

"Man is good," The slick sound of a knife pulling from its sheath cuts through the low rumble of Beau's voice. "'cause' we invented tobacco."

"You idiot — " Remy's words catch on a breathless cackle as he shifts, supporting the top half of the osocerivo's corpse so it doesn't hit the dirt. "man didn't invent tobacco — God did. So if you're gonna give credit to anyone, make it the man upstairs. Which is exactly why man is *evil* — 'cause we give ourselves all the glory and God all the blame."

"But you just blamed Him for the tobacco. So wouldn't that make you evil, too?" Beau grips one of the carcass' limp legs. His hand clasps around the lower half, the protective scales harsh on the inner callouses of his palm. He lines the blade up where the iridescent scales transition to thick tawny pelt, and carves down with a harsh motion. The flesh parts like fabric, splitting to reveal a patchwork stretch of fat and corded muscle. He continues to drag the blade down, until it meets the hole he'd torn between its barrel-shaped ribs, which he had used to core and empty it of its internal organs. Those sit a few yards away, roasting in the searing drought sun. A bird circles overhead, its shadowed wingspan briefly stretching between them. "Yesterday you gave Lucy your *serape* because she was cold, even though she's got those skin blisters and smells somethin' awful. I don't think an evil man could do that."

With his gaze pinned on the motion of his blade, he doesn't catch Remy's broad grin. The one that stretches to the corners of his sharp jaw - framed by unshaven stubble and his squinting eyes. Beau doesn't see the smile, but he *feels* it, as hot and blistering as the sun itself. He picks up another limb to skin down to the flesh.

"That's your mistake — I only did it cause Amy was lookin', and I wanna impress her. What's more attractive than a man who cares? Which means I did it 'cause I'm a selfish bastard. Just like you, and every baby born, and every beautiful woman ever seen, and every damn plant and animal in the Mojave. Everyone's selfish and only lookin' out for their own good." Remy's voice is mirthful.

Beau snorts. "You got a real fucked up idea of the world, Rem'."

"Better than yours." Remy hums. There's a musical tilt coiling around his vowels, sweetening his words until it almost feels like it isn't an insult. Beau spits a wad of dried saliva to his right.

"How?" With the pelt loosened, the rest of the limbs peel back easily. He returns his hands to the center, where the cuts intersect, and pushes the pelt around the sides. Satisfied, he nods up to Remy. Dirt stirs beneath his spurs as he leans back. "Is it such a bad thing to think we all got a bit of good in us? What's the point in goin' on if you expect every person you meet wants to gut and string you?"

Beau peers up at him from under the rim of his hat, just in time to catch Remy contemplating his words with a thoughtful expression. The unclouded blue sky bends around his very existence, warped and vibrant. Empty desert expanse stretches well beyond his further sight. It's only interrupted by cacti, bleached osocervio bones, and the swell of red sand dunes

smothering loosely packed dirt. Cattain's Gulch looms to their distant left — a craggy red-faced tower of splintered sandstone, the only landmark for miles. It would feel lonesome, if not for Remy's company.

"Well, you're so convinced we're all good, you miss all the shitty stuff you should be watchin' out for." Remy meets him around the side. With a practiced motion, he grabs the osocerivo's front legs, brings them together, and hoists it up so it's balanced on its hind. Beau begins to work his way around the sides — gradually loosening the pelt from its back and rear. His knife chases the notches of its spine like a lover. "Like that buck that came through — the hot headed one with the six iron?"

"I remember. Stupid little thing, hardly knew a bridle from a stirrup. But — he wasn't *evil*. Just lost. Like all the rest of us that end up round' here." This deep into the Mojave, the only people who made Dirt their home were people looking to hide. Or — in Beau's case — brought to it by God himself. Feverish and drenched in sick-sweat, half convinced the town was a mirage plastered against the sweeping night sky expanse. It was only natural he repay them with the life they helped nurse back to health.

"Well, Amy an' I never told you, but we caught him feastin' on Butcher Brian's stash. He jimmed the lock and just went — for lack of a better phrase — ham. We ran him out right quick. Then he... well, you remember." Both of them wince. A carrionfly, its bulbous thorax sagging behind drooping wings, lands near Beaus' working hand. He doesn't swat at it — just watches out of his peripheral as it tears at a small piece of the bloodied flesh.

"Everyone's gotta eat." He knows he chose the wrong words as they drop from his cracked lips. Remy tenses, and the low thrum of ever-present tension between them grows taught.

"And that's *exactly* why I woulda' made a better Sheriff than you. If we let any vagrant wander in and sample the goods, what'd we have left? We hardly got anythin' as is. I saw Mazezy Mae grindin' her teeth on a rock yesterday. I asked her, '*Now what, Maezy Mae, are you gettin' outta that there pebble?*', and you know what she says to me?" A pause. The wind goes still, settling the heat along Beau's burdened shoulders. "She said '*It don't make me feel so hungry no more.*'"

Something harsh and directionless stirs in Beau's gut — a bullet with no promise. His blade catches on a piece of pelt, and it tears through, leaving behind a dangling thread of unusable fur. Silence stretches between them. Any retort dies and rots in his closed off throat, because Remy is *right* - as much as it pains him to admit it.

"I'm trying my best. We all are. The drought..." The words feel weak, a faint excuse cut through by an offended scoff. Spittle lands on the back of his sun-spotted hand.

"The drought in eighty-one was worse. You've gone *soft*, Fortunato. By this time five years ago, the game cart would've been full. Now look." Remy gestures beyond his peripheral, and Beau doesn't need to look over his shoulder to see the empty wooden carriage standing

stalwart behind them. “We’re sweatin’ bullets for half-starved snake-bears and bickering like we’re married. And Dirt isn’t getting any richer. Not when you’re trying to feed and clothe every half dead fool that crawls their way up from the south.”

The last section of pelt comes off with a slick noise. For a long moment, neither man says anything.

Their gazes meet under the feverish bed of heat. Something flickers across Remy's face — hidden amongst the dimming remnants of his outraged expression. Beau studies him, as he so often does. Dark, unwashed hair spills down in greasy coils, framing rugged stubble and narrowed eyes. Dirt, dust, and a smudge of dried osocerivo blood hide the constellation of freckles draped across his sun-burnt cheeks. Despite everything, the deputy pin stuck to his plaid working shirt is polished clean, reflective enough to spit the sun back into Beau’s eyes.

He can’t help it. He desperately searches through Remy’s expression for... he isn't sure what. Forgiveness? Understanding? Anything to soothe the ache in his chest, no matter how meager of a placation it may be. Like licking sweat from a brow and pretending it’s water.

Remy breaks eye contact first. Beau takes quiet solace in the angular cut of his jaw, the exposed stretch of neck as the other gazes out towards Cattain’s Gulch. Then he nods down to the shorn pelt between them. "Good work." Remy grumbles, if only to break the tense atmosphere, and drops the carcass on its side. Beau wordlessly gathers the pelt in his arms. Both

their joints crackle as they straighten, and Remy winces. "We're gettin' too damn old for this, Beau."

A strained smile crosses Beau's face, bottlenecked by the image of Maezy Mae breaking her baby teeth on pebbles. "We have a few decades in us still, *amorcito*. C'mon now, we should cook this meat before it goes any more rotten."

Remy is quiet as they work. Normally, Beau would savor the break from his endless rambling. But he finds no solace in the crackle of the fire — no peace in the sectioning of meat, nor reprieve in the salted linen on his calloused hands as they wrap up each section. The last stretches of sun smear across the desert expanse by the time they load everything into the game cart. Beau rubs his hands together, knuckles stiff from the heavy labor and dropping temperature. Remy pulls out two of the smaller chunks of meat from the pile. He passes one to Beau and digs into the other, gaze sweeping across the dimming horizon. Beau doesn't unwrap his.

"I heard," Remy says through a mouthful of food after a stretch of suffocating silence, "that Lucy's mom died."

There's guilt in Remy's words. Beau isn't sure he feels guilty himself. The last he'd heard of Lucy's mom, her voice barely came through the death-rattle pouring out of her slack jaw. At that point, passing on would have been a mercy.

He glances towards the game cart, seeking reprieve from the news of another death that he'd have to announce to his township. Tucked neatly next to the sectioned meat is the osocerivo's pelt and head. Its empty eyes meet his own with a sleepy indifference — passive gaze intersected only by a carrionfly crawling across its frozen eyelid. He's quick to turn his gaze back to the half-dead fire, though whatever meager solace he could've found in it is stamped out by the osocervio's eyes peeling the skin off his back.

"She was a good woman." He finally says after a mournful pause. "I remember her goin' up to see the Doc in Northbuck a month or so ago — was it the same thing Lucy's got now?" Soft blond hair, muddled and stringy from fever-sweat. Sunken eyes rotted into the sharp cut of their sockets, skin marred with painfully reddened pustules. Mazey had cried when she caught sight of her — and it was Beau who had to drag the poor girl away before she could see the clumps of hair soaking blood into the dust.

Remy nods. "Hard to tell yet, but that's where my money is. Maybe we should keep Lucy away from everyone 'till we figure out what it is."

The smoldering embers of the cooking fire glow dimly between them. Beau can't resist looking over to him, watching as the intensity in his gaze gets strangled out by the gentle warmth reflecting across light blue irises. Too soft for a man like Remy, who absently picks at the dried blood on his hands with the hooked edge of his carving knife. The meat remains wrapped in Beau's hands.

“Yeah,” Beau agrees softly, just as Remy glances up to meet his eyes. Something thrums in his chest. As he starts to speak, Remy looks beyond him, towards Cattain’s Gulch. “I— ”

"Hold up — you seein' that?" Remy's urgent voice cuts through his sentence with a warning intensity. Beau twists to look where Remy’s gaze has flickered, knife already drawn from its sheath. Another osocerivo stands only forty feet south. Its reflective scales dance in the dying sun as it sways back and forth, head drooped low, antlers dragging circles into the dirt. Like it's bent in worship — or trying to draw something with the pointed crown of its antlers.

For a beat, the rest of the Mojave slips away. Beau’s gaze is drawn to the motion of its head. Its movements are purposeful — a precise tilt here, a flick there. Its snout dips to press reverently against the dirt. Not searching, not marking, but *mourning*. Then it steps back. Lifts its heavy head from the dirt and, with a distinct glance towards their game cart, slips into the growing cover of the night. Beau watches its retreating form until he can no longer pick apart the elegant slope of its antler crown from the stars in the sky.

It takes a long time for either man to draw the will to speak. Remy breaks the silence first with a low, heavy sigh, a breath he’s been holding onto since it first appeared. “We coulda’ killed it.” His voice is thin, almost shaken. “Lord knows we need the meat. And it was just — *there*. Why didn’t we go after it? What was it doin’?” He sounds bewildered — not only at the creature, but at himself.

“We coulda’.” Beau agrees quietly. He considers saying why they hadn’t: that he had only ever seen that kind of mournful reverence at funerals. But Remy has never been one to buy into Beau’s superstitious tendencies, and verbalizing the creature’s actions feels *invasive*. Like a betrayal worse than the murder of its kin. His gaze drifts to the guts of its brethren, smeared across sun-bleached rocks, still cooking in the dimming drought-heat.

When he turns back, it’s just in time to see Remy running a calloused hand through his dark coils. Remy catches his eye before he can turn away. His own expression flushes, ever-so-slightly, reddening under the thin light cast from the fire. Beau, slave to desperation as he is, searches the sharp curve of Remy’s cheeks once more. Like this time — *this time*, he’d finally find it.

And, to his horror, he does.

It’s unnatural. Whatever unnamed emotion that passes between them, it’s wholly, terrifyingly *unnatural*. Beau turns away with a sharp noise — back to where the osocerivo had swayed in the dimming light of the sun. He hears Remy shifting, likely turning away himself, and Beau doesn’t have to look to see his expression: disgust. His nose would be wrinkled into a layered crease between his squinted eyes, forehead drawn with angular lines, accentuating the harsh slope of his eyebrows pulled nearly over his lashes. And even that, terrifyingly, makes Beau’s heart clench.

The last of the embers die. Plunged into darkness, with only the sprawling starscape above them, Beau suddenly feels *terribly* small.

“You...” Remy starts to say something, but trails off. When he doesn’t continue, Beau stands up, careful to keep his gaze trained on the dead fire.

“You get the bedrolls from the cart. I’ll get the fire started again. We need to be back in town by noon tomorrow, so we can get Lucy somewhere private, and talk to Doc about what to do with her.” Falling back into his commanding tone feels good. A thin, meager reprieve from whatever strange moment they had just shared, from the horror of being small. Something he could control. Something he doesn’t need to search for in Remy. And something for Remy to act on, which he does without hesitation.

Beau’s share of the osocerivo’s meat, still wrapped in its salted linen, rests near the dying fire. Hunger coils tight in his gut. Once Remy becomes distracted with setting up his bedroll, Beau throws it back with the rest of the meat.

The stars stretch endlessly overhead, layered and vibrant like darkened rust. Beau stares up at them in quiet contemplation as they settle in. Unlike every other night he’s turned to them, they offer no reprieve, no matter how furiously he searches. Remy’s presence haunts the forbidden outskirts of his peripheral. Far past when the embers finally burn down into nothing but smoldering charcoal.

Maybe, Beau muses as he watches night turn to day, God was the one who wanted them to stay unspeakable. Maybe God is to blame.