Blood Orange

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Blood Orange
by David Kling

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Anther and Columbine were still missing. It had been two weeks since they had left on a journey which, while perilous, should have been over in less than a week. Columbine’s absence, in particular, chafed like the sting scar on Tansy’s wrist. The more she tried, the less she was able to put it from her mind.

Anther’s absence was dangerous, though. Along with his daughter, he was also supposed to bring back a store of propolis, enough to last the village through the winter months. The pair had gone to the ruins of Denver for that, and for Columbine’s first harvest, her rite of passage into adulthood. Anther had proctored many first harvests over the years, and it seemed cruel to Tansy that he should fail when he had the most to lose. No, she knew that Columbine and Anther were coming back. They had to.

Zinnia was less sure, a friction that was palpable in the cool air of their shared abode. The sun had set, and Tansy and her mother were sipping barley corn soup from clay bowls. “What if I went after them?” Tansy asked.

Her mother paused, spoon halfway to her lips. “I think it would be selfish,” she answered. “After everything Anther has done for us?” Her words had an edge to them, meant to cut. Tansy’s mother had grown close with Anther in the years since Tansy’s father’s death, and in his role as Tansy’s surrogate father.

Her mother’s mouth tightened. “Yes.”

Tansy said nothing.

“If you went, you’d be throwing all of that away.” Her mother paused. “Do you understand me?”
Tansy lifted her bowl to her lips and drank bitter sheep bone broth.

The next afternoon, a grist of bees descended on the adults working the field. Tansy was in the pasture, checking the sheep for stings, when she heard the screams. She dashed into the wheat fields. Ten wounded, thirty stings between them. Tansy helped carry Pinyon, who was only eighteen, back to the village. As he struggled in her arms, she couldn’t help but think of Columbine, if she had been stung somewhere far from home…

Old Grama was waiting for them in the village square, and she hobbled off to get her brother Phlox. She must have caught Zinnia on the way, because she appeared soon after to lead the wounded into the longhouse infirmary.

Zinnia gave orders to boil water, fetch rags, and mix herbs and blood honey into paste while she dug eggs out of sting sites with measured calm. Grama and Phlox, aged hands steady only while performing surgery, joined her. Even so, their work was finished by candlelight. There wasn’t enough anesthetic to go around, but most of the afflicted had lapsed into unconsciousness anyway. Tansy stayed after the other villagers had gone home. She left briefly to prepare a cereal of wheat and sheep’s milk for her mother, as well as Old Grama and Phlox.

When she returned, pot overflowing with food, she could hear muffled voices from inside the main longhouse. Zinnia and Old Grama were talking, their voices quiet enough that no one but Tansy could hear.

“… it’s the harvest. We can’t spare a single hand in the fields, especially now.” Grama’s worn alto.

“I know, but we need propolis if we expect to save even half of them. Isn’t there anyone we can send?”
“The wheat will rot in the fields if we do. More would die of starvation.”

Tansy’s mother gave a deep sigh. “Alright. I’ll see what I can do. The honey poultices will stall infection, but…”

Tansy waited, but the women said nothing else. She knocked and entered. Zinnia looked nervous, but Old Grama’s face was impassive as ever.

After they’d eaten, Old Grama and Phlox retired to her hut, grunting and limping their way out of the longhouse. Tansy had read once that bee stings might help to alleviate the stiffness of arthritic joints. If that were ever true, whatever change had come over the bees since that time had stolen anything good about the species.

Once they were alone with the sleeping wounded, Tansy cleared her throat. “I think I should go,” she said, quietly.

“If you’re tired. Otherwise, I’d appreciate the company.”

Tansy shifted. “After Columbine and Anther, I mean.”

“After everything that’s happened, you’re still thinking about that? People are going to die, Tansy. And you won’t be one of them. Not if I have anything to say about it.”

“Mom, this isn’t just about Columbine anymore. I can bring back the propolis for Pinyon and the others—”

Zinnia silenced her with a wave of her hand. “Tansy, stop. If Anther couldn’t do it, you can’t. You need to learn from his mistake, and Columbine’s. They never should have left so close to winter. Besides, you’re needed here now more than ever.”

Tansy tried to speak, but nothing resembling words came out. A sudden flow of tears cut off whatever argument she might have made, and she rushed out of the longhouse. Zinnia made no move to stop her.
It took another week for Tansy to make up her mind. When she did, she left without telling her mother, went to Grama’s place. It was situated in the hub of their small community, where she could oversee everything. When she answered the door, Grama didn’t seem surprised to see her. She gestured for Tansy to enter.

“Go ahead,” she said once they had settled on Grama’s cushions.

“Let me go on my first harvest.”

Old Grama sighed. “The weather is turning.”

“I’ll be back before that.”

“Not what I meant. There’s a real harvest to look after. There’s no one to go with you.”

“Then I’ll go by myself. I’ll have the book with me, that should be enough.”

“And the sheep?”

“Sorrel can watch them, at least while I’m gone. It’s time for him to learn, anyway.”

“And if you don’t come back?”

Tansy swallowed. “Sorrel’s old enough.”

“But you aren’t. Your first harvest isn’t for another year, yet.”

“I don’t care.”

Old Grama narrowed her eyes, rubbed her sore shoulder. “Fine,” she spat.

Tansy sat forward, bracing herself with her hands.

“You’ll come back with some sense or you’ll die. Either way, I won’t have to deal with you anymore. Sorrel is more than old enough to look after the sheep, and Groundsel besides.”

She nodded to herself, indicating that she hadn’t been talking to Tansy at all. “I’ll go see Phlox. I think he’s in the library today.”
“Right now?” Tansy asked.

“You want to beat the weather, don’t you? Better get a move on. Phlox’ll get everything together, you just say your goodbyes. If you don’t come back, I hate to think how Zinnia will fare.” Grama had always held a strange fondness for Tansy’s mother that Tansy didn’t quite understand. It might be because Grama’s children all died young, but whatever the reason the sentiment didn’t seem to extend to Tansy herself. “Come back tomorrow. Early.”

Tansy thanked her again and left not for home or the longhouse but to check the sheep one last time. She couldn’t face her mother, not yet. Before that, she needed to focus, to remind herself why she was going. Nowhere reminded her of Columbine as much as the pasture did. As she walked, the clouds fell and dropped light autumn rain, and after she had checked and rechecked all the sheep for stings she buried her face into the neck of the oldest, who she and Columbine called Pennycress, and let the smell of warm, wet wool fill her nostrils. Pennycress seemed to have grown used to the girls’ affection, and she leaned against Tansy’s body. As much as she and Columbine bemoaned their daily tasks, Tansy would miss this simple life when they returned and would be expected to work the fields, like adults.

She stayed in the pasture past dark, far longer than necessary, playing over and over how she might tell her mother that she was leaving. When she walked into their hut, her mother was there. She rushed over to her and impulsively checked for stings, like Tansy was a sheep or a child.

“I’m fine, Mom,” Tansy said as her mother pulled her into a hug.

“I was worried. What were you doing, coming back at this hour?”

Tansy thought of telling the truth, but only for a moment. “How are Pinyon and the others doing?”
Zinnia shrugged. “Not well, but I’m doing everything I can. Grama made me take the night off.”

“I’m sure they’ll be fine, with you looking after them.”

Zinnia smiled and pulled Tansy in for a long hug.

The rest of the evening was like trying not to get lost in a wheat field, every word a chance to misstep and give herself away. Tansy convinced herself that it was better this way. Her mother would only try to stop her if she knew, and Tansy wasn’t going to be dissuaded. She was just saving both of them from heartbreak on what should be a night of celebration, the night before she left for her first harvest.

Sleep came more easily than she thought possible, perhaps because of the extra hours spent in the pasture and the difficulty of keeping secrets. She woke feeling more refreshed than she had since Columbine had left, and was pleased to find her mother still sleeping, which was both a rarity and a blessing. Now she just needed her luck to hold out a little longer.

It never crossed her mind that Grama wouldn’t be up, and sure enough the old woman answered the door looking no more tired than usual. Phlox was inside as well. Even though he was three years younger than Grama, he looked a decade older. His skin was wrinkled and leathery from his time spent out trading for pre- and post-collapse manuscripts for his library. It seemed unlikely that he would outlive Grama.

Tansy greeted them nervously. She had never quite liked Phlox, after the time he sterilized her first sting, not to mention the three she had earned since. He had to do it, of course, but he didn’t have any of the warmth that Grama or her mother did when they did the same.

Phlox shrugged off her greeting and motioned for her to sit. He had spread several books out on the floor. “Look but don’t touch,” he warned. There was an ancient map spread out with
her path clearly shown in red ink. The corners were crumbling, and the ink had bled, warping the thin paper. Next to it, the map was reproduced in charcoal on much thicker, post-collapse paper. Above the maps was a picture of the ancient Denver skyline next to an unrecognizable depiction of the modern skyline.

“Remembering the way is easy,” Grama said. “Follow this river—”

“The South Platte,” her brother cut in.

“But remember where it branches. There’s a small map for you in the book,” Grama continued as if she hadn’t been interrupted. She handed Tansy a large bundle wrapped in sheepskin.

Tansy took a second, longer look at the map. The river ran west before curving northward sharply, briefly, and continuing southwest to Denver.

“This is the building we’ve selected for first harvests.” Phlox broke his own rule and tapped the charcoal skyline. “It has a safe stairwell to the roof, and there’s a comb that connects it to this building.” More tapping. “Because it’s outside, it’s safe to harvest at night and in inclement weather.”

Tansy looked back to the map. “How long will it take me, about?”

Grama laughed. “Depends how fast you read.” She thumped the book in Tansy’s hands. “Don’t come back till you’ve read it all. And since you’re going alone, you can save any questions for when you get back, if you get back. That it?”

Tansy nodded. “Then pick this up,” Grama continued, “had enough trouble hauling it over here, between the two of us. Phlox packed plenty extra, in case you do find them.” She patted a large pack that sat next to her. “You’ll find instructions in the book on how to use
everything.” Grama walked her to the door. “And good luck to you.” She considered Tansy briefly. “You’re letting the heat out.”

Tansy took a step back and the door was immediately closed before her. She turned around and resisted the urge to rest her back against the hut. The pack’s leather straps were already digging into her shoulders. But the horizon was still full dark, and that meant if she was fast she could make it away from the village before anyone else was up.

Tansy struck out southward. The pasture looked somehow different in the early morning than it did at night, sheep sleeping piled against each other. It would take a few hours to reach the river, but if she managed to make it by noon she wouldn’t have to deal with the sun in her eyes.

Her mind wandered, finding another time when the pasture had looked brand new. Tansy had chased Columbine, both shedding white woolen shirts, gloves, pants against the late summer heat. They’d laughed, out of breath, and their ruckus made the sheep they were herding look up from their meals and bleat their displeasure. Tansy tackled Columbine into the tall grass, and what little air was left in their lungs was pushed out in shared exhalation. Close to the ground the sun’s rays barely reached them, and the cool air smelled like mushrooms and the girls’ own exhaled breath.

Neither had been skin to skin with anyone but family before, an artifact of the protective clothing they donned before leaving the house each day. But they were old enough to watch the sheep, now, and that meant they knew better than their parents. In that moment of forbidden contact they’d forgotten the world around them, hadn’t heard the rising drone of insect wings. They’d both been stung that day.
Tansy rubbed at the raised white scar on her wrist. Past the wheat fields, she started to breathe easier. She had a good head start, in case her mother decided to follow. Tansy didn’t think she would—at hadn’t chased after Anther, after all. She couldn’t help but grimace at the thought of the chewing out Grama was going to give her when she got back for not saying goodbye.

Tansy’s view of the village fell off as she walked the steady decline. Eventually, the hill it was built on was swallowed up by the wheat fields, which themselves had disappeared the next time Tansy looked back. Vegetation was scarce this far out. Butterflies and wind were inadequate pollination for the majority of the plants in Phlox’s old books. He’d shown Tansy a picture of her namesake once, and she’d never forgotten the sight of those small, sunshine clusters nestled in green leaves. There wasn’t anything so beautiful as that, these days.

Pines and oak dominated the landscape. The tops of the oldest were so high it made her dizzy to contemplate. She thought that if she climbed one she would surely be able to see all the way to the coast.

She took her first break after the sun came up. When it was light enough, she surveyed the contents of her pack. Food and water, flint, untreated wax, cloth for bandages, a charcoal pencil. Two torches, pine branches bound with sap and rolled in sage and other herbs. They were some of the most valuable things traded from the mountains, about the only thing that could keep you safe from a swarm. Tansy hoped not to need them. And the book. It was bound in sheep’s leather, wrapped in sheep’s skin. It wasn’t one of a kind, of course. It had been copied again and again, by hand.

She didn’t have time to read it, not yet, but she flipped it open nonetheless. Instructions for making a compass in case she got lost, how to bind a twisted or fractured ankle, how to seal
the joints of her clothes with wax to keep bees from getting inside. And the story of Colin. It was the only account they had ever been able to find from the exact time of the collapse, everything else had come before or after. It had been brought up from the coast a long time ago, and even at that time it was in poor shape, could only be copied in pieces. Even so, it was a rite of passage on its own, containing knowledge that allegedly separated child from adult. Tansy wondered if Columbine had read it already, if they now belonged to different worlds. She snapped the cover shut and repacked everything, leaving aside a round of unleavened bread and a pat of ricotta, which she ate with some of the water supplied to her. She was thirsty, but Phlox had only given her enough to make it to the river, of which there was still no sign.

When the sun had been up a goodly while, she wrapped her head with the scarf from her pack. The birds weren’t the only thing that the sun had woken, and she didn’t trust herself to self-administer in the case of a sting on her scalp. With the extra layer, it wasn’t long before she gave up on conserving water and was left shaking the last few drops onto her dry tongue. She tore off a bit of wax to chew, an old trick Anther had taught her. She rested again in the shade of an oak tree, but not for long. The comfort the shade provided was temporary, and what she needed was water. She couldn’t even make a compass without it.

The sun was high in the sky, leering down on her, when she caught the first sounds of the river, sweeter than birdsong. She broke into a run, let her pack fall off her shoulders, and ran right down to the water’s edge. She waded in, the cold stealing the breath from her lungs. Before she could even catch her breath, she was pulling handful after handful of icy water to her lips.

When she climbed out of the river she was shivering, but the late autumn sun made quick work of her sodden clothes. It was unseasonably warm, warm enough to bring back fond summer memories, most of them having to do with Columbine. Once, when they were ten, they’d gotten
in trouble for stealing raw wool and padding out their chests and hips with it and strutting around
town in Zinnia’s shoes. Tansy’s only other significant memory from that summer was learning to
milk sheep, and noticing the way that long days in the sun turned Columbine’s hair the color of
corn silk.

The first day of travel passed uneventfully along the river, but Tansy was exhausted when
she reached the first rest marker. It was a twisted, rusted piece of metal pipe stuck into the
ground that anyone else might not have given a second glance. When she let her pack fall off her
shoulders, she almost fell with it, but she needed to get to safety. She wrestled her pack into the
hollow of a tree and pulled out the book, checked to ensure it was wrapped tightly, and tucked it
under her arm. Next, she stripped off her clothes and left them with her pack. The water nearest
the pipe swelled into a natural pool, deeper than the surrounding water. Tansy braced herself and
dove in, feeling along the muddy wall of the river until she found a small hole, which she pulled
herself through and up into a small cavern. The only light in the space was what came down
through the pipe, and that filtered through a screen to keep the bees out. It was enough to find the
flint hidden near the back and start a fire which, though small, quickly lit the small space. With
the fire burning steadily, Tansy found that the den was furnished with two woolen blankets, one
to sleep on and one to cover up with.

The fire shed enough light to read by, and though she was physically exhausted Tansy
reached for the book. She was hungry for it, to uncover the secrets of adulthood. She unwrapped
it tenderly, laid it on her blanket covered lap, leafed through the thick, ragspun pages. She briefly
learned that shelters like the one she was sitting in were established by earlier generations, before
a steady homestead had been founded in the area. They were inspired by something called a
muskrat, which, if they still existed, Tansy had never heard of, and at any rate no picture was
given. She imagined some muddy, slime-covered thing would be the only thing to be happy in such dark and cramped conditions for any prolonged period, and an involuntary shudder ran through her body. Hopefully none came knocking tonight.

After whetting her appetite for knowledge, she finally turned to the pages on which Colin’s account was recorded. She thumbed through, taking a rough estimate of how much was available to her. Too much for a single sitting, certainly. But she had so many questions, and if this text was so important to the people of her village then surely it would contain its share of answers. How to find Columbine. How to protect all that she had left.

She was pleased to find that the text was remarkably unbroken. The fragments had been pieced together artfully and, Tansy hoped, with very little liberty.

I’m not going to tell this story from the beginning. I couldn’t if I wanted to, there isn’t time. I’m not going to talk about the hundred mistakes humans made to get here. No one ever cared to hear about it before. I’m not going to talk about losing my job covering colony collapse at the Herald for refusing to put a bow on the story, or getting reassigned to car crashes and puff pieces. I’ll say that I met James, at least, and that he loved me even after he realized I was using him for stories. He had a good paramedic’s heart, and I think he might have fixed me given the time.

No, I’ll start with the dual meltdowns of Salem and Hope Creek nuclear plants, on an artificial island in the Delaware Bay by Lower Alloways Creek. These nuclear plants were located on the pre-collapse east coast. August 14th, the morning of the meltdown, several hundred employees were already at work when the meltdown occurred, none of whom were recovered. Because it happened in the early hours of the morning, though, most of the nearly
60,000 residents living within ten miles of the plants were able to evacuate safely to surrounding areas, including Philadelphia. Census records found post-collapse suggest the number 62,411 to be more accurate.

The mysterious nature of the disaster left both local and federal officials twiddling their thumbs. Early reactions were to a potential terrorist threat, as no natural factors could immediately be found at play. Responsibility was passed from hand to hand amid mounting public outcry until it was decided, two days after the disaster, that a search and rescue team should be sent in with a small group of nuclear scientists to try and find survivors and ascertain the cause of the meltdown.

The story gets more personal upon the return of the would-be heroes, sent to their death, but it’s my damn story and there’s no guarantee there’ll even be anyone to read it when I’m finished. James got sent out on the call to retrieve the rescue party and scientists, or the small group of them that had made it off the island alive. I begged James for information before he went, but he refused. We had, after all, talked about me using him to get information for stories, something I’d vowed to stop doing. I told him that this was different. This was the big one, the one that could finally take me off page seven and back headliners. He left the apartment in a huff, and I worried afterward that I might have sent him off for the last time on a sour note. When he returned seven hours later, however, he was more than happy to relate what he had gone through.

By the time his team had arrived on the scene, on the coast at Lower Alloways Creek, seven of the ten members of the rescue party were already dead in their biohazard suits, the plastic of which was shot through with holes. The survivors were covered in horrible, full-body sores and experiencing what almost seemed to James like anaphylaxis. None of them made it to
the hospital, and their bodies were refused at the door. Their symptoms before death weren’t
totally consistent with radiation poisoning, and the fear of some foreign agent was still hot in
the air. Because pre-collapse bees were less aggressive, doctors didn’t suspect them as the
cause. The bodies were instead sent around the country for examination. Meanwhile, James was
allowed to return home under the provision that he present himself for a physical after a week’s
time.

I offered to make him something to eat, though we didn’t have much in the apartment.
The supermarket shelves were bare from the recent influx of refugees from the meltdown. He told
me that he only wanted to lay down, that his side had begun to hurt but it was probably nothing
worth worrying about. He didn’t seem angry anymore, just tired. Colin attempted to make sense
of differing information while James slept. Colin stayed up until the early morning, though
whether this was out of habit or because of the news is unclear.

Tansy knew well enough about nuclear plants. They were the reason that unmutated fish
were so expensive to trade from the coast, and the reason that the traders themselves often bore
their share of blemishes. Not for the first time, her mind grappled with the idea of sixty, much
less sixty thousand people existing in one place. How crowded it must have been, and how many
sheep they would have needed to keep themselves dressed. She allowed these and other such
musings to carry her off into a cozy slumber.

She sat up immediately upon waking, disoriented and trying to reacquaint herself with
her surroundings, dispel the wrongness that lingered in the air. She was in the hollow under the
riverbank, she knew, and she could see through the screened air vent that the sun had risen, or
would soon. The small fire she had lit the night before had guttered out but left the scent of
smoke in the air and the sound of crackling embers. No, too constant to be embers, and the fire had been out too long. She cocked her head, listening to each corner of the small space until she finally understood. Buzzing. A bee must have gotten in on her hair or come in through the vent. Tansy scrambled from under her blanket into the ice-cold water as quickly as she could, the fear of a small, sudden pain never leaving her until she was standing on the riverbank, patting down her goosebumps with shaking hands.

She dressed quickly and placed the book back into her pack. She had been in a rush to leave the burrow, but not in enough of a rush to have left the book behind. The water that had gotten in around her shoddy wrapping wouldn’t hurt it too badly. She briefly considered leaving some sort of warning for anyone else who might come by and use the shelter, but knew that Grama wouldn’t be sending anyone else out this far till spring, and by then the bee would be long dead.

About mid-day, Tansy was looking for a shady spot to sit for lunch when her eyes happened across a shape making its way downriver on the same side she was. Knowing it must be a fellow traveler, Tansy raised her arm in greeting and was met with a similar gesture from the figure. As it happened, the figure was a trader from the coast, smaller than Tansy but still hauling one of the massive overland sledges of their people. When the trader came close, Tansy nodded amicably and they did the same. Most of the trader’s body was wrapped in a formless cloth tarp, with any gaps in coverage supplemented with loose rags. The tarp was pulled up over the trader’s head like a hood to keep the sun off, and Tansy couldn’t be sure if they were male or female.

“Would you care to share a meal?” the trader asked. Their voice was high pitched, childlike.
Tansy nodded, and the trader stretched their arm out toward the shade of a large oak. For a while they ate to the sound of birds digging out ash borers. The trader was eating what appeared to be some kind of salted fish and a handful of wild mushrooms. Whatever it was, it looked better than her oatcakes. “Do you want some?” the trader asked. The glint of eyes in the recess of their makeshift hood suggested that they had been watching Tansy.

“What is it?”

“Longfin Jerky. It’s good.” The trader broke off a piece and handed it to Tansy, and Tansy noticed an odd blotchiness to the skin of their hand. She took the food anyway, gratefully.

It was salty, but a bit sweet, too. “So it’s fish?”

“Squid,” the trader corrected. Tansy nodded. If the trader was eating it, it must not be dangerous. “It’s like a kind of fish,” the trader added.

“My name’s Tansy, what’s yours?”

Instead of answering, the child pulled their hood back. Their head was small, smaller than it should be, and mostly bald. Their scalp, too, was mottled, the flesh knotted in places. Their left temple bore a starburst of white tissue, a hatching scar. “My name is Whiting,” they answered, evidently after gauging Tansy’s reaction to their appearance. “Can I have some of your oatcake?”

Tansy looked down, embarrassed. “Of course.” She removed a fresh one from her pack and gave it to the child. Though the coastal traders who had visited the village during Tansy’s childhood had often borne similar appearances, she had rarely seen them so close. She looked at the trader’s sledge, instead. There were a few old books there, too destroyed to be worth much to anyone. Clay jars of blood honey, as well as more salted fish, their skins cataloging a variety of different shades. There were also three small glass jars of pinkish liquid. Royal jelly. When she
used to complain about chores, Tansy’s mother had told her that on the coast parents made their children crawl through radiation ridden powerplants, where most bees preferred to make their hives, to harvest it. It was extremely precious, probably worth as much as any book in Phlox’s collection.

“Are you looking for something in particular?” The trader had caught her staring.

“No,” Tansy lied. “I don’t have much to trade, anyway.”

The trader cast a look at her pack. “Well, take a look and tell me if you want anything.”

Tansy walked over to the sledge for a closer look. She found no propolis, but nestled in a hollow she hadn’t been able to see, she found small parcels of sunrise-colored paper. They were oranges. Not as valuable as royal jelly, but extremely tedious to produce; they had to be hand pollinated. When Tansy was very young, Grama had traded for one and had given Tansy and Columbine each a bit of the peel to rub under their noses. When they had eventually eaten them, the peels had been mostly bitter but still spoke of the sweet sourness of the fruit itself. Tansy had dreamed of surprising Columbine with one ever since.

“I—an orange. Is there anything you would take for an orange?”

The trader gave her pack another glance and pointed to her torches. “One of those would be about an even trade, I think.”

Tansy chewed on her lip. If she were returning instead of leaving, it would be so easy to say yes. But then, if she were returning Columbine would already be with her, and there would be no surprising her. “Alright,” Tansy agreed.

The trader pulled the torch from Tansy’s pack and laid it on their sledge. They handed Tansy an orange, as well as a handful of salted fish. The paper that contained the orange was, itself, fragrant and Tansy realized that it must be made from orange blossoms and fruit. It was
soft, far smoother than the rag paper they used in the village, its surface ridged by the outline of
delicate white petals and stamens. Tansy wrapped the orange with rope and put it into the very
bottom of her pack.

Finished eating, they both lingered a while longer in the shade until the trader finally
pulled their hood back up. “Tansy, can I ask you for something else?” Tansy nodded. “Can I
touch your hair? It looks soft, and I’ve never been able to ask anyone else.” Tansy nodded again,
and the child reached out its mottled hand and stroked her hair, rolling the strands between their
fingers until they were well satisfied. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Whiting.” They slung their sledge straps across their shoulders. “I
came from a village a day-and-a-half’s walk that way. You’ll know it when you see the sheep.”

“Thank you, Tansy.”

It didn’t strike her until much later that the same trader never came to the village twice.

Tansy hiked for the rest of the day, reinvigorated by her shared meal with the trader. The
sun was beginning to arc toward the horizon when she crested a hill and, for the first time, caught
sight of Denver in the distance. Everything glittered from the glass on the ground, and the
buildings were still tall enough that they could be seen even from this distance. For a long while
after that, Tansy fancied that she would be able to make it there before the end of the day. From
the hill, it had looked like she could practically reach out and touch the city. But by the time the
sun fell behind the mountains she gave up. One more day of walking, and then she would be
there. Then she could find Columbine. They’d eat the orange together, and finally go home. She
held tight to this thought, like a talisman against the doubt the enormity of that distant city
inspired. Tansy found another shelter not too far after the sky had gone dark, and this time she
was sure to run her fingers through her hair before entering to make sure she didn’t bring any uninvited guests.

Things only got worse after that. People wanted answers but I don’t think anyone ever had any to give. The next meltdown happened at Calvert Cliffs, and then North Anna. Just prior to that, though, a possible terror threat occurred at the nearby Smithsonian, a well-respected place of learning. Because it was so swiftly outclassed by the meltdowns it flew under the radar, but it became part of a pattern that would be repeated in the coming days. The meltdowns were always preceded by disaster at the labs the bodies of the rescue team from Lower Alloways Creek had been sent to for study. At the same time, the line connecting the two locations was too direct to be any sort of pathogen. The surrounding cities were unaffected in every case, at least at first. The spread was rapid, and nobody had time to scramble for answers long. I don’t know if anyone else has figured it out. It’s probably too late even if they have.

Things got bad in Philly faster than anywhere else. The evacuees were getting restless, clogging city infrastructure that was already at capacity. The account suggests that Colin was able to see this unfold from his window. He saw crowds of people in the streets stealing food and other goods, but other details are secondhand, such as the shutdown of roads.

Some people got out before the riots started. James and I stayed. He was still making it to work at that point, and paramedics were desperately needed. He wouldn’t leave even though I wanted to. He always felt some strange duty toward this city. When he came home, though, he was exhausted. His side still hurt, and he hadn’t had time to get it checked.
James needed something for his side but the city was bad that night and it wasn’t safe to leave. We still had enough in the fridge to last a few days, and the news promised that deliveries were on their way. We just crossed our fingers and hoped.

The cold seeped from the water, from the ventilation, into the small cavern. Tansy wondered if it had snowed while she was sleeping. She judged it to be early morning by the light streaming through the air pipe, but when she made it outside she couldn’t be sure. Low, dark clouds spread from horizon to horizon. Her body shivered uncontrollably long after she pulled her clothes on, and only warmed after she began to jog.

She found another hill soon, and Denver was closer than ever. She gritted her teeth with nervous anticipation. The road ahead was sure peril. She’d hit the city before lunchtime, she thought. She tried not to notice how large it was, at least twenty times larger than the village was, wheat fields and all. She would find Columbine though, she was sure of it. Denver was large, but there were only so many places she and Anther would have gone, and Tansy would visit all of them.

The outskirts of the city were all metal shards and broken glass. Metal signs were reduced to monoliths of rust. Some buildings still stood, but none rose above a story or so, and even then the elements had worked holes into them from floor to ceiling. A muddy hollow carved into the riverbank was infinitely preferable to these treacherous relics.

Tansy peeked into several of them, hoping to find some trace of Columbine and Anther, to see if one of them had been trapped by falling debris, but that soon proved pointless. It would take days to search even the buildings on the way to her destination. The thought struck her that, from the roof of the harvest tower, she would be able to look out over the whole city. It was so
cold that Anther and Columbine would need to build a fire for warmth, and she would be able to find them by the smoke.

She walked on and on through the ruins of the city until it ceased to be wondrous and fell into monotony. At first she wondered at the shells of vehicles that had once been able to make the journey she had made in an afternoon, but soon they became so much rust to her. Even when she came across a building that towered over her, higher than the highest oak tree, she only gave it a passing glance. The cold had leached through her coat a long time ago, and if she stopped to stare at the goliath she worried she would freeze to the spot. Besides, buildings that tall were dangerous. The only way they could stand at that height for so long was a thick coating of wax over their insides, propping them up from within.

The city was eerily quiet. Not even birds braved this close to hives; they made as easy a meal as anything else to the voracious insects. It made Tansy a bit grateful for the cold, despite her shivering. Outside of a few stray squadrons, which moved sluggishly, she didn’t see any of the dreaded warrior bees that usually made the city so dangerous.

Tansy sighted the harvest tower first from a handful of blocks on. Even compared to the other buildings she had passed, it was massive. Seven stories high, with the bare bones of an eighth to serve as a roof. According to the picture Phlox had shown her it had once been triple the size, though Tansy could scarcely believe it. A smaller building of about five stories stood next to it, and a comb of honey stretched the entire distance across. The scant light that pierced through glowed red like deep, dark embers. When she approached, she couldn’t look up at the tower without getting dizzy.

Like the other buildings, the windows had long since scattered their glass on the ground. Gnarled masses of wax walled off every place that had once provided entrance. Only one
remained, a stairwell which had once served as an emergency exit. Its position in the structure must have been so out of the way, and the door sealed so securely, that it had flown under the notice of the bees when they were fortifying the rest of the building.

Tansy found the door easily enough. Before approaching it, though, she tightened her scarf around her head, ensuring that it was properly tucked, and rewaxed the joints of her clothes. The lock that had once secured the door had been broken a long time ago, and despite the maintenance that had been performed on it over the years Tansy still had to push against it with her shoulder to get it open, albeit with a rasping screech that set her teeth on edge. She stood in the doorway, waiting to see if the noise would draw any drones, imagining the blood rushing in her ears was wings in flight. When she judged it safe to do so, she shut the door as quickly as possible, a vain attempt to abbreviate the scrape of rusty metal.

It was hot inside, a luxury which would soon lose its luster. A concrete stairway wound its way up the floors and, looking up, Tansy could distantly see a cap of wax protecting the stairwell from the elements. She began to climb. The first four floors, she knew, were reserved for brood. These were guarded the most fiercely, even over honey, and prying one of the doors on those floors open would mean certain, swift death.

By the fifth floor, she was panting. In the dark, the shape of the stairs always just evaded her, and she had practically pulled herself this far by the side railing. Pausing to catch her breath, her eyes caught the faint light filtering through the door to the fifth floor. The hive used the three upper floors for honey production. She’d been advised against exploring, but Tansy could hardly help herself. On tiptoes, she peered through the window, whose ancient glass rendered the scene beyond in distorted swirls.
In the dim light she could just make out vaguely human figures. The bees’ captives, more domesticated even than the sheep Tansy watched over back home. By this time she had caught her breath, but she needed a closer look. She pulled the door open as quietly as she could, left it open behind her. The large, open fifth floor hallway was coated in combed wax which stuck to the soles of her shoes with each step, like mud. The first form she came across looked like a man, from what she could see of him; the lower half of his body was cemented to the floor with wax, his arms bound to his sides in the same manner. A living stalagmite. There was a break in the wax at his groin to allow pollination.

Tansy stumbled back in horror, catching herself on a wax pillar before she fell to the sticky floor. Her hand sunk into the pillar and she could feel a softness like flesh, and the pillar expelled a breath. She whirled on it and found a woman. The yellowness of the wax was nearly indistinguishable from the woman’s sallow skin, so that one seemed to bleed into the other. Unlike the man, the woman’s eyes were open but unfocused, unaware. Nothing could be done for either of them. Tansy shuddered involuntarily before stepping back. The woman’s upper arm, laid bare by Tansy’s carelessness, was bone thin.

Tansy found she was in a forest of bodies. The longer she looked, the more she saw. Ten, twenty, thirty or more camouflaged in wax and dim. The heat was catching up with her, getting to her head, the air gone stale and close. She turned back to the stairwell. There was a young woman stuck to the wall next to the door. The wax around her stomach was cracked, the flesh there swelling gently. Tansy swallowed. Her hand crept to her back, pulled her one remaining torch from its place on her pack. Her village could little afford the loss of this place, if it burned. But if she could save one person from being subjected to its horrors... She lit the torch to ensure her precision in the low light, and made sure not to look at anything but what was in front of her.
She waited for the initial burst of fragrant smoke to clear, the sting bringing tears down her cheeks, and brought the shaft of the torch down once, twice on the woman on the wall. She looked little different in death than she had in life. Tansy leaned forward to close the woman’s eyes. As she did so, the woman’s lips twitched, as if she were about to speak, before a soft sigh passed between them. It was buzzing, not words, that came next as flying insects forced their way from the woman’s body.

Tansy flicked the torch back up to stem the flow of bees, but it was too late. Their alarm sounded, bees began to fill the air, flying free of their living hosts. Spinning back and forth, trying to put as much smoke as possible between her and the growing swarm, Tansy’s eyes searched desperately for escape. If she ran back to the stairwell now, they would follow and she would never make it to the rooftop. There was a closed door on a nearby wall, and Tansy lunged toward it. Waving the torch with one hand, she wrenched the door open with the other. It was like pulling stone through sand, but she forced the door over the wax sludge that coated the floor. She opened it just wide enough to admit her, dropped the torch, and pulled the door closed behind her, praying the torch would go out before burning her alive.

The first thing she did in the small, dark space beyond the door was to drop her pack and scramble through it for her sealing wax, which she used to fill the cracks she had unsealed when she’d opened the door. She hoped that and the torch outside would keep her safe. She lit a small candle. The room she was in was far smaller than the burrows she had slept in on the way to Denver, tall but narrow. It seemed sound, though, so if the wax held she still had hope. She pulled off her scarf and let it drop to the floor. Her hair was drenched with sweat. She knew that the candle would only burn out what little air she had, but she needed to be somewhere else, anywhere but where she was. She laid the book on her lap with a prayer and began to read.
The evacuation order came before more food did. They rolled tanks down the main roads, blasting the order to get out, neighborhood by neighborhood. Neighborhoods were rows of houses like villages that made up pre-collapse cities. They didn’t say where we should go. James hadn’t been out of bed for a few days, and when we got the call to leave he sat me down.

“I think I have appendicitis.”

“That’s bad.”

James chuckled, but it made him wince and he grabbed his side.

“So, what should we do?” I asked.

“I’ve already got water boiling on the stove. I need you to take it out.”

I took a sip of instant coffee. “You want me to take your appendix out.”

“I can stitch it up I just—I can’t do it myself. There probably won’t be anyone who can do it, wherever we end up. This might be our last chance to use a clean knife.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it, it was just too much. “You want me to cut your appendix out with a kitchen knife?”

“It’s not ideal,” James said.

We sat in silence for a while before he got up to sterilize the knife and a couple rags. I spread a clean, white sheet over the living room couch. When he came back into the room, he removed his shirt and set it aside, next to the sewing kit.

“Just do what I tell you.” He laid on his back, and I leaned over him. “You need to cut between my hip bone and my bellybutton.” I could see where I needed to cut. It was red and black and bruised looking. “Right here.” He took my hand and put my fingers on the spot, gasping a bit. “Not too deep.”
My fingers felt numb, and the knife shook when I picked it up. After I stilled the tremor, I placed the tip of the blade against his skin. It was harder than I imagined it would be, though the blade slid in easily enough. As the incision lengthened, one inch, two inches, three inches, I became aware of a sort of vibrating, like a cat purring. I couldn’t quite figure out the source of the sound.

“Okay, that’s enough.” James sounded calm.

He instructed me on how best to separate the split flesh, and when I did the noise grew louder. I could feel it now, where my fingers touched the wound. I pulled the skin further apart, and dozens of compound eyes stared back at me like dark velvet. The bees had eaten through most of the organ I was supposed to remove, but at my intrusion they took flight. We were both stung, many times. I think James went into shock before he died, he reached for my hand and I held it despite the stinging swarm. I’m in the bedroom now, with my laptop. I’ve balled a shirt up under the door but I don’t know how much longer I have left.

I hope that this is of some use to someone. I’m not sure, myself, how this happened, other than to say that we should have taken more care with things when we had the chance. With their food supply poisoned, bees have moved up the food chain. More protein means more bees can lay eggs, not just the queen.

Tansy turned the page but found only blank pages from that point to the back cover. She turned back and reread the final entry. There were no words of wisdom, no sage advice, no buried secrets. Nothing that could save her. Nothing that could save Columbine, or Anther. She shut the book, blew out the candle, and leaned against the door. Columbine. Tansy couldn’t think
of her without remembering the woman on the wall, bees flooding out of her. She did her best not to think at all.

At some point she must have drifted off, because she woke disoriented. In the barest light that made its way around the door, she was able to reorient herself. She had no way of knowing how much time had passed since she had entered the small room. Her head was throbbing, though, and if she didn’t leave now she would suffocate. She tied her scarf around her head as tightly as she could, sealed her clothing with wax. She had no torch to protect her. She had to make it to the roof, no matter what.

With one final deep breath, she sucked in what felt like all of the oxygen that remained in the closet before bursting out onto the fifth floor. Bees were on her in an instant, surrounding her, blinding her. She covered her eyes with her gloved hand to keep the insects from her eyelids. Peering through fingers and wings, she found her way back to the stairwell.

She could feel the bees in their thousands, hear their furiously beating wings. Their heat encased her, and she felt on the verge of collapse before she even made it to the sixth floor. Sweat ran into her eyes now, and she only had the railing to guide her up the stairs, to pull her muscles into the alien forms the stairs required. When she fell to her knees, she didn’t even have that. Only the thought of the garden of bodies kept her going, crawling on both knees and one hand, knowing that if she lost consciousness she would share their same fate.

Robbed of sight and hearing, she had only the crunch of bodies that followed each inch forward to mark her way. When she finally reached the metal of the roof door, it was blessedly cool, and she threw all her weight against it until it burst open and she collapsed into white, silken snow. The swarm dissipated almost instantly, and she was left panting on her side in the
whiteness. The sky was just lightening, the sun still beyond the horizon. She rolled her body, took a small mouthful of snow into her dry mouth.

When she had recovered, she pushed off the rooftop. In the distance, she could see the snow-covered foothills. She staggered to the side of the roof and looked out over the city. It was even larger than she ever could have thought, and white in every direction. No smoke rose. No fires burned. Columbine and Anther weren’t there, if they ever had been.

The north facing side of the roof was enclosed in a rusted chain-link fence and, when Tansy drew closer, she noticed that strips of paper had been woven into it. Names had been written on the paper: Milfoil, Mullein, Aster, Vervain, and everywhere James and Colin. The names of the dead.

She turned from the wall. She needed to focus on what she had left, what she could still save. On the west side of the tower, a platform had been rigged with a pulley which, after a bit of experimenting, Tansy used to lower herself to the honeycomb below. She filled three earthen jars with honey before carefully cutting away the darkest, richest wax from the comb. This wax held the propolis that would save Pinyon. She scraped it into a pine plank box, which she wrapped in cloth.

She nestled the box into the bottom of her pack, found the orange she had traded for. Guilt burrowed into her gut as she unwrapped it. If she had failed to reach the roof, if she had fallen, torchless, against the onslaught of insects it would have been because of this orange. She thought of throwing it off the roof, but further waste would not erase her sins. If she brought it back to the village with her, her foolishness would be exposed. She unpeeled it, dipping each of the ten segments into the honey she had harvested, and ate them like punishment. When she had finished, she tore the orange paper in two and used her charcoal pencil to inscribe Columbine on
one and *Anther* on the other. She tore out a piece of blank paper from the book and wrote James and Collins’ names on it before weaving the four names into the quilted fence. She would return home soon, she thought, but not for some time yet.