

Dirt Path

Inspired by "A and A - Let's Go" by [Nesskain](#)



The road rolled in front of us, waving in the heat. The mustard-and-mayonnaise lines on the black stretch of too-hot pavement squiggled. The view from outside the truck's windows was so repetitious that I thought that maybe we'd been caught in a cheap cartoon that used the same backgrounds over and again in the hopes that the audience would think that there was more going on than there was. I almost said it aloud, but then figured it didn't really make a lot of sense, so maybe I should just leave it be.

Manny sighed and pulled in one enormous arm, rubbing it with a hand the size of a paperback book. "Fraid I might get a sunburn," he said in the voice that not only did I love but also came with a disarmingly soft delivery.

I glanced over at him, at the acres of red hair that framed his face, at his perpetually thoughtful expression, at his worn-but-clean coveralls. There wasn't a thing about him that didn't make me happy, a thing about him that didn't make me glad that I met him all those years ago.

"Yes, that would be quite out of character for a man of your stature," I said, unable to resist teasing him, if only a tiny bit.

"What? A redhead with a sunburn?"

"Exactly."

He harrumphed. "I don't need skin cancer on top of everything else, you know."

I flashed him a smile as the dusty wind whipped curls of my black hair into my mouth. Pulling the strands free with a normal, brown finger while keeping the red pickup truck on the straight and narrow, I squinted at the road. In the eye-watering blue of the Nevada sky, I fancied I could spot spots in the far distance, circling.

"You see that?"

"See what?" Manny shifted in his seat to try to get out of the direct sunlight that poured through the open window.

"Up there."

He followed my pointed finger--the normal, right one--and grunted. "What do you think?"

"I think it's a kettle of vultures."

His silence let me know that I'd said something he didn't quite follow. I dragged my eyes down from the sky and to my boyfriend's face. "A *kettle*?"

"Well, they're not around a carcass, so it can't be a wake yet."

"A wake?"

"Yes, Mr. Echo, a wake. That's what you call a kettle of vultures when they're eating."

He wiped a hand across his sweaty face. "Why do you know that, Cel?"

I shrugged. "Back when I was in sixth or seventh grade, I had a fascination with group nouns. You know, what a group of something is called. A smack of jellyfish. A walk of snails. A shiver of sharks. A murder of crows." I hesitated at the disbelieving silence that met my comment. "You...come on. You've heard of a murder of crows, haven't you?"

"Who comes up with this stuff?" His disgust was almost as predictable as it was palpable.

"No one. I don't know. A committee?"

He snorted.

"Whatever. The point is, there are some words that are used to describe a group of animals. Vultures happen to be one that I remember, in part because they're a kettle in the air, a wake when they're by the corpse, and while on the ground, they're called a committee--ha! Maybe they're the ones that come up with the group name!"

Manny pinned me with a baffled look. He shook his immense, shaggy head. "I don't think I'll ever understand you."

"Good. Life's better with some mysteries."

The distance on heat-drenched roads deceived me, as always, and the area where the vultures had been circling now drew close.

"Hey, Manny," I said, frowning and tightening my grip on the steering wheel. "You see that?"

Another grunt, then a gasp. "What happened?"

"I don't know," I said, though I had my guesses: There had been something on the road that had made the driver--coming the other way--overreact. The telltale streaks of black rubber dragged across the lane, into mine, and then back again before sweeping off the road entirely. The rumpled wreck lay a good ten yards into the desert dust, the pulverized glass from the windshield sparkling in the sunlight.

Pushing hard on the brakes, I slid the pickup truck onto what passed for the shoulder. We rolled beyond the wreck itself, finally coming to a rest some thirty feet away.

"Move your fat arm," I said, waving Manny back. I couldn't see out of the back of

the pickup, so I needed to use the side mirrors as I slipped the truck into reverse and started rolling backward.

"You think they're okay?"

"No," I said, taking care to not swerve myself too much and to keep safely on my side of the road. I couldn't remember the last time I saw a car come past us--it was probably in the order of twenty or thirty minutes, if I were forced to guess--so the precaution might have seemed foolish, but I'd seen enough in my life of accidents to know that I didn't want to run any avoidable risk. Once even with the exit of the wrecked car from the road, I put the truck in park and, with a quick glance in the side mirror, cracked open the door.

Without the constant cooling breeze coming through the open windows, the heat hit the back of my throat like a choked word. I coughed. I may have grown up in Arizona, but that didn't mean that I loved the heat. I could deal with it, of course, but people deal with horrible things all of the time. A glance each direction to ensure my safety, and I crossed the road.

Waves of roiling heat baked against the bottoms of my normal arm as I ran, and I felt like I was being assaulted by the sun no matter which direction I turned. Whoever was in that car would be roasting, no matter how long ago the accident happened. And, if a kettle of vultures was overhead, I didn't have a lot of hope.

Nevertheless, I turned over my shoulder and shouted, "Grab some water!"

Manny was already at the back of the truck, almost as if he anticipated what I would say.

"I love that man," I said under my breath. Picking my way down the shoulder and into the sandy ditch, my work boots caked in the hot grit, I shouted at the people in the overturned car. At least, I *hoped* there were people in the car, and not just a vulture's meal. "Hey! Everyone okay? Anyone hurt?"

The closer I got, the less confident I felt. Scoops of dirt from where the car had smashed into the desert heaped around my feet. A kaleidoscope of glass danced with the reflection of the ground and the sky. A toddler's tantrum of broken plastic, multicolored and useless, splayed about. If someone survived the impact, they were probably in pretty bad shape. "How hurt are you?" I asked, as it was the most practical question I could formulate.

Manny huffed next to me, his broad brow already bejeweled with sweat beneath his blue ballcap. "So? What do you think?"

Before I could respond, a weak cry--inarticulate, to say the least--came from inside the ruined car (it was a red Hyundai Elantra, with emphasis on *was*). "Manny!" I said, though I'm not sure why. I jumped forward, picking my way through the heat. "Manny there *is* someone in there!"

"Slow down, Celeste, I don't..."

I hunkered down and looked in through the rumpled metal. It was just one person, a woman. "Manny, she's hurt!" Blood drizzled through her blonde hair; I could see a glimpse of her skull beneath the flap of skin that had once been her scalp. She was buckled in--probably the reason that she was still alive, honestly--and dangled over the

torn upholstery of the car's roof. She moaned again, eyes fluttering. I couldn't help myself: I reached out with my left hand and grabbed the door. The sensors inside of my fiber optic nerves lit up. It was "hot", though not in a way that would hurt me. Nothing hurt my left hand.

Cybernetic hydraulics began to whirl into life as I strained against the metal. It popped and crumpled beneath my fingers as my robotic arm increased pressure to ensure a good grip. I gritted my teeth and leaned back, ready to tear the door off of its hinges, when a large hand--about the size of a paperback novel, if I were forced to guess--clapped down on my shoulder.

"Cel. Stop."

I glared up at Manny, anger flaring. "What do you mean? She needs our help!"

"No."

"What do you mean, *no*?"

"I mean you don't get to do that."

"Why not?" I could feel a surge of frustration bubbling in my chest. I clenched the door tighter. A squealing burst of tortured metal accompanied the action. "She needs--"

"She's not our problem."

I stared, open-mouthed. "Not our problem?"

He shook his shaggy head. "Look, we wanted to see if we could help. We can't..."

"The hell we can't! Give me one minute and I'll have her out..."

"No. We can't risk it."

"Risk what?" Frustration at his cagey responses crept into my question. Manny was never like this; he didn't enjoy riddles, puzzles, or anything other than straightforward speech. "She doesn't have to know."

"If we pull her out, we'll have to tend her until help arrives."

"So?"

"She'll see us." He paused. "She'll see *you*."

I blinked. "What's wrong with me?"

"You know that we can't let others see you. It's why we're moving. It's why we're on this godforsaken road in the first place."

"I don't understand."

He sighed, then wiped a hand across his sweating face. "Celeste, no one can see you. More specifically, they can't see *that*." He pointed at my left arm, the one that had the shape of a human limb, but was gunsmoke gray and crossing-walk yellow. Cybernetics ran through it, interfacing with my brain through a complex process of computation and prosthetics. It was part of who I was for as long as I could remember. And yet...there was something...*vestigial* about the arm, something about a deeper past, a darker experience. Of pain. Of fear. Of blood. Of desperation.

I shook my head. "It's not a shameful thing."

"I didn't say it was," said Manny. "But it is a thing better off hidden." He shook his head. "We can't risk her seeing it, or the police asking questions and coming to take a peek." He sighed. "I'm sorry, Celeste. I know this is important to you, but I can't allow it."

I gritted my teeth. "Well, this isn't about *you*, now is it? *I'm* in charge of me. What you want and what I want may not be the same this time, so you can just--"

Before I could finish my threat, his heavy hand darted forward. Much like his timbre was unexpectedly soft and high, his speed was unexpectedly high. He got his hand around my neck as quickly as a mongoose attacking a snake.

Pressure, the sound of a click, and as the world faded, I thought, *The group noun for mongoose is a curiosity.*

Then it was all dark.

Manny had to use the manual release valve on Celeste's arm to get it to release the door, but that wasn't too hard to accomplish. He'd built her--salvaged her, *saved* her--and so he knew what he was doing.

With a heavy sigh, he scooped up the inert form of his girlfriend, settling her on his broad back with the same casual grace as he would if he were slinging a sports jacket over his shoulder.

This was happening more and more, this rebelliousness. He couldn't figure out where the bug in the code was. He'd have to check it out, once he arrived in Oregon. But that was still hours--more than a day, actually--away. For now, he was down his chauffer. That was a bigger irritation to him than almost anything else.

Behind him, he heard a soft whisper. He chose to ignore it. What he'd told Celeste was true: No one could know about her. And, once he got everything settled in Portland, he'd be able to wipe the files that related to this journey. Then Celeste wouldn't know about the woman she couldn't save.

As he walked down the dirt path toward his parked truck, his cybernetically enhanced girlfriend unconscious on his shoulders, he decided he'd better hurry.

He didn't want to get a sunburn.