

DUST CITY

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BUTTERFLY ON FIRE

ONCE, THIS WHOLE PLACE WAS NOTHING BUT TREES. BEFORE THAT, IT WAS a shadowy smudge at the bottom of the sea. Before that, it was packed in ice for a million years. But once, and pretty recently in the grand scheme of things, it was nothing but trees. At least that's what Mrs. Lupovitz teaches us in science class. But sometimes, it's hard to believe.

These days, the City's a clutch of steel, cut through with glass cliffs and canyon upon canyon of cement. The only trees are the deadwoods, sprouting from the endless plain that surrounds the City on all sides. If you look out through St. Remus's west wall, you can see them: thousands of branches, rising up like grasping hands.

The St. Remus Home for Wayward Youth is an arid compound built around an old cathedral (which is now the mess hall). The buildings here are either strangled with ivy or streaked with the remnants of polluted rain, and all of them—the courtyard, the dormitories, the old rectory—they're all hemmed in by a thirty-foot wall topped with razor wire.

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Today is Visitors' Day.

Somehow, Jack convinced me to come down to the mess hall with him. He wants to introduce me to his girl. Apparently, she's anxious to meet me. Apart from the ones she passes on the street now and then, she's never met a wolf before.

"You're gonna like her, trust me," Jack says, stalking over the cobbles. He says it in that loose, offhand, Jack sort of way that sounds more like hucksterism than a method of eliciting trust. Nevertheless, I do: I trust him, the little thief.

"I *hate* Visitors' Day," I tell him, which makes perfect sense. No one's coming to visit me. Not unless Dad escaped from prison (and who's to say that if he did, I'd want to see him?).

"Come on." Jack tugs my sleeve and hastens us around the corner of the rectory. Then he stops dead.

There's a crowd of uniformed guards huddled around one corner of the mess hall. It looks like the building's grown an oily gray scab. Jack rushes forward. "Look," he says. "There's something going on."

We move closer and I can see Roy Sarlat standing in the middle of the crowd. Roy's the biggest wolf at St. Remus. He's been in and out of juvenile detention centers like this one all his life. He's down on all fours, padding back and forth. Every step scours the ground. He's angry. Never a good sign with Roy.

Jack wedges his face in between the hips of two guards, but one of them slaps him back. "I can't *see*," he complains.

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“Lemme up on your shoulders.” Before I can say no, Jack’s scaling my back like a gecko.

Roy paces and growls inside the tightening corral of guards. For the moment, Jack’s forgotten all about the girl waiting for him inside the rectory. He’s perched on my shoulders like a sports fan in the cheap seats, winding his fingers into the hair on the back of my neck, pulling himself higher. Both of us know we’re in for a show.

Roy opens his mouth, teeth glistening, and growls from deep in his gullet. “Anybody comes near me,” he says, “and I swear I’ll use these.” His jaws open wide and he clamps them shut, snapping crooked fangs together and launching out fireworks of spit. It’s a clear show of ferocity. *Teeth* are taboo, and not just here at St. Remus. Break out the choppers while robbing a market stall and it goes from petty larceny to felony in a snap (no pun intended). If Roy starts biting, it’ll be an automatic week in lockup.

“I got family in there,” he growls. “And I mean it, anybody comes near!” He claps his jaws again.

There’s a phlegmy voice from within the thickening crowd of guards. “Did I hear you say *anybody*? Because I don’t think that’s what you meant.” The guards shuffle and murmur. The crowd parts and Gunther lumbers into the open. “Sorry, Roy,” he says. “You know the rules. Can’t let you in until y’bin searched.”

Roy growls again. More saliva squeezes out through his teeth. The muscles in his legs knit together and swell.

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Gunther grins and starts rolling up his sleeves. His truncheon hangs heavily from his belt, but he doesn't need it. His arms are already thick as the trees we never see. All the guards at St. Remus are goblins (or "globs," as we inmates call them), and without a doubt, they're the nastiest breed of hominid. But Gunther? Gunther is in a class by himself. While every glob in the world is a huge, ugly, snaggletoothed, knuckle-dragging, short-tempered vulgarian with all the delicate charm of a city bus (just before it runs you over), in Gunther's case, all of that would be a compliment.

"Fair enough," he says. "Let's do this the hard way."