

DAY 419

The Epilogue

Nash Fitch looked down at his battered desk. It had been with him since before he founded Maysbridge. Its battered surface looked as scarred as his soul felt. It was hard to believe that it had been less than two years. It felt like two centuries.

When the plague swept through from Appalachia, the surviving inhabitants in these co-communities had fled. It had been the perfect opportunity for a moonshiner like Nash to expand his operation and rise to prominence. Once his base was firmly established, he'd moved on to the Kentucky River nearby, where his boats and access to plenty of fuel meant that refugees trying to get to other kingdoms that might have openings paid Nash whatever he asked for to gain passage up and down the river.

Control, of course, didn't mean safety or security. There were still river pirates to deal with, so Nash made sure his men were well armed, that transactions were done well away from the sight lines of the river, and that armed guards patrolled regularly.

Ammo was hard to come by after the riots, so automatic and semiautomatic weapons became more commonly used as hammers and clubs since most people couldn't afford to feed them as firearms. Lack of ammo hadn't been a problem for Nash, however. He'd grown up in Appalachia, where the most beneficial addiction they had was making and hoarding ammo to potentially use if the government tried to stick their noses to firmly in their business. In comparison to feuding and running 'Hillbilly Heroin', at least it resulted in the creation and preservation of a commodity—one that could turn the tide for men like Nash. They didn't trade with outsiders, but they all knew Nash and the O'Ma that raised him.

His Pa had been a wanderer who'd left before Nash had been born (when he was younger, Nash had romanticized that his father had been one of the Travelers and that his ma had been a Countryfolk liaison) while his Ma had died of a drug overdose when he was three (he'd heard rumors that she'd suffered the "oppression" after he was born), so the community had helped his O'Ma raise him. After the Fall, Nash rising to power had been a blessing to

them, so they made sure that he always was supplied with the ammo he needed to stay ahead. He even had enough to trade out from time to time, although he tried to be careful to never trade enough to endanger his own dominance.

Of course, his recent encounter with James Rockland had proven that his judgment on such matters wasn't always perfect. It still infuriated him that he hadn't seen the signs earlier! Nash might not know about "psycho" stuff, as he called it, but he'd always been observant and he should have recognized the earmarks of what they used to call "little dog complex"—the inferiority that middle and lower rung employees felt when they were always doing the bidding of a higher up.

These were the people who went "postal" before the Fall, but now tried to convince themselves that it was their own time to shine—to finally be a “big dog.” It made people who you used to be able to keep in line unstable and unpredictable.

His oversight had nearly gotten Jenna kidnapped, which, with her condition, probably would have resulted in her death. While she might have told Rockland her secret—just to survive—Nash doubted it.

Whatever the source of her clear distrust of Nash, he had provided safety and value to her that overcame her desire to die due to what she'd survived. Nash couldn't even fathom what she must have had to do in the ten months after the Fall to stay alive as an unprotected woman with her condition. As such, Nash could understand why her death wish could be so compelling. And if she'd actually been surrendered to someone like Rockland, it would've doubtlessly pushed her past the point of caring. If Nash was any judge of character, she'd have let him have his way one time, never knowing that he was killing "the golden goose" in the process.

There were a lot of things Nash was ashamed of from his rise to power, but he'd never willingly permitted the enslavement and abuse of women and children. His O'Ma had raised him better than that and he liked to think that, if there was a heaven, she was looking down on him, proud of his decision with Jenna.

He hoped he would've done it for anyone in his care, but he couldn't be sure. There was something special about her, that made him always want to keep her safe. It wasn't so cliché as love, at least not romantic love. Oh he'd proposed to her plenty of times, but that was mainly because in the post-Fall

world, the marriage agreement was one that marked a woman as unavailable to the outside populace by exerting the full power of the husband's name and influence. In these parts, both of those elements of Nash were very powerful. Not that André's protection of her was ever a question, but the marriage vow was one of the most implicit forms of protection Nash could offer. Even Rockland wouldn't have dared cross one of Fitch's wives.

The thought caused him to frown and rub at the wood of his desk. It was one of his neurotic tendencies to keep rubbing at certain spots on the wood until they eventually wore down to smooth indentations.

It wasn't quite true that his proposals had just been about her safety. The truth was they really had been able to make a lot of money together and Nash wasn't so oblivious as to believe that didn't factor into his desire to keep her permanently here. It would've been nice if it could've continued. Of course, the truth was, the time of traditional forgery was going the way of the dinosaur. With no network to verify IDs with, Nash had already heard rumors that kingdoms were starting to look at truly old forms of identification. Ornate jewelry was being explored by some of the kingdoms nearby, but he'd heard distant stories of kingdoms that were going to an even more primitive form of marking—one that was nearly impossible to forge: the tattoo. You could encode massive amounts of data that way and, unlike paperwork, forged tattoos would fall apart if you rubbed on them. Only those who would permanently attach the forgery would've had a chance, but then they'd have to disintegrate the original human being to make sure the fake was never found out. While Nash was certain there'd be reapers that'd try it, the reality was that the unique fading of tattoos was as telltale to the bearer as the tattoo itself and if dates were employed in the art, there'd be no fooling anyone; at least not with the Post-Fall technology available these days.

He grimaced again as the Kentucky heat of the late afternoon infiltrated his office. He had half his men working on getting air conditioning working now that they'd managed to secure a load of solar panels from the lucky raid of an old shipping yard. Between the panels and the alcohol generators Nash already had in town, A/C could become a reality. Just as soon as his engineers figured out how to get the Ivory Tower Eggheads at the Ark to part with one of their cooling coils, that was. Nash chafed as much due to his neighbors' stubborn hoarding of tech as he did due to the proclamations of the crazy pirate radio station dj Terry Trail, who kept proclaiming that Nash was selling slaves and, behind closed doors, was a heroin addict.

For a brief moment, Nash wondered if Jenna would've stayed if they'd had A/C working by the time she left. However, he knew better. She never would've moved in to town to take advantage of it. She just couldn't trust people and no amount of technology would change that. Nash secretly suspected that her inability to trust had nothing to do with the ten months in the wilderness she'd faced. No, there was always a haunted look in her eye that Nash recognized all too well, as he'd seen it in the mirror more times than he could count. Somewhere along the line she'd betrayed someone and the wounds she gave herself through that were even more destructive than the internal wounds she gave herself in the 10 months after the Fall. Those wounds ruled out her ability to trust anyone else lest she betray them, too.

Nash hoped she would overcome the stigmata she bore, just as he hoped in turn that he could do the same for his scarred soul. As he rubbed at the scarred desk he thought more about that notion. Stigmata led naturally into the concept of penance. He couldn't remember much from the times his O'Ma dragged him to the little Catholic church, but he did remember that.

Maybe risking his life to free Jenna from slavery and finding a couple of "mils" for her to accompany out of town were all part of his penance for his past. Despite his sadness at seeing her go, he at least had done his best to make sure that she found good protectors. The Marine, James Fallhery, with his search for lost relatives before moving on to Cherry Point, NC had resonated with a kind of truth of character that Fitch recognized. (Nash wasn't sure what to make of Thomas Faust, Fallhery's companion. However, as Fallhery was in charge, Fitch had felt that the two would keep her safe.) He hoped they would find what they needed to. And he hoped Jenna would discover part of whatever she was meant to.

It still troubled him that she'd never told him why she needed to leave. The wanderer argument was crap; they'd both known it even when she said it. She was terrified of something and she simply hadn't trusted Nash enough to tell him.

The thought of what he might not know left Nash feeling like the Bony Harvester was waiting for him beside an unmarked grave!

Tired of his own introspection, he put in the headphones of one of the recent acquisitions he'd picked up. He'd managed to get his hands on a carton of mp3 players that a band of Travelers were getting rid of. It was rare that they got rid of technology, which they had spent most of the Fall collecting, much less at a discounted price. As such, Nash had suspected that the mp3 players

were non-functioning. (The Traveler society might be rumored to have come up with the Code of the Traveler that Nash himself subscribed to, but most of the actual Travelers he dealt with weren't so noble.)

When they turned out to be functional, he asked them why they were selling them. They passed it off to lack of room, but he doubted it. Nonetheless, he was more than happy to get the players and get his tech crew going through and loading them up with songs. Empty mp3 players were useless to a populace without computers or CDs to digitize through them. Fortunately Nash had a small collection of computers which could be operated on his generators for just such cases. These little gems would help him unload a truckload of AAA batteries he had "acquired". It was too bad he hadn't come across personal solar chargers to go with them, however!

Ah well, he thought, you couldn't have everything. He could, however, have some music.

The perks of being the boss was that he had a custom playlist on his mp3 player which didn't consist of Starbucks Tunes of Summer from the year 2011 PF! Shortly before the Fall, he'd discovered zero-project whose original work reminds him of a cross between Enigma and Danny Elfman. The fact that it was mostly instrumental made it soothing, but also invigorating.

He'd just sunk into the Lux Aeterna melody when a pounding on his door woke him from his reverie.

"What is it?" Nash almost snarled, pulling back his anger at the last moment. After all, to lose one's temper was to lose control, something Nash hated.

"Boss, you're gonna want to see this." André's voice came through the battered door as the bodyguard waited for permission to enter.

"Yes, yes, come in!" Nash summoned, trying to remember that Flanagan's adherence to rule and protocols had often kept Nash alive when he'd done stupid things, like trusting Rockland too much.

André walked in, his perennial trench coat clinging to his shoulders with sweat due to the burgeoning weather. Nash noted that he'd repaired the shredded shoulder that the shotgun blast had made when he was winged with his shootout with one Rockland's enforcers.

“We found this in Jenna’s place.” André held out a note with a wax seal on it. “It’s addressed to you.”

Nash took the letter, recognizing Jenna’s work immediately. There was a flare to her work that he would miss!

Smiling somewhat sadly, he tore open the letter to read:

Fitch,

I hate you in many ways right now. I had a perfectly workable world view that you screwed with. It would’ve been much easier if you’d sold me off, because then I could’ve died knowing that I was right all along. But, being the bastard you are, you just couldn’t let me have that! The truth is, I don’t know what to think about anything anymore, but, maybe, there’s something worth discovering if I stay alive long enough.

I’ve never thanked you for saving my life. Quite honestly, I don’t really know how or if it was a curse or a blessing. On the chance it’s a blessing, I’ll share a secret that I’ve never shared before. It may be that it will save your life and then, perhaps, my debt will be alleviated.

Before the Fall, my mentor believed that there were those who would have prophetic dreams about the end of the world. He called them Dark Dreamers and he sought them out, hoping to change the end. Though I never told anyone, the truth is that I had visions of the end, as well. I always ignored them, however, as I thought they were just nightmares. When they finally got incredibly violent (shortly after I had gotten one last call from my mentor) and I realized they weren’t just dreams, it was past the point of no return. The next morning was March 17th and there was nothing I could do. During the months after the Fall, I had a few more dreams and all of them have come true.

However, it’d been over six months since my last dream and I had prayed they’d gone away, but two weeks ago, I had another one. This is what I saw:

I saw a shadow covering the land from the Southwest, sweeping through Maysbridge and on to the North. Those who stand before it will be shredded by those who bear the broken O.

Somehow I know this shadow will destroy those who have technology and that they are on the hunt for something larger than you. However, even though you're not their main target, if you're still here when they get arrive, you and everyone you care about will be destroyed.

-Jenna

Nash' fingers suddenly went numb as the truth of what he had read resounded through his soul. In the back of his mind he could hear the rattle of the Bony Harvester and the wind seemed to whistle through his ears with the sound of a scythe.

"Get every truck we have available..." Nash began, almost unaware of what he was saying.

As he spoke, he recalled a song from his youth...a song about gamblers:

***"... You got to know
when to walk away,
And know when to
run!"***