump! Each one strikes the metal vehicle as the train chugs past it.

They might leave only a dent, like hailstones, but it’s a small start.

Dad places his hand on my arm before I can throw the last one. The dark Gage yells something, but the train whistle drowns out the words.

I glare back.

Dad shivers and holds me tighter. His lips brush my hair. “Don’t worry, Portia. We’re going to be all right. You’ll see.”

“But I’m going to fight, Dad. Kids have to work out their own fights.” I hate that Jotham was right.

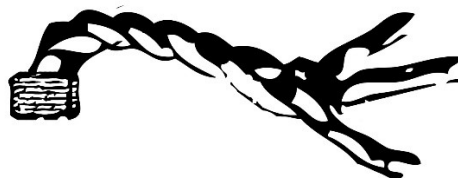
His breath catches. “I’ll keep you safe.”

I purse my lips. Our old cube grows smaller and smaller, and I turn my head to focus forward, like Dad told me to. My heart doesn’t belong to the place anyway.

It belongs to two men.

“I’ll keep you safe too, Dad.”

The words rise like steam in my throat. “And one day, I’ll find a way to make Darius safe again.”



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