

## The Waystone's Call

Inspired by The Reclamation Project by John "Gneech" Robey

By Shiloh Skye

Miles took his very first steps upon the surface of the earth, leaving the burning wreckage of a small skiff behind. The human stumbled ever so briefly into the countryside before his legs finally gave out. He collapsed onto his hands and knees, coughed up smoke from the burning wreckage of his stolen escape craft, and rolled onto his back. Cracked ribs ached against his shallow breaths as he struggled to taste fresh air once again. Arms outstretched, Miles watched the dark smoke of the skiff billow into the tangerine sky.

*Freedom.*

It hadn't set in yet. Miles clutched at the grass and soil beneath him, digging into the earth--the real, genuine earth. He brought up an organic clump of actual dirt and grass that overflowed in his hand. It was slightly damp, with a fresh smell that tickled his nose as he let it fall through his fingers. The clump vanished, revealing the horizon behind it.

Far way against the orange sun floated the silhouette of the Hourglass high city. It took the shape of its namesake; like an upside-down mountain, the massive city hovered just above the peak of a lonely mesa. Miles had never seen his former home from a distance, and when he laid his eyes upon it, the voices in his head suddenly resurfaced.

*You did it.*

*You've escaped.*

*You're finally free.*

Miles let an uncontrollable euphoria wash over him as the voices continued congratulating him. A smile stretched across his face, transforming into a relieved laugh

as he gave in to exhausted delirium. He clutched at the star pendant that hung around his neck, knowing now that he had the chance to find the one who had given it to him so long ago. The feel of the cool metal in his hand comforted him, and he tried to grant himself a well-deserved rest for just a few more moments, but the ethereal voices would not let him enjoy it for long.

*Get up, Miles.*

*You must push on.*

*They are coming.*

Miles whimpered. He tried to shake the voices from his mind, but they continued to accost him from every direction, just as they had for the past two years. Mentally and physically exhausted, he couldn't resist them. He relinquished his grip on the pendant, pushed himself up, grit his teeth through the pain in his chest, and began to stumble forth into a new world.

The lonely, abandoned valley stretched out for dozens of kilometers in every direction from the Hourglass. Ancient crumbling concrete structures dotted the landscape, overgrown by nature and transformed into lush, green monuments sticking up from a sea of wild wheat. The voices echoed from every direction across the ancient plain, as if the ghosts of the ruins themselves were urging him forward.

*Follow my voice.*

*Someone is waiting for you.*

*They will take you to safety.*

"I know," Miles muttered in annoyance. The voices had interrupted his worries for the small group that had helped him escape the Hourglass. He hoped beyond hope that the furred folk, who had used holographic cloakers to take human forms, had found a way to slip back into the shadows. They were supposed to have accompanied him, handing him off to another smuggler who would take him somewhere he could begin his search for who he had lost. Instead, they had practically thrown him on the escape skiff when the plan fell to chaos, telling him to 'follow the call.'

*They'll be okay.*

*Keep walking.*

*Don't look back.*

Miles hesitated, nearly pausing to defy the voices and look back at his former home. In response the voices escalated into visions. They flickered into existence ahead of him, like a weak broadcast emerging from static on an antique television screen. Miles gasped in recognition when a figure finally came into focus, but as quickly as the person appeared, they flickered out, leaving only the weight of the star on his neck, and the fading taste of blueberries.

"No, come back." Miles said. "Please come back." But the vision was gone, replaced by shadows cast by the last sliver of daylight.

The vision sapped his will to carry on as the shadow of night fell upon the plain. He leaned up against an old, dry tree. His legs burned as if they had melted into lava. For just a moment, thoughts of turning back intruded within his mind. He thought of repenting for leaving the Hourglass, falling to his knees at the gates and begging the enforcers to let him back in.

But the ghost of his suffering in that oppressive city urged him onward, filling him with the weight of purpose.

"No," Miles whimpered. "Never go back. Can't ever go back."

With that small burst of resolve, Miles managed to organize his thoughts just enough to search his surroundings for somewhere he could collapse into sleep--or at the very least, to pass out. He fingered his pendant as he scanned the area. An ancient fossil fuel station stood next to an asphalt road, almost entirely reclaimed by nature, but the brutal concrete and rusted out rebar of the human structure felt too alien and unwelcoming, as human things always had. Instead, Miles spotted a dark grove across the plain. The voices urged him toward it, as if the lush oaks and pines themselves were calling his name.

But before Miles could follow, his senses froze him in place.

A terrible feeling gnawed deep into Miles' gut. The hair on the back of his neck stood up. His eyes locked forward. He felt his ears twitch in deep study of every

surrounding noise. A rustle in the grass. The sound of breathing. The crackle of electricity.

*Run.*

Miles dove. A shock baton smashed against the tree trunk, shattering the dry bark that would have been his skull had he not just barely sensed the stalker. Adrenaline snuffed out the pain and exhaustion. His legs turned solid once more. He rolled from the dive and bolted like prey from the ambush of a predator.

"He's heading north!" the Hourglass soldier shouted. A cacophony of voices erupted behind him, spurring Miles' every nerve.

*To the grove.*

*Past the trees.*

*To safety.*

*Run.*

He scrambled through brush and into the grove's tree line. Taser shells blasted against the tree trunks around him, missing his body by inches, filling the night with a chorus of sputtering electricity. An enforcement skiff roared above the trees, violently shaking and snapping branches like the vicious winds of a storm. A spotlight poured through the canopy and forced Miles to weave between tree trunks and vault over fallen logs in desperation to shake the blinding light.

Suddenly, the trees ended just as the voices had promised. The environment changed all at once. Massive piles of discarded machinery now rolled across the landscape with nothing to obstruct the spotlight that fixed itself upon him. Miles ran through the paths between the scrap piles, vaulting over long-dead robotics and crumpled appliances. The ground became uneven with metal scraps that shredded the soles of his shoes and bit into his feet. He hardly noticed, drunk on fear and instinct like a crazed animal desperate to survive the hunt.

A clearing opened up in the machinery, but before Miles could search for his next exit, the skiff surged ahead of him. It glided through the air on its broad side and shined

the spotlight directly in Miles' face. Blind and startled, his ankle slammed with a sickening crack into a piece of machinery. It sent his body careening through the air, and when he finally tumbled back to the earth it was to crash into what felt like a pile of jagged metal teeth.

He writhed on the pile of metal, hyperventilating as half a dozen soldiers spread out in an arc before him, taser guns at the ready. The skiff landed in the clearing behind them, blowing sharp metal particulate out in a circle and forcing Miles to shield his eyes. They struggled uselessly to adjust to the blinding spotlight that had stayed trained upon him. More dark figures stepped off the skiff, long coats spread out like demonic wings at their backs.

*Run.*

*Run.*

*Run.*

Miles struggled to obey the voices, but a boot landed hard on his chest, forcing him down into the sharp metal. He cried out, feeling the cracks in his ribs strain against the weight.

"Stupid kid," the Hourglass enforcer spat. He blinked twice and the communicator on his ear lit up. "Runaway secured. Still non-compliant. We're returning to the Hourglass."

"No," Miles protested, but the enforcer ground his boot down harder.

"Shut up!" he said as Miles cried out in pain. "You know what an embarrassment this is to your family, kid? Parents can't even keep their own son from going native. What a joke."

The man looked over to two of the guards at his flank and jerked his head at Miles. "You two, get him on the skiff."

The two enforcers gave confirmation and grabbed Miles under his arms.

"No! Let go of me!" Miles cried, struggling as they lifted him. He twisted in their grasp, managing to break free and throw a single flimsy punch that nearly broke his knuckles on the enforcer's steel helmet. A shock baton instantly slammed into his back with such force that it knocked the wind out of him. His bad ankle hit the ground, and

the second explosion of pain sent him falling back into the pile of scrap. This time, his head hit something hard. He heard the crack of his skull. A boot slammed down on his arm, snapping the bone like a toothpick. Miles cried out in agony.

"Quit it, damn you! Kid's not one of them beasts. He's VIP! You kill him it's your ass."

The enforcer continued to bark orders at his men, but Miles couldn't understand anything he said. Any lingering spirit of defiance gave way to an freefalling exhaustion. His world began to go dark. The trauma sent his pain and exhaustion collapsing into rubble with the rest of the scrap.

As darkness began to close in, Miles saw something he would only come to understand later. The metal piles surrounding the clearing shifted one by one. Landslides of scrap slid down the piles of machinery. The soldiers in the clearing whirled to assess the threat. Massive angular shapes emerged from the rubble. Dozens of metal shadows reached out toward them. Flashes of light filled the night. The pounding of gunfire. The scent of blood and oil. Bloodcurdling screams, cut short.

But Miles couldn't comprehend it. All the stars went out and all the voices went mute as the broken human succumbed to unconsciousness.

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*"Sometimes I wish I was never born. Or, at least that I wasn't born here."*

*"Well, I'm glad you were. I don't think I could make it in the Hourglass without you."*

Unconsciousness transformed into a fitful sleep, and Miles dreamed of conversations held long ago in the Hourglass. He watched the stars, defying the city's curfews and letting his mask down for the night, talking about things he could never say to anyone else.

*"I feel like I don't belong. Like there's this discomfort that I just can't pin down."*

*"Well, if you figure it out, let me know. I'm as confused as you are."*

Memories that so often made for a fitful night's sleep suddenly calmed him instead. He tasted blueberries, watched the stars, and held his companion's hand. As they leaned closer to each other, sounds from the waking world began to bleed into his dreams.

"I need a doctor out here. *Now!*"

"Multiple fractures. Head trauma. He's unresponsive."

Miles felt himself being lifted, carried, and strapped down, then lifted up again. Someone placed something heavy and cold up his head. Reality struggled to pull him from the depths of sleep. The waking voices grew closer and louder, drowning out the soothing memories with a sad and anxious voice.

"Is he going to be alright?"

"I should have gotten there sooner."

Miles pushed the waking world away, slipping back into one final dream, but this time no soothing memories greeted him. Instead, Miles once again found himself in that graveyard of machinery. The air tasted thick and suffocating. He whirled, searching for something to explain the inexplicable anxiety welling up inside of him.

A figure flickered into existence at the edge of the clearing, just as it had in the ancient plain. He looked down at the ground, statue still. Miles gasped as the bodies of the enforcers appeared at his feet, bloody and lifeless. He felt a warmth on his hands and looked down to find them stained with blood.

"No, wait," Miles said.

The figure didn't even meet Miles' eyes. He just shook his head and turned away. Miles ceased to breathe. "Please," he called. "I didn't mean to."

The figure turned his back to Miles and began to retreat into shadow.

"No! Come back! Please don't leave me again!"

Miles ran but couldn't get any closer to the figure. He reached out, calling his name and fighting against the dense darkness closing in all around. He swung his fists as if to fight it off, but it felt as though he was trying to push through molasses. He panicked and flailed as he slowed to a halt, punching and kicking in a struggle for air.

"Hey, please stop! You're going to hurt yourself. Miles, wake up!"

Miles' eyes snapped open to that feeling of falling which so often follows a nightmare. Panic soon gave way to confusion as he found himself lying in a bed, covered by a blanket and mercifully free of pain. Morning light met his eyes, but it was not the fluorescent light of a Hourglass reeducation ward. This light shone golden and warm, and his eyes easily adjusted to it. It lit the amber wood of the small room in such a way as to give the place a radiant glow. Miles looked up to see the light streaming through a window above him. Puffy white clouds rolled lazily through the sky above, rather than down below.

This wasn't the Hourglass.

"It was just a dream," said a voice.

Miles looked to the side of the bed. Any doubt that he wasn't in the high city shattered completely when his eyes met not those of a human being, but of a tiger. His species was unmistakable, with row upon row of those characteristic black stripes crossing his burnt orange and white fur. Miles' fearful breathing seemed to cease all at once as he stared into the tiger's emerald eyes, too stunned to speak.

"I'm sorry I had to wake you up," said the strange tiger, his speech making him appear all the more real. "You shouldn't be moving so much right now. Your pain's masked, but you're still hurt."

Miles stayed silent, watching with fascination as the tiger spoke. His voice was soothing and reassuring, with the smallest suggestion of a purr in every word, as if speaking deep from the chest.

"You've been asleep for three days. Do you remember what happened? You were supposed to rendezvous with us after leaving the Hourglass, but your skiff's engine gave out."

The revelation that the tiger was part of the same group which had smuggled him out of the city should have made him feel relieved. He had found them. He was no doubt safe. But instead, the tiger's words sparked memories of the machine graveyard, hitting



him like a cargo skiff. He heard the machinery and the gunfire again, and he imagined that something had gone terribly wrong in their attempts to recover him. His stomach twisted. The dream of their corpses littering the ground appeared behind his eyelids with every blink. His hands felt wet with blood. A chill sent ice into his skin.

"Are you okay?" the tiger asked. "Can you speak?"

Miles trembled. He opened his mouth but found that his mind couldn't string words together, much less force them out. He averted his eyes, feeling stuck like a clog in a pipe. The only words running through his mind: My fault. My fault. My fault.

The tiger frowned and tilted his head. "You're overwhelmed. I get that. Take your time. But I need to show you why you shouldn't get out of bed or move around too much, okay? You're hurt pretty bad." The tiger tapped a claw on his wrist-bound device. Its screen glowed suddenly, and with a few more taps a light shot up and out of it, spreading into a vivid blue hologram depicting the skeleton of an arm.

"This is syncing with the reconstruction bandages we put on you." The tiger pointed to the arm's radius bone. "You have a fracture here. See? But the good news is it looks like the bandage has set the shards back into place already. It just needs to grow together now." Apollo tapped his wrist again. The view switched to Miles' ribs. "Luckily that's the worst of it. You have a few broken ribs, too. And a small skull fracture. Probably gave you a hell of a concussion."

Miles' eyes gravitated upward to the weight he suddenly realized rested upon his head. It was a brace of some sort for that skull fracture, no doubt. He reached up with his good arm to feel at it.

"Ah ah, don't touch that," Apollo said, jerking as if Miles were about to touch a hot stove. "You don't want to knock that thing off your head right now. Trust me." Apollo turned off the wrist device. Its hologram shrank back as if the light was being sucked down a drain. "It's going to take a while to heal all of that. A few days, at least. So try not to mess with the hardware or have too many more bad dreams, okay? You're safe now. I promise."

Miles just stared, causing the tiger to cock his head. A momentary look of worry crossed his face.

"Do you understand me?"

Though too overwhelmed to speak, fear of awkwardness demanded a response. Miles simply nodded, which must have been reassuring, because the tiger's shoulders relaxed and he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Good. That's good. For a second I thought that concussion took a bigger toll than we thought." With that settled, the tiger stood up from his chair at Miles' bedside. "I'm gonna get you something to eat. You should be able to keep food down now, so let's see if we can--"

Miles reached out with his good arm and grabbed the tiger's paw in his hand. The tiger froze, looking back at the human with those wide, emerald eyes. For a moment, Miles didn't know why he'd done it. His hand seemed to move on its own, with the emotions only catching up a few seconds later. Whether out of fear, trauma, or something else entirely, he wanted the tiger to stay. *Needed* him to stay. The last thing he wanted was to be alone with his thoughts, or to let go of what he had finally found. He squeezed the tiger's paw tight and looked up into his eyes.

"Don't go."

The tiger sat down on the edge of Miles' bedside, keeping his hand held. The comforting weight of his tail fell across Miles' middle like a delicate hug.

"I'm not going anywhere for a while, alright? I've been assigned to take care of you, and I'll only be gone for a moment. You're safe here."

Apollo smiled and gently lifted Miles' shaking hand from his paw. He padded to the doorway and looked back. "Oh, I guess I forgot to tell you my name, huh?" He smiled, showing his pearly fangs. "I'm Apollo. Just call if you need me, alright?" He left, the room tail swaying low as he went.

A pit grew in Miles stomach as he watched Apollo go, despite logically knowing he'd return. Even those few moments alone with his memories made him feel unsafe, and he wondered if he'd ever recover from that terrible, lonely fear.

He reached for the pendant around his neck--the last thing he had to remember by--but he found only the empty bare skin of his chest, and the soft beat of his heart.

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Reconstruction bandages worked fast, yet three days passed before Miles could move without fear of worsening his injuries. The pain management settings on the bandages allowed for some dull aches to warn him if he made any dangerous moves. Apollo urged him not to ignore that pain. Fear of further injury made certain those instructions were followed.

"You're looking great," Apollo said, studying the diagnostic information that streamed out of his watch and hung in the air like starlight. He looked at Miles, who tilted his head as he looked at the numbers. The tiger shrugged. "I have no idea what most of this means either, to be honest, but our doctors say the scans I've sent them look good. You're almost 100% now."

The tiger sat down on Miles' bedside, dismissing the holograms with a tap of a claw. "The question now is where your head's at. And I don't mean the concussion. You're still having nightmares, right?"

Miles hesitated, but nodded. He saw the dead bodies of the enforcers every time he closed his eyes, but the nightmares were worse. When he dreamed, he saw the whole Hourglass crumbling like the ruins in the valley, its citizens, his family, and even the smugglers who had helped him escape perishing en masse, the dreams making it clear that this was all because of him and his selfish flight from humanity.

"Yeah you've been calling out in your sleep. After what you must have gone through, I think I get it." The tiger moved closer and put a comforting paw on Miles' shoulder. "Do you want to know what happened?"

He didn't, yet his conscience spurred him to learn as penance for what he had done. Miles nodded.

"I'll give you the short version then. The enforcers chased you into an active machine graveyard. There were dormant Machina units sleeping in the scrap, and all the activity stirred them up. By the time we got there, you were the only one still clinging to life."

Miles stared at the bedsheets, frozen in place as he imagined the massacre. He wished he had seen it for real, just to punish himself a little bit more with a traumatizing memory. The thought of it made him nauseous. Suddenly, too nauseous. He barely held himself together until Apollo pressed a bucket into his hands.

Apollo patted his back gently as Miles lost his lunch. Between heaves, he choked out his first words in hours.

"I'm sorry."

Apollo's ears perked up at the sound of Miles' voice. Tortured as it was, the rare words still made the tiger smile ever so slightly.

"No apologizing. You've been through something terrible. Makes sense you'd be shaken."

But Miles hadn't been entirely speaking to the tiger. He had been calling out to the men who had died. If he hadn't run, they would still be alive. He might as well have murdered them with his own two hands, all because of voices in his head which had now deserted him, as if they had never been real in the first place.

"Follow the call," he muttered.

Was there ever a call to follow?

The tiger continued to console Miles as he moved from place to place in the room, stacking dishes, storing medical supplies, and repeatedly checking the holograms on his watch. Miles found himself studying the tiger as he worked, as if he was a captivating mythical creature who could disappear back into a storybook at any moment. The tiger walked from place to place on feet so much different than his own, with raised heels and wide paws that padded softly along the floorboards. His tail, which Miles was particularly entranced by, swayed with even more grace than the cat himself. Miles felt the strongest need to reach out and hang onto it for comfort, but he summoned restraint. Instead, he took to stroking the skin of his arms, a habit that let him take some comfort in his own imagination.

Over the next few hours, the LEDs on Miles' bandages turned green one by one. Apollo noticed them first. He checked his watch one last time and smiled. "Yup, they say it's time to unwrap you. Ready to get these things off?"

Miles nodded. He watch Apollo remove the outer bandages first before tearing through the disposable inner layers with a few precise swipes of a claw. They fell away to reveal more than a few bruises--consequences of the increased blood flow caused by the bandages.

As Apollo folded and loaded them into a medical bag, Miles realized that the tiger had forgotten something. The brace for his skull fracture remained on his head. Miles

had seen the strange device whenever he forced himself to look in bathroom mirror. It seemed very unlike the reconstruction bandages, with a band of gold that bisected the otherwise silver loop.

Apollo was about to close the bag, so Miles hastily lifted a hand to his head, grasped the cool metal, and...

*Why did you stop?*

*You're so close!*

*He's waiting for you!*

*Come to me! Miles!*

The voices exploded into Miles' reality once more. Instinctively, he covered his ears, as if trying to shut out the blast of a bomb, but the voices screamed in his head, begging him to escape from whatever had delayed him. A singeing pain radiated outward from the center of his mind. He cried out, and the whole world gave way to his voice. It disintegrated, falling away into avalanching piles of sand whirling in the void.

Miles spotted the silhouette of the figure from the field, calling out to him from the sands. He moved slowly as time itself began to crawl. Miles tried to run toward him, desperate once again to reach him before the sands swallowed him up, but something held him back. Something wrestled him down no matter how hard he fought or called out. He kicked, swung, rolled and writhed. It held him tight, forced his head down, and then...

The world snapped back into place.

The walls of Apollo's home closed around him once more. The voices ceased. The whirlpool of sand drained away. The figure vanished, and in his place, Apollo looked down at Miles with an expression somewhere between worry and anger.

"Why did you do that, Miles?! Why did you take that off?!"

Shock prevented Miles from responding in any way, shape, or form. Never before had his hallucinations blown the whole world apart before his very eyes. It left him in a state of pure disbelief.

Apollo drew back, releasing his firm grip on Miles and briefly looking at his paws as if realizing he had done something wrong. He got off of Miles slowly, crouching next to his bed and taking a long, drawn out sigh.

"I'm sorry. It's my fault. I should have told you, but I thought it'd be too much too fast." He rubbed at the fur on the back of his neck, as if awkwardly trying to figure out how to say what needed to be said. "That thing on your head isn't a brace. It's called a Faraday. It's keeping the signal that brought you here from messing with your head. Don't take it off again, okay?"

Miles eyes widened as that small piece of information burst apart like a firework in his brain, launching a dozen questions in every direction. The tiger knew. He knew about the voices and the visions. He knew what had brought Miles to this place.

Miles desperately wanted to ask the tiger so many questions in that moment. What was the signal Apollo spoke of? Why was it affecting him? How was something like that even possible? But any need for answers was drowned out by a tidal wave of emotion.

The call wasn't just in his head. This hadn't been for nothing.

He struggled to hold back tears as the wave of relief washed over him. It wasn't his fault. Not all of it, at the very least. He never thought that the existence of something so painful could bring him so much validation. After so long being driven to believe that it was all a figment of his imagination, the curse that smothered his words dissipated.

"Thank you."

Apollo's ears perked at the words. He looked at Miles, jaw parting in surprise.

Miles cleared his throat, shaking the stiffness from his vocal chords.

"I...I think I'm going to be okay."

Apollo smiled wider than Miles had ever seen, even showing a bit of fang. Miles smiled back, and for a brief moment everything finally felt okay. But in mere moments, that bright feeling darkened.

Something in the tiger changed, and Miles could somehow sense it. He could practically see the shadow that settled over Apollo's face. The small mannerisms that signaled something was wrong. The tiger's fur went sleek. His cheek tufts fell down and his emerald eyes softened. He whispered a sigh and clutched his fists tight, as if holding

himself back. And he *was* holding himself back from something. Miles could sense that somehow, more so than he had ever been able to sense it in any human being.

Just as Miles' face began to betray his worry, Apollo turned away and gestured toward the door.

"Well then," he sighed. "We'd better go. It's time you got some answers."

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No shower Miles had ever taken could compare to the one he took that day. His mind no longer entirely consumed by thoughts of the dead, he could concentrate on the hot water running down his bare skin, and the soap cleansing all the grime that had built up under his casts. He spent what must have been a half hour just enjoying it, standing and turning in the hot water, letting it wash away his guilt for a time.

Yet he couldn't keep his thoughts from drifting entirely. He thought about Apollo, and how the tiger had cared for him with such patience and understanding. The way he had held Miles down on the bed to protect him from himself was downright heroic. He felt a degree of admiration that he hadn't experienced for anyone in his entire life, save for one long lost person.

Miles stepped out of the shower. A small pile of folded clothes waited for him on the countertop. He didn't recognize the clothing at first, having never seen a shirt without sleeves before, but eventually he figured out where his arms and head were supposed to go. The pants were cut half as short as they should have been, only hanging at the knee. As he looked himself in the mirror, he felt that familiar frustration with his body amplify into full blown discomfort. He felt practically naked with so much skin exposed, but he told himself that he didn't need to adhere to the strict dress codes of the Hourglass anymore. With that, he forced himself to step out of the bathroom.

Apollo was waiting for him, leaning with arms crossed by the front door. He straightened up when Miles emerged, and the two looked each other up and down, as if seeing each other for the first time and not knowing what to think. Apollo was, indeed, wearing much the same type of clothing, though his was even more revealing. His sleeveless shirt was cropped to show off his bare stomach, and his shorts looked more like a pair of briefs with a skirt in the back. The tiger clearly liked to show off his stripes.

Miles suddenly wished he had fur once again, if only to cover his blush.

"Um...you don't happen to have any socks or shoes, do you?"

Apollo looked down at his bare paws. He wiggled his toes a bit and looked back up at Miles.

Miles bit his lip.

"Never mind."

Apollo opened the front door, allowing sunlight to pour into the room. It lit the tiger up with the warm light, adding a golden hue to his orange fur that Miles thought was downright beautiful. Miles walked barefooted to the door, but before he could exit, the tiger put a paw on his shoulder.

"I have something for you." He hefted a small linen bag in his paw and placed it in Miles' hand. "Bit of a welcome present."

Miles stared at the tiger, whose eyes caught the light in such a way as to make them gleam like emeralds. But Miles could sense a deep melancholy lingering behind the shine in those eyes. It held him in a state of wonderment.

"You're supposed to open it, Miles."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Miles, said, shaking off his trance. He unfurled the drawstring on the small bag and gasped, dumping three of the small blue spheres into his palm.

"Blueberries." He hadn't seen them in years, ever since the ceasing of trade with the outside world. He could hardly stop himself from popping one in his mouth immediately. He bit down and closed his eyes as the sweet, tart juice brought back treasured memories of better times. He had craved them for so long.

Apollo smiled at Miles' goofy grin. "I have a field out back," he said, with a clawed thumb over his shoulder. "They ripened last week. I thought you'd like them."

"They're my favorite food," Miles said. "Better than any I've tasted before, though."

"That's fresh fruit, for you. Never tasted as good in the Hourglass," he said. "I'm sure."

Miles looked up at the tiger, who averted those emerald eyes out the door. That shadow was still lingering over him, inexplicably tarnishing that friendly, caring demeanor Miles had treasured for the past month. Miles wondered if he was simply imagining it, feeling an essence of the tiger's emotions that he had never felt with any human. Perhaps it was another lingering effect that the Faraday wasn't entirely able to resolve.



The tiger shrugged as if he too knew what Miles was thinking. "We'd better go," he said, stepping out the door.

Miles followed the tiger into the sunlight, emerging onto the front porch of the humble home. The sight of the outside world nearly made him drop the precious fruit from his hands.

He had been too depressed to bother looking out a window, expecting Apollo's home to be nothing more than a homestead in the middle of a ruined world, barely different than the plains where he had been attacked. But the sight before him was anything but ruin and wasteland.

What must have been over a hundred different orchards stretched across the rolling foothills in all directions. They blanketed the land as if sewn together into the world's most bountiful quilt, some organized into perfect square rows while others flourished in blobs of controlled chaos. Shimmering water reservoirs sparkled within the ocean of green while the wooden roofs of homes and barns popped up like islands above the low canopies. In every direction, the orchards led to snow-capped mountains that surrounded the entire valley, standing like guardians in protection of an impossible treasure.

Artificial solar trees towered intermittently within the green, reaching into the sky and spreading out like funnels as if to let sunlight pour down into their trunks. They stood like beacons, some connected with walkways and vines that allowed for travel between them. Miles even spotted figures gazing across the land from the very top of the trees. He wondered what an incredible view they must be taking in.

"It's so...colorful," Miles muttered.

Apollo stopped walking and looked back, nodding. "Yeah, I know. I said the same thing when I first saw it."

"Hurts my eyes."

A smile graced the tiger's face. "Yeah, I said that too. Come on. We're heading north. There's a lot for you to see."

The tiger waved Miles onward, down the hill overlooking the Orchard and into a patch of pear trees. In only a few groves, Miles had seen nearly as many types of furred folk as different varieties of fruit. Orchardists of all different species worked alongside buzzing fruit-picker drones that grabbed fruit with claw grippers and dropped it into oft-

overflowing crates. He was surprised to see children--cubs, he supposed--chasing an airfish through the apple groves, so free and safe without any law to dictate militant parental supervision. The furred folk waved and called out pleasantries to Apollo and Miles as they walked along, Apollo's eyes ever forward while Miles' wandered in perpetual amazement, occasionally popping a blueberry into his mouth.

He nearly dove for cover when a massive cargo skiff lifted off from behind a cherry grove. Wind generated a cacophony of rustling leaves and the roar of antigravity engines rattled his ears before silence fell once again. The thrill was downright invigorating.

"We distribute fruit across the region, and to all the nearby high cities. All this has to go somewhere, after all, and it funds our work," Apollo said, passing the time on their walk. He told Miles of a multitude of fruits and berries grown in the orchard, some of which shouldn't have been possible for the climate. Folklore explained that a bag of engineered fruit seeds had fallen off a high city as it flew overhead a hundred years ago, scattering seeds like rain upon the foothills. It was just folklore, but it was also the best explanation anyone could come up with for how so many different fruits could grow in one place.

Eventually Miles' attention returned to the tiger ahead of him. He watched the cat's tail sway gently, becoming entranced by it once again, and the intrusive thought of holding it entered Miles' mind once more. It was an old thought, left over from a better time when he had wanted to hold another, more ethereal tail. Miles watched Apollo's figure closely for a moment, looking for a wavering in his form, but he pushed the irrational thought from his mind with another blueberry.

"So, I figured I wouldn't ask this until after you felt a bit better," Apollo said. "But we haven't heard much from our Hourglass teams ever since the lockdown. What's happening there?"

Miles sighed. "The piece of the Reclamation that split off from the Project is still in power. Still claiming that humans are going to cleanse the earth somehow."

Apollo snorted. "They have a plan for that?"

"Of course not. They're just saying things. Like ever since they appointed a head of human retention they've been spreading the word that furs are helping people leave the high cities to go native."

Apollo grunted.

"And I mean, that part is true, obviously, but they also say you're doing it to destroy the human race."

"So why don't you believe them?"

Miles thought for a moment, but soon realized that he didn't quite know. He had never left the high city before now. By all means, he shouldn't have believed otherwise, and yet...

"A feeling," he said. "That's all. Just a feeling that something wasn't right."

Apollo nodded, staying silent.

"But one thing doesn't add up," Miles said. "Why help humans escape the high cities? You didn't ask to be paid, or for me to give you anything, but you risked your lives to get me out of there. What's in it for you?"

Apollo let out a light chuckle. "Humans always think there has to be something in it for us, but believe it or not, sometimes we just want to do the right thing. Although in your case, it's a bit more complicated."

Miles looked down into the bag of blueberries, realizing he had eaten the last one. He frowned and stuffed the empty bag in his pocket. "How so?"

"Just wait. You'll see, soon enough."

Miles was about to ask what Apollo meant when the fruit trees around him came to an end. A grand hill stood in front of them, its slope blanketed with wildflowers and untamed grasses that waved in the breeze. Miles swallowed as he watched the tiger begin climbing up the slope as easily as if it were flat land. He suddenly regretting not taking advantage of the Hourglass gymnasiums when he had the chance. Setting his jaw, Miles followed Apollo up the hill, trying to distract himself from the rise of his heartrate by admiring the tiger's tail from below.

Along with the rising pace of his heart, Miles began to hear a faint hum in his ears. At first, he thought the hum was a product of his own imagination, but he could no longer ignore it as the Faraday on his head began to vibrate ever so slightly. He had opened his mouth to ask Apollo what was going on when he spotted what he somehow immediately knew to be the cause.

A peculiar dark shape had begun cresting the hill, rising up as if to pierce the sky the closer they came to the summit. When they finally arrived, the Faraday was

practically buzzing, and it had begun to grow warm against Miles' skin. His attention locked on to the thing he instinctually knew to be the source of the call, the voices, the visions, and his every struggle for the past three years.

The black obelisk stood like a slice of starless night against the clear-blue sky. Mirror smooth and reflective, as if carved from obsidian, it rose at least ten meters into the air, towering over them like a giant king holding court. The pyramidion at its peak bore solar panels on each of its four faces, no doubt powering whatever devices lay entombed within the staggering monolith. A white engraving of what had once been a human hand adorned its base, its weathering marking it as an artifact from ancient times.

Apollo approached the monolith and placed a paw on the surface, patting it as if the thing was alive. "This is the Waystone of the Orchard," he said. "It's the source of the signal that's been messing with your head."

Apollo turned to Miles, beckoning him over. Miles obeyed, approaching and placing his own hand on the Waystone. He thought he could sense a dull vibration from deep within, like an ancient electronic heartbeat, resonating with the vibrations of the Faraday as it blocked the signals.

"Why is it calling to me?" he asked. "Why won't it leave me alone?"

"It's not sentient, Miles. It's can't target you. It just sends out a signal. That's all."

Miles looked up at the pillar, finding it hard to believe. "But it's been showing me things. Giving me directions. All these voices and visions..."

"Were hallucinations created by your own mind in response to an array of ultrasonic, bioacoustic signals. Your brain is wired to move in whatever direction makes that signal stronger. That's how the Waystone gets you here."

Miles stared uncomfortably into his reflection on the stones glossy surface, somehow knowing the question Apollo was about to ask.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, but sometimes it helps to talk about it. Did the Waystone make any promises? Like, did it tell you to search for someone? Or something?"

Miles realized he was stroking the skin of his arm again while looking at the reflection of the human staring back at him. He took his hand off the stone and hugged himself tight. Memories of the vision waving him onward flashed through his mind.

"Yes. Someone I knew once, waving at me. And when I took the Faraday off, everything went dark. The world disintegrated while I was trying to catch up to him."

Miles looked up at Apollo, who was staring at his own reflection in the Waystone, tail still and straight, deep in thought. He read the tiger's emotions again, sensing some unknown inner conflict brewing within him. Miles felt the strongest urge to reach out and hold the tiger's paw, but he once again resisted the temptation.

He had expected Apollo to ask the identity of the person waving to him; instead, the tiger dismissed it entirely. "The Waystone's call is a ruse," he said. "What it shows you is only meant to get you here. Nothing else. The Waystone leads you to yourself, not to others."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Miles asked, feeling an unexpected surge of defensiveness.

Apollo scratched the fur on the back of his neck. Miles braced himself for whatever difficult answers were to come.

"What do you know about how the furred folk were created?" Apollo finally asked.

Miles was taken aback at the unexpected topic, but he shrugged. "Genetics. We gave animals the gift of human anatomy and higher thought, and because of our gift they've been able to prosper." Apollo raised an eyebrow at that, and Miles had to jump to explain. "I know it's not true. The 'gift' thing is too self-righteous. But it's what we're taught."

Apollo's brow finally lowered. He nodded. "Well, first of all, humans didn't engineer animals to make them more human. They engineered humans to make them more like animals. And with all that genetic engineering, it was inevitable that something would evolve that they didn't intend to make." Apollo finally took his paw off the Waystone. He turned to meet Miles eyes. "You're that something."

Miles' eyes grew wide with confusion, prompting Apollo to continue.

"You have a set of genes that probably escaped the lab and slipped into the human gene pool centuries ago. And now those escaped genes are expressing themselves in you. The Waystone resonates with that wiring and attracts you to it. That's why you're here."

Miles was still confused, and more than a bit wary. "So, you're saying I'm part furry?"

Apollo chuckled. "Yeah, I guess so. You have an overwhelming need for freedom that the earliest furred folk had. And you're not alone. There are lots of people like you, all called by the Waystone." A smile crossed the tiger's face. "We're called 'Wayfinders'. That's why we run this operation and why we don't ask anything in return. We help humans escape the high cities because it's who we are, and with more Wayfinders, we can free more people from the regimes in the high cities, and give them better lives on the ground. That's our purpose."

Miles contemplated the overwhelming deluge of life-changing information. It nearly turned his stomach. He swallowed. "I...I can't believe it."

"You will. And there's more, but it's best explained by the stone, not me. You're close enough to the Waystone now. If you take off the Faraday, it'll show you the best part of all of this. Maybe the most important part. It will show you who you really are."

Miles blinked. That suggestion registered with something deep inside. It spoke to a confusion that he had struggled with all his life. He remembered the feeling of intense discomfort every time he looked out the window at the sprawling high city or saw himself in the mirror. He wanted to know the cause of that uncanny feeling. It was what the Waystone's call had first promised him. If it really did have the answers...

Miles found himself reaching up, his fingers brushing the warm metal of the Faraday, nearly ready to grasp it. He saw Apollo's eyes light up and a smile grace his muzzle.

Just as Miles was about to lift the Faraday from his head, something overwhelmed the call to freedom and the promise of answers. An itch grew in the back of his mind. He almost didn't recognize it, until his heart began to beat faster, and his mouth went dry. Here at the precipice, something planted deep in his mind held him back.

What if the answer was more than he could handle? What if it was something terrible, rather than the missing piece in the puzzle of his life? What if it took control of him?

Fear evolved into second guessing, allowing certain teachings from the Hourglass to flood his mind. The propaganda that he had never believed suddenly seemed credible. The images of dead men, slain by the machines he had led them to, seemed like proof.

Miles dropped his hand.

Apollo blinked, his smile disappearing. "What's wrong?"

"The stone...what is it going to do to me?"

"Like I said, it's going to show you who you really are."

"It's not going to brainwash me into joining you?"

Apollo blinked. A laugh began to bubble up within him.

"It's not funny," Miles snapped.

The laugh stopped, replaced by a newfound expression of worry. The look in Apollo's eyes showed that it wasn't the response he had anticipated. The tiger just stared, mouth slightly ajar, as if seeing something that didn't make any sense.

Miles grit his teeth and fists against guilt and shame. The brand of those corpses upon his mind burned. "This stone messes with your head, right? It makes you think things you wouldn't normally think, doesn't it?"

"No. Of course not."

"And it's going to make me want to help people abandon the high cities. Humans are a dying species. It'll make me want to speed that up. Oh god, it made me kill those men. It made me lead them to those machines!"

He imagined machines ripping the men and women to shreds in that machine graveyard. Had they left families behind? Did they have hopes and dreams? Suddenly Miles couldn't believe that he would ever even consider joining such an organization in the face of such death.

"Miles, you of all people should know that's not true."

"Yes it is!" Miles yelled, sending Apollo's ears falling back. "I could have stayed in the city. I could have done something to change things. I could have talked and convinced people somehow and then everyone would still be alive."

"I didn't expect you to feel like this." Apollo said. He reached out as if to touch Miles, but stayed his paw. "Miles, do you actually feel guilty for leaving the Hourglass behind? After everything they did to you?"

Apollo's words spun memories like strips of antique film playing over Miles' eyes. In his teens, he watched as figureheads barked speeches that sparked the first flames of tension. He witnessed the arrest of the furred folk for reasons unknown, and their eventual exile from the Hourglass.

By age eighteen, he felt the oppression of the city grow with every new decree, trapping him more and more. The banning of "unproductive" partnerships was the final straw, and he lashed out. He cried as the enforcers coerced heretical truths about the furred folk from him, and he trembled as reeducation cleansed him of those perversions by any means necessary.

Age twenty came and went. He drifted through the city, a ghost of himself. His eyes became distant and his voice spiritless. The medieval scars which branded his back healed and faded, but the scars on his mind refused to do the same. He felt senseless, slow, and weighed down, as if walking deep underwater.

Then, he met the one person who dared to reach out and pull him from the depths.

Miles eyes watered as he looked back at Apollo. The war in his mind ground the battlefield into a hopeless no man's land, deathly quiet and maddeningly tense.

"Just...leave me alone."

Miles couldn't bear to look at the crestfallen tiger anymore. He turned away and retreated down the hill, disappearing into the Orchard alone.

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Whereas once the sights and smells of the verdant oasis had enchanted him, Miles' mind now raced too fast to notice much beyond his own thoughts. He wandered aimlessly through the orchard, his train of thought spiraling into catastrophic ruminations. He imagined returning to that machine graveyard, crying out and awakening the machines so he could join the people he'd led to their deaths. For a moment, he even contemplated returning to the Hourglass to face their cruel and unusual system of justice for what he had done. It would serve him right. After all, he was no better than a killer.

Yet he found that he couldn't bring himself to even begin planning a return. Whether it was cowardice or the influence of the call keeping him from it, he didn't



know. Nausea rose through the numbness at the steadily-growing belief that he would never face justice and be free of this guilt. He would live forever in paradise as someone who didn't deserve to live while everyone else suffered in the place he had once called home.

How could Apollo expect him to help even more people make the same mistake?

He wandered for far too long, his feet aching, having never walked barefoot for so long in all his life. For a moment, he wished his feet would become paws, which looked so much more accustomed to walking without the protection of shoes. The daydream of what it must feel like to pad through the world on fluffy, clawed feet ended as Miles realized where his head was going. He caught the heretical thought, rejecting it outright and resigning himself to pain instead.

When the sun had begun to set, and the tangerine sky had sharpened the shadows of the orchard, a sound broke Miles out of his wanderings: laughter. The sound seemed impossible in that miserable moment, and for the first time in what was perhaps hours, Miles stopped, realizing that he had come to the end of a row of apple trees. In place of the orchard, a yard of wildflowers greeted him, filled with more color than any part of the orchard he had seen so far.

An ancient human structure lay beyond the verdant yard. Despite clearly predating the fall, the place was no ruin. It had once been a hospital and still seemed to serve that purpose. A striking red caduceus decorated the outer wall. Paint that should have faded long ago was kept alive by the efforts of the furred folk, showing this to be a place of healing and sanctuary. Wooden structures had gradually replaced old, crumbling concrete, with some seemingly in active construction. It was a patchwork of new gradually replacing the old, destined to one day become a new version of itself entirely, piece by piece.

And in front of that evolving structure, a group of figures congregated amongst the flowers. At first, Miles thought they must have been furred folk of the Orchard, but as he neared he discovered his mistake. They were the first humans he had seen in days. Each was dressed in the grey, standard issue clothing of a high city whose insignias Miles didn't recognize. These people were like him—humans who had made the same mistake and been smuggled out of the high city by the Orchard.

Yet they laughed and talked amongst themselves rather than languish in what they'd done, some laying down within the flowers and looking blissfully up at the sky, reminding him of himself after touching the earth for the first time. He watched children play together, running to and fro through a field of life and fresh air the likes of which they had probably never experienced before. Adults sat together not far away. They talked excitedly, some cuddling close to one another in a way that made Miles nostalgic.

They seemed so happy. So free. Miles wondered how they staved off the guilt of having abandoned their homes and their people. They were safe, happy, and full of hopes and dreams that Miles had never seen in any hourglass citizen. It shook the core of his despair.

A woman spotted him from afar. She smiled and elbowed someone next to her, pointing Miles out, giving him a wave, and beckoning him to join their little group. Miles couldn't bear to face them. Instead, he disappeared back into the apple rows with new thoughts arriving to torment him.

The depths of melancholy couldn't keep Miles from noticing the way the sunset changed the Orchard, darkening the green and replacing birdsong with the chirping of crickets and buzzing of cicadas. Night finally descended and began to reveal the stars ever so gradually. First the planets came into view, followed closely by the brightest stars. They dotted the sky until it was much the same as in the Hourglass. Miles stopped to look up, staring into the cosmos and feeling the comfort of familiarity. Finally, he thought, something from the Hourglass that he could recognize. At least the sky he had looked up to every night of his life had followed him across the world to this new and confusing place. The sky, unlike everything else, never changed.

But to Miles' surprise, he was soon proven wrong. Even the sky began to transform. Unfamiliar stars filled in the night's dark empty voids as if an artist was speckling paint onto a black canvas one flick of the wrist at a time. The paint landed far and wide, some specks bright and large, some in overlapping clumps, and others like grains of sand on a beach, nearly indistinguishable from the ones around them. Miles watched, near unblinking as a sky untarnished by the lights of a high city revealed itself to him. A milky streak formed, as if the artist had powdered their brush and swept it

across the painting, revealing a stunning ring of glowing dust Miles had never known existed.

Miles felt the irresistible urge to find a better view. He needed to get closer to that sky and explore what the Hourglass had hidden from him for so long. Miles looked around the orchard, noticing for the first time that the Orchard's towering solar trees had begun to glow ever so softly, using the power they had gathered throughout the day to provide just enough to see by without drowning out the night sky. Miles noticed one particularly tall, golden tree nearby. He made for it immediately.

Within the tree's trunk, he discovered an alcove that seemed like a simple shelter, but a glowing upward arrow on the far wall revealed its true purpose. Miles stepped inside and pressed his palm to the arrow. A golden ring lit up on the floor and encircled his feet. Without any other prompting, the floor lifted him up through the tree's trunk. In only a few seconds, an iris opened above, and Miles was lifted into the cool night air once more.

He found himself on an observation deck with nothing to obstruct his view of the sky. The iris of the lift slid shut behind him as Miles sat down on the glass solar cells, hugging his knees to his chest and training his eyes on the galaxy above once more. For what felt like hours, Miles watched the sky, captivated enough for his depressed thoughts to eventually sink below the surface of his mind. He was able to pretend, for a time, that he needed no answers to his questions, and that he had no responsibilities or anyone to find. Instead, he imagined himself back on the observation deck of the Hourglass, watching the stars together in ignorant bliss.

The lift iris suddenly opened behind him, jarring Miles out of his meditations. He turned to see a lithe, furry figure rise out of the deck.

The tiger acted like someone taking their first careful steps out of a bomb shelter to judge if the coast is clear. His tail was tucked, his ears were down, and he smiled nervously when Miles didn't react.

"I uh...if you want me to give you some space, I can, but you shouldn't be alone."

"You followed me?"

"It's my job to make sure you stay safe."

Miles squinted suspiciously, but he didn't sense anything nefarious in the tiger's demeanor. He shrugged. "It's fine. I've had enough time alone."

The tiger smiled. "Alright then." He lifted a bag off his shoulder and set it onto the floor where it made an audible *thunk* as whatever was inside hit the tempered glass. "I'm sorry," he said, sitting down next to Miles, legs stretched out before him. "I shouldn't have gone that far. It was too much too fast, and for someone from the Hourglass..." Apollo shook his head. "I should have known better."

Another pang of guilt hit Miles' stomach from seeing the tiger's ears lay so flat in shame. He slid his hand over and placed it on Apollo's paw.

"It's alright," he said. "It's my fault, not yours."

"None of this is your fault."

But Miles just shrugged and continued to wordlessly stare at the stars.

"I brought you something." The tiger said. He opened the shoulder bag and produced a glass bottle, dark blue and filled with a shadowy liquid. In his other paw, he held two ceramic cups.

"We probably shouldn't drink too much of it. Don't want to tumble off the edge of the tree, but I thought you might like to try a bit, at least. I made it myself."

Miles hesitated, but he hadn't tasted alcohol since the Hourglass's prohibition. Temptation to take the edge off won out. He nodded, and Apollo poured him a small cup of the stuff. Miles sipped at cautiously, eyebrows raising as he realized the flavor.

"Blueberry..." he said. "You can make wine out of blueberries?"

"I have a whole rack of different kinds. I'm sorry it probably isn't the best you've ever had. I'm still trying to get it right."

"It's fine. More than fine." Miles took another swig--a bit more than just a sip, causing Apollo's ears to flick with delight. They watched the stars a while longer, silently sipping down the wine until Miles found his cup empty. He swirled the nothingness in his glass.

"I'm sorry for yelling at you," he said. "It's just, I didn't meant to hurt anyone when I left home. Those enforcers...none of that would have happened if I'd just been okay with things."

"Why do you have to be the one who has to be okay with things?" Apollo asked. "Why couldn't they be okay with you wanting to leave?"

Miles looked at the tiger quizzically. The question left him strangely confused, like an equation that didn't quite add up.

"They teach you to blame the wrong people in the Hourglass," the tiger continued. "You've never even thought about it, have you? That maybe the Hourglass is the one to blame for not being okay with who you are, and sending those enforcers after you in the first place. Everything would have been okay if they hadn't done that too, wouldn't it?"

"No, of course not. It would have been a lot worse."

"How so?"

Miles opened his mouth to answer but found himself wordless. Broad arguments lay on the tip of his tongue, like how humanity would suffer for having too many people leave the cities, or how breaking the rule of law in the first place was immoral, but somehow those arguments didn't seem to suffice. On top of that solar tree, sitting under the uncountable stars alongside the tiger, with orchards stretching out in every direction, none of the high city's doctrines made sense.

Miles averted his eyes and stayed silent.

"And you thought the Waystone was the thing brainwashing you," the tiger said, smiling with satisfaction.

That moment felt so familiar. The way the tiger talked about the injustices of the world, grinning as if he alone knew how to solve them, reminded Miles of treasured conversations from long ago.

"I had someone in the Hourglass," Miles said. He wiped his eyes at the very mention. "We used to stargaze like this all the time whenever we could get a permit to use the observation deck. He was so good at it. He always knew all the constellations that would show up with every season. I can't imagine what he'd think, seeing a sky like this. There were a lot less stars above the Hourglass."

"Light pollution," Apollo said. "The light from the city drowns out the night sky."

"That's what he used to say. He read it in some old book somewhere. I barely believed him," Miles said, smiling. "He always promised me we'd pull the curtain back and go see it someday. He used to come to my window and climb inside without my father knowing, and we'd talk about all the things we were going to do and all the places we'd explore outside the city. And...there were other things we did."

Apollo raised a brow and grinned. "*Other things?*"

Miles blushed. "Well, yes, that too, but it's not what I meant." he said, quickly. "See, we had these cloakings. They weren't as good as the ones your smugglers use. They were just toys, really. But we figured out how to use them so that we could...look like furred folk sometimes. It just felt right somehow, not being human for just a little while. I miss that so much."

Miles sniffed, eyes welling up once more. He had expected Apollo to laugh at something so ridiculous, but the tiger just looked at him with a curious expression, silently urging him to go on.

"One day he came to my window and he just...wasn't the same. He wouldn't come inside. He asked me to run away with him to the surface world to go find the furred folk. He said we could make a life together, but that we had to leave that night, and I just..." Miles stroked the skin of his arm up and down as he lost himself in his memories. "I was too scared."

Miles remembered the uncanny, wild look in his partner's eyes that night. He had spoken in such a pained, desperate way, though his words barely made any sense. It was as if some starving spirit had possessed him and was begging Miles to help satisfy a terrible, ancient hunger.

"So he abandoned you." Apollo said.

The tiger's accusation came so suddenly that it surprised Miles. He looked over at Apollo, brow furrowed in confusion as the tiger went on.

"I mean, he could have stayed and waited for you, right? But he left you alone and ran away."

Miles shook his head. "No, of course not. It wasn't his fault. I'm the one who didn't go with him."

"You don't blame him for leaving? Not at all?"

"He should be the one blaming me. We talked about leaving and being together with the furred folk so much, and then I told him 'no'. I ruined everything and broke his heart."

With every word he spoke, Miles sensed something changing in the tiger's demeanor, yet he found that he couldn't stop himself. The sudden need to tell Apollo the truth had overwhelmed him, even as the tiger clenched his fists and grit his teeth.

"Someone leaving you behind like that is wrong though," the tiger said. "He abandoned you."

"And I abandoned humanity," said Miles, shrugging. "I ran away from my city. My family. I got people killed."

"But he could have gotten *you* killed by leaving you in that city. Who knows what could have happened. I think that's a lot worse."

Miles tilted his head. "How is that worse?"

Apollo scratched at the fur on the back of his neck in that anxious way he always had when unsure of what to say.

"Because...he loved you. I mean, he did, didn't he?"

Miles stayed silent.

"And you loved him."

"That's why I need to find him. I don't know if it's possible, but I need to tell him I'm sorry. Maybe he'll even take me back, if he can find it in his heart to forgive me."

Miles stopped talking when he saw the tiger's eyes; they had welled with tears, glimmering like the surface of a pond in the moonlight.

"You need to move on with your life and be happy," the tiger said. "He doesn't deserve someone like you. He left you in the Hourglass alone. You can't just..." Apollo turned away, hugging his knees to his chest. "You can't just forgive him like that."

"I can't forgive what I don't blame him for."

"But you should blame him," Apollo said, frustration in his tone. "He doesn't deserve you. He made a huge mistake and left you behind. He shouldn't be able to just get away with that. He did something terrible to you and he should face the consequences. He should let you move on so you never have to see him ever again. So he can never hurt you ever again. And...and..."

Apollo trembled, hackles raised and teeth gritting as he sank too deep into his own misery to say anything more.

But the tiger had already said enough.

It all clicked at once. Miles' head reeled as he put together the reason for the change that had come upon the tiger, from the very first shadow to this final breakdown. Miles didn't know how it had happened, or indeed how it was even possible, but he knew the true meaning behind Apollo's words.

Slowly, Miles crawled to the tiger. He rested a hand on his cheek, looking deep into his emerald eyes.

"He will always be the love of my life," Miles said. "I could never blame him. Not after he pulled me out of my head and took away all the pain of being human and living in that terrible city. The only reason I made it through these last three years was because the call gave me back the hope of seeing him again someday. That's why I need to find him, and I can't do it without you."

Apollo's hackles fell. The cat appeared utterly deflated, yet he also seemed relieved, as if recovering from having carried a great weight for days on end. He held Miles' hand and squeezed it tight, twirling the pads of his paws through Miles' pale fingers while he sorted through what was surely a cacophony of thought.

"Come with me," Apollo finally said. "There's something you need to see."

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The Waystone seemed a slice of the night sky fallen to earth. It shone with the reflections of the galaxy above, as if the obelisk had called even the stars themselves to congregate within. Miles and Apollo approached the stone in a hurry, a nervous excitement spurring them forth.

"Like I said, when you're this close to the Waystone unprotected, it shows you the truth," Apollo said, stopping at the face of the stone and taking Miles' hands in his paws. "It's the best way to learn about who you are. Even if it is a bit...invasive." Apollo looked back at the Waystone, as if it were a doorway he was hesitant to send Miles through. He squeezed Miles' hands, no doubt feeling them tremble. "I'll be right here," he said. "I'll bring you back as soon as it's over. I promise."

Miles' heartbeat sped up, but he nodded. "I trust you."

"Good. Then face the stone."

Miles let Apollo rest his paws on his shoulders to guide him. He faced the portal to the stars, watching their reflections shimmer within the smooth surface of the black mirror. Apollo's reflection placed his paws upon the Faraday, then hesitated.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you the truth from the start," he said. "I thought it'd be better off this way, to let you move on and forget me."



Miles smiled sweetly, hoping Apollo could see it in the stone's reflection. "I forgive you," he said. "I'll always forgive you. I'm just happy you realized it."

Apollo nodded. "Alright, then here we go." With a deep breath, the tiger lifted the Faraday from Miles' brow.

*At long last.*

*You've arrived.*

*Now, let us begin.*

The Waystone's reflected night shot outward in meteoric streaks, swallowing the world within an endless field of stars. Miles felt as if he had entered the depths of the stone itself. A quick turn proved Apollo had not been pulled inside with him. Alone in the dark, he looked around himself, ripples forming from his footsteps as if walking up on the still, dark surface of a bottomless lake.

"Apollo?" he called, voice echoing through the void.

"Hello, Miles," a voice responded. Miles knew it well, even after all this time. He turned to finally meet the one he had lost so long ago.

"Nick."

Miles' former partner stood before him, smiling sweetly with the same compassionate, comforting look in his eyes that Miles remembered. It had been so long since Miles had seen that kind face. The sight of it flooded him with a feeling of relief even greater than that of escaping the hourglass and setting foot upon the earth for the first time. He was slightly taller and stronger than Miles, a small difference that had always made him feel so safe in his arms, and Miles had to restrain himself from running into those arms that very instant.

"It's good to see you," Nick said.

"Is it really you?"

"In a way, yes. I'm as you perceive me: a memory, to tell you why you've been called here. The stone thinks it best that I be the one to show you this."

Miles couldn't hold himself back any longer. He embraced the memory, squeezing Nick tight and closing his eyes, resting his head on Nick's chest and savoring

his touch. It had been so long. Even if this was just a memory, he needed to live within it if only for a moment.

"Thank you for traveling so far to find me. I hope your journey wasn't too bad."

Miles drew back, wiping his eyes. "It was terrible. You know that." he laughed. "You were a Wayfinder too, weren't you? That's why you were so disturbed that night. You were hearing the call."

Nick smiled and nodded. "It will all be worth it in the end. I promise. You're about to learn what all of that is really about. More importantly, you're about to learn who you really are."

"But how do you know about me? Who are you, really?"

Nick reached skyward. Stars fluttered down from the sky like lightning bugs, swirling around each other and coalescing into the four mysterious letters that appeared again and again throughout the world.

"This Waystone was created by GNDN long before the rise of the high cities," Nick said. "You have arrived at what was once an important bioengineering facility, where they attracted people like you for experimentation and elimination."

"But why?" Miles asked.

"Because you were dangerous." Nick opened his palm, revealing a chromosome that unfolded like a butterfly from within. All at once, the shape unraveled, sending strands of DNA swirling throughout the cosmos like long, unending streamers.

"You possess a rare polygenetic trait encoded in you by something known as the Vertaform gene cluster." Segments of the DNA strands lit up in glowing gold when Nick said that strange word. "The Vertiform was a fluke byproduct from the engineering of anthropomorphic beasts. It was introduced into the human gene pool long ago and has since expressed itself in only a small fraction of human beings. You are one of these special people."

"I know all this," Miles said. "I have the furred folk's desire for freedom and escape. I get that."

Nick shook his head. "Oh, Miles. There is far more to it than that."

Amidst the swirls of DNA, two figures emerged from nothingness. They were both furred folk, and their forms bore a recognizable holographic waver. Miles took a short breath in at the sight of them.

"Do you remember who they are?" Nick asked.

Miles nodded, taken aback by the vision of something so very personal that had been ripped from him so long ago. "These were the forms we took back in the hourglass. With our cloakings." He pointed at the feline form. "That was you, and this other one..." he pointed at the long-eared companion. "That was me. We both wanted to become these furred folk so bad."

"And do you still want to be one of them?"

Miles hesitated. It was a desire he hadn't expressed once, ever since Nick fled the Hourglass on that terrible night. He had suppressed that need, keeping it from ever rolling off his tongue in case the consequences slammed down upon him once more.

"You're safe here, Miles," Nick said, placing a hand upon his shoulder.

Miles looked back at him and swallowed his fear. Finally, he nodded. "I do. I think I've always wanted to."

"It's always been a part of you. The furred folk's need for freedom changes when present in humans. In us, it becomes an urge not just to escape from human society, but to escape being human altogether. It's what gives you this desperate desire to be with the furred folk. To be *one* of them. You weren't ever human, Miles. No one with the Vertiform gene ever wants to be."

Something in Miles clicked at that moment, and with the new understanding came a waver in Nick's form. His outline began to shift ever so gradually, shaped by Miles' newfound understanding.

"It's why you hate looking at yourself in the mirror, and why you imagine part of your body being different than they really are. It's why you stroke your arms, imagining them covered with fur, and why you can read the emotions of the furred folk better than those of the humans around you."

The image of Nick shifted more drastically. Ears rounded out, and his blue eyes shimmered into an emerald green. His face began to push out, as did new teeth.

"But you're not alone," he said, and the DNA shattered into the faces of dozens of human beings, each one gradually transforming into furred folk. "There are so many people who inherited the Vertiform before you, and so many people to help you through this. Like them, the Vertiform means that, for all intents and purposes, you are one of

the furred folk, stuck in a human body. And we can change that. You are wired for escape in more ways than one."

Nick's transformation continued. Fur spread across his body, and his fingers widened out into paws. His heel left the ground, lengthening up and away from the tips of his feet, which became large, sturdy footpaws.

"Our facilities can change you into who you really are, if you want it. It is a long and uncomfortable procedure, but none who have undergone this transformation have ever regretted it." He drew closer, placing a paw on Miles' cheek. A tail sprouted behind him. Black stripes crossed burnt orange fur, and whiskers grew out from his muzzle. His voice lowered, a soft purr accompanying every word, as if speaking from deep in the chest.

"Are you ready to become who you really are?" Apollo asked.

Miles' jaw quivered, overwhelmed by the impossible meaning of the tiger's words. A tear rolled down his cheek as Apollo held him close. The tiger placed a paw upon the back of Miles' head, running it through his hair, kissing him gently.

"Yes," Miles said. "I don't want to be human anymore."

"Then wake up, Miles," the tiger said. "Start your new life."

In the blink of an eye, the simulation ended. The weight of the Faraday on Miles' brow cut him off from the vision. As if awakening suddenly out of sleep, Miles fell, his muscles failing to keep pace, but strong arms caught him. Apollo lowered him into his furry lap, cradling Miles and looking down at him with watery emerald eyes.

"It's you," Miles said, reaching up to pet Apollo's cheek. "My tiger..."

Apollo nodded and sniffed. "It's me. It was always me."

They held each other for a long time, reunited at last, apologizing over and over again until they agreed that there was nothing left to apologize for.

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On the border of a machine graveyard, a skiff lowered to the ground, sending dust and small bits of metal scampering in a ring around the landing zone. The roar of antigravity engines gave way to silence as the pilot cut the power, leaving the skiff at a slight hover just above the earth.

The skiff's side wall opened and a dark-furred rabbit emerged. His long ears drooped down to his mid back but perked up slightly when his paws hit the ground. He froze, listening and scenting the air, whiskers twitching and eyes vigilant for even the slightest movement. When he felt confident there was no danger, the rabbit ventured on, one paw resting on the EMP device at his hip.

He lifted his arm and a hologram burst to life from the device on his wrist, showing the approximate distance and pointing toward his target. The rabbit followed the directions further into the graveyard. He didn't need the hologram to tell him when he came upon his destination, as the image of the place had been burned into his mind long ago.

After two years, nothing of that pivotal event appeared to remain within the bare clearing of the dumping ground, but the rabbit knew what lay just beneath the surface of history. The hologram led him to a small pile of rubble at the clearing's edge, though he didn't need its guidance to find the spot. Carefully, he sorted through pieces of rusted steel and iron until a shining, silvery piece caught his eye. The rabbit reached into the pile of scrap and retrieved his long lost pendant.

"Mercury?" A voice from behind asked. "Did you find it?"

"Yeah, it's still here." Mercury stood up and showed the pendant to Apollo. "I still can't believe you managed to put a tracker on this. How many strings did you have to pull for that?"

"Don't ask," the tiger chuckled, smiling nostalgically at the sight of the pendant. "It was worth it. Besides, if I hadn't, I wouldn't have been able to find you once your skiff crashed. Those enforcers would have..." Apollo noticed his mistake immediately as Mercury stiffened at the mention of his long-dead pursuers. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'll shut up."

"No, it's fine," said Mercury, patting the tiger's arm. "No more apologies. What's done is done. Now it's time to make it worth it."

Apollo smiled. "As you say, love."

Mercury gave the pendant to Apollo, who hung it around the rabbit's neck, pulling his ears back to clasp the silvery chain.

"There," he said. "Good as new. I'm keeping the tracker on though. Just until we're finished."

Mercury laughed. "Probably for the best, yeah. Maybe we should get you one of these, too."

"So we match?"

"So we match."

They left the machine graveyard behind, holding paws on the walk back to their waiting skiff. Apollo jumped up first, immediately heading for the controls and running a quick preflight check, but Mercury took a moment to look back. He remembered the trauma of that terrible night. The enforcer's ghosts still lingered in that graveyard--he could practically hear their gunfire echoing against the screeching machines--but the knowledge of what the pain they caused had blossomed into lightened his heavy heart.

Without thinking, he held one of his long, furry ears, pulling it over his shoulder and stroking his own soft fur for comfort.

"Mercury, are you alright?" Apollo asked from the wheel of the skiff.

Mercury whirled, letting his long ear fall back around his shoulder. "Yeah. I'm fine. Just remembering, and still a bit afraid, I guess."

Apollo frowned. He stepped away from the controls to the edge of the skiff and held out a welcoming paw.

"Don't be. I'll always keep you safe. There's nobody in the whole world who can do this but you."

"That's a lot of pressure."

"You should take it as a compliment."

Apollo jumped down from the skiff, embracing his love and licking him softly on the cheek. "I'll be by your side the whole way. I love you, I believe in you, and I know you need to do this." He drew back and looked into Mercury's eyes. "We'll settle down together when this is all over. Adopt a few cubs. Brew more wine. Fatten up on blueberry pie. You'll see. But first..."

He looked off toward the horizon. The small silhouette of the Hourglass stood in wait against the setting sun, silently calling as if twin to the Waystone of the Orchard.

Mercury put a paw to Apollo's chin, brought his gaze back, and gave the tiger a kiss. He watched his future with the one he loved coming into focus. He promised himself that he would never lose that again.

Apollo grabbed Mercury's paw and pulled him onto the skiff. Together, they set off from the machine graveyard, laying all regret to rest amongst the other rusting bones of the old world.