

Spring 5-1-2021

## Sundered: A Novel-in-Progress

Erik Renner  
erikrenner13@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: [https://opencommons.uconn.edu/srhonors\\_theses](https://opencommons.uconn.edu/srhonors_theses)



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Renner, Erik, "Sundered: A Novel-in-Progress" (2021). *Honors Scholar Theses*. 825.  
[https://opencommons.uconn.edu/srhonors\\_theses/825](https://opencommons.uconn.edu/srhonors_theses/825)

Sundered: A Novel-in-Progress

Erik Renner

Thesis Advisor: Sean Frederick Forbes, PhD

Honors Advisor: Mary Burke, Ph.D.

## Thesis Preface

As this is an ongoing project – a “novel-in-progress,” so to speak – I thought it prudent to include a preface that would break down the evolution of my novel, since it may not be immediately obvious that this has been a project over two years in the making. The version of the book included herein is roughly the sixth or seventh major written iteration of the story—I wish I could say that it was one or the other with full confidence, but as I’d never expected there to be so many different evolutions to this project (a running theme throughout this journey, as I’ve come to realize), I didn’t start numbering them until the second semester of my Junior year, by which point at least one version of the story was lost to a malfunctioning hard drive while another had been consigned to an email account I unfortunately no longer have access to.

For the most part, this will be a fairly general overview of the overall development of the book. Although I would love to break down every step of the process to the smallest detail (something which I had to stop myself from doing a painful number of times while writing this), if I were to actually do so, this “preface” would almost certainly run well over fifty pages in length, at which point I would likely have to call it something else entirely. As such, I’ve decided to keep this limited to a more general view of the history of the project, with particularly important changes, occurrences, themes, and concepts being highlighted along the way. I have, however, included a heavily annotated transcript of the most recent character sketch that I made for the protagonist of the novel, Eliot Hargrave, as well as an annotated copy of the currently in-progress version of the first chapter. This will allow me to dive into two specific examples of the level of time and thought put into each step of this process, something that may be otherwise lost while discussing generalities.

The origin of this project is a little complicated, as it actually started as three completely separate entities that slowly merged together over the course of my time at UConn. For starters, the current version of the main character, Eliot Hargrave, actually has his roots in a rather silly character I came up with in the summer between high school and college. The general premise of the character was that he was a ranger out on a nameless frontier – at the time part of a larger world that had pretty much every genre I enjoyed thrown into it despite how illogical it seemed, from dystopian nightmare societies where punk rockers rioted in the street to low fantasy journeys in the style of classic pulp adventure stories like Robert E. Howard’s *Conan the Barbarian* – who was killed while trying to save his wife from bandits. The man’s corpse was then thrown by the bandits into a deep cave, where it coincidentally landed on top of a magical ankh that brought him back to life. This allowed him to hunt down his and his partner’s killers as a revenant.

I creatively named this character “the Duster” because he wore a duster and he “dusted” people (meaning he killed them). By the end of the story, he would become a similar character to Clint Eastwood’s “The Man with No Name,” where his actual name had been supplanted by the legend that grew around him. Although I later attempted to revive the story as it was during my Junior year (though this time with the Duster being in a same sex relationship, as I’d just come to terms with my bisexuality and wanted to explore it in writing), neither version of the story ever got farther than a few pages before being dropped.

Interestingly, the few pages that I did write for my first attempt at the Duster actually have the first mention of Mancil, the town that Eliot grew up in in the current version of my novel. This version of the town shares many similarities with its current iteration, though with many of the more specific world and plot elements absent. Mancil was still a frontier mining

town, though at this point in time it was situated near a massive mountain range and had been founded by dwarves (as this world also had fantasy races because apparently high school Erik thought that there just wasn't enough going on this world already), and instead of steampunk-style spider machines creating smoke that frequently blotted out the sun, a massive, smog-spewing train would block out sunlight in the morning and the evening, while the mountain range blocked the light in the time in between. Why anyone would ever willingly choose to live in a town that was essentially trapped in near-perpetual darkness when the region was also filled with murderous bandits and had most of its resources already harvested was unfortunately something that I never bothered to write down, so if I ever had any reasoning for it besides it being an interesting set piece, it has been lost to the sands of time.

Around this same period, I also got into *Dungeons & Dragons*, a tabletop roleplaying game with stories that are usually set in high fantasy worlds. Because I wanted to make new friends at college, I decided to try and create a new and exciting world for a potential *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign, my logic being that anyone cool enough to like roleplaying would surely make for perfect friends. The general concept of the world was that it had been physically split in half by a magical war centuries before, instigated by a Roman Empire stand in group from the eastern half of the main continent. The massive rift created by the war revealed a previously unknown purple element that both granted psychic powers and powered various steampunk machines, including a massive moving city built on spider legs called the "Mechropolis" which would crawl down the walls of the rift and harvest the mysterious new element, though the primary focus was on a crime-infested city named Sterl.

Unfortunately, the group that this world had been designed for quickly fell apart due to easily avoidable drama before our first gaming session, and I was forced to shelve the world.

However, many of the core concepts of that world stuck with me, and every few weeks I'd be drawn back to the world to see if I couldn't work out a story in it.

Although some of the groundwork for the current version of the story was there, both of these half-formed ideas remained distinctly separate entities, and likely still would be today if not for the third part of the equation. For fun, I decided to take a creative writing class Sophomore year, an action which ultimately had far a greater impact on my life than I'd expected at the time. One of the first assignments for the class involved writing around fifteen lines of metered poetry, which, as simple as it sounded, was something that I just couldn't get a grasp on. Eventually, after discussing the trouble I was having with both my professor and my mother (an English teacher), I was struck with inspiration: I would simply write a story within the constraints of a poem.

At the time, I was on a massive Cthulhu Mythos kick, having just discovered that there were other authors writing about the same concepts as H. P. Lovecraft without the nasty streak of racism that colors the majority of his stories. As such, the idea of writing something about nightmarish horrors from beyond the stars was incredibly appealing to me at the time. I ended up creating a short poem about a sailor washing up on a stone shore littered with wreckage and gore after his ship was destroyed by an otherworldly monstrosity that had risen out of the sea. At the time, I simply handed in the poem and forgot about it, assuming that, like most weekly class assignments, it would likely be completely erased from memory within a few weeks.

However, something about the concept stuck with me. There were too many questions I'd left unanswered for myself. Who was this man? Where was this mysterious rocky shore? Why was he there? What had summoned the creature that had destroyed his ship?

Eventually, the opportunity to answer these questions presented itself in the same creative writing class in the form of a short story split into two parts. The man (initially a sailor) became a newly graduated archaeology major in 1920s New England. The shore became an abandoned island off the coast of Massachusetts which had a dark and mysterious past that had been shrouded by time, and was largely forgotten about except by locals. The archaeologist had discovered a journal that discussed a strange idol of an unknown culture, which he'd gone to take from the island in order to get his foot into the door of the academic world. However, his taking the idol ultimately resulted in the creature that it depicted rising from the depths of the ocean floor and destroying his ship, trapping him on the island. In typical Cthulhu Mythos fashion, he then very quickly lost his mind and died a horrible death.

Much like the original poem, however, the ending to the story didn't exactly sit right with me. Due to time constraints, I'd rushed the man's descent into madness. Part of me wanted to keep working on the story, but I also didn't have much of a reason to outside of personal interest, which meant that, more likely than not, the story was never going to be finished. However, the professor for the class encouraged me to keep working on it, suggesting that I could potentially use it as my honors thesis. Having a life-long love for books, I immediately jumped on the opportunity, and began work on trying to extend the story over the next few months.

However, as I began fleshing out the story, I realized that there wasn't really much to expand on, other than having a more accurate portrayal of a man losing his grip on reality. I also realized that, as an inexperienced writer, it would likely be incredibly challenging to pull off a story where the main character only gets a chance to interact with another human being in the first chapter and then never encounters anyone else. I attempted to flesh out the mythos of the island, coming up with the concept that the book would be more of a collection of short stories

centered around the island. Each story would be set in a different time period, with the style of horror shifting between periods to match whatever type of horror was most popular at the time—for example, the 1980s story would involve a group of teenagers going to the island to party, but getting picked off one by one by a scientist who'd gone insane on the island and been transformed into a mutant (who also happened to be the main character of the portion of the book set in the 1950s) like a classic slasher story. The linking thread was going to be an ongoing narrative about the original settlers on the island, who had disappeared far before the events of the story in a similar fashion to the missing colony of Roanoke; however, there was also going to be a time travel element with characters causing events in each other's stories without realizing it. In other words, my conception of the book was quickly becoming an incredibly unwieldy mess that I was losing interest in by the day.

By the point that I'd come to that conclusion, however, I'd already enrolled in a novel writing course for the first semester of my Junior year. At the time of enrollment, I hadn't realized that the course was intended for people quite a bit farther along in their journeys as writers than I was, as everyone else came into the class with a fairly clear vision of their actual project; the course was really more of a way to help people perform the physical act of writing their books than it was about explaining how to actually go about doing so. Despite the fact that, at this point in time, I had just scrapped my main idea for the class, I decided to stay in the course, rationalizing that it would be better if I was forced to make a decision about it then instead of waiting until the second semester of my Senior year to start writing it (which, ironically, technically did happen, at least in the sense that the prep work I needed wasn't actually finished until quite close to the time of the writing of this preface, though that wasn't really what I was thinking of at the time).



Ultimately, this was the right call, since it forced me to step back from the island story and start from a relatively clean slate. My first reaction was to completely abandon what I'd been working on because I (incorrectly) assumed it to be of little use, and I found myself slowly gravitating back towards the world that I'd been forced to abandon Freshman year. At the same time, for another creative writing class I was taking, I'd just made my second failed attempt to make something with the Duster, having started working on the story for an assignment before switching to something set in a science fiction world that I'd written for another *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign that had also happened to fall apart (this time because I simply didn't have the creative energy to spare between that project, my ongoing *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign with a group of friends from high school, and the book, rather than because of some trite drama).

My second thought was to just to move the Duster from his original world into what I'd taken to referring to as the "Split World" in my notebook, but something about it didn't sit right with me. There was nothing truly noteworthy about the Duster in a world with fire breathing dragons and mad necromancers, nor was his quest really related to any of the greater concepts I'd come to attach to the world. He had no reason to save the crime-riddled city of Sterl from the demonic cult threatening to take it over, or to stand up to the might of the towering Mechtropolis and its legion of psionically powered golems (which is just a fancy way of saying "magic-powered robots"). Yet I realized that I couldn't bring myself to abandon the character for some cliched fantasy hero, particularly because this was around the time that I'd finally realized that I actually really disliked most high fantasy books, despite the fact that I loved many of their concepts. The stories that always pulled me back time and time again were those either grounded in reality or with very clear limits on their fantastic elements – if a wizard can simply magic away any problem, why should I ever be worried that he, she, or they might fail?

That was when it all clicked for me. I was going to write neither a high fantasy adventure nor a traditional western revenge story. Instead, I was going to create a post-apocalyptic adventure that drew from everything that I loved about my old concepts with none of the extra fat attached to it. This change in direction additionally allowed me to explore greater real-world concepts in a fictional setting, as the backdrop of an apocalypse allows for the perfect setting to explore the concepts involved with establishing a society and enforcing social structures. An anarchic wasteland acts as a perfect battleground for concepts both old and new, often brought to their extremes, to clash.

Thus, the first true version of the current story was born, though the fact that it was made largely out of necessity rather than out of a clear desire for a specific story ended up being an issue that haunted the project right up until its current iteration. The Duster was turned into a far younger protagonist, someone around 19 to 25 years old, who wanted to get out and explore the world. Instead of him drawing his power from a state of undeath, he would gain his powers through the use of the mysterious element that had been unearthed by the war, though this too needed some changing. I'd removed the fantasy elements from the world, instead deciding to make the mysterious element the primary fantastic element of the story – the rest would be fairly grounded, allowing for an actual sense of danger.

Instead of a magical war creating a rift that revealed the mysterious element, the element (now known as patridium after having the majority of the lore and rules relating to it changed) became something that had been known of for a long time, though the process for turning it into a potent (and highly dangerous) fuel source had only recently been discovered. As I'd always loved the concept of mutations and psychic powers, having grown up on a steady supply of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Pokémon, I replaced the magic in the world with something

more akin to an exaggerated version of old concepts about radiation (which, admittedly, I just called radiation until the most recent version of the story, where it became known as “the taint,” something a bit more grounded in the vernacular of the period this story is based on). Drawing on the idea of a large, continent spanning war – and wanting to have an excuse for psychic cowboys to make an appearance – I used post-Civil War America as my basis for the technology level of the time, then began working out the impact that throwing this world’s exaggerated equivalent to nuclear fuel into a time where doctors still performed surgeries with filth covered hands and gas lights and candles had yet to be replaced with electric bulbs would have on the world’s trajectory.

No longer was patridium a magical miracle rock that simply granted psychic powers to anyone who got near it while also occasionally being used for fuel; now, it was a highly dangerous element that could be used for power but had horrifying effects on those exposed to it in its fuel form, bringing in the mutations I’d loved from the old island story. The psychic powers it granted could only be gained from finding a raw chunk of the material and spilling your blood upon it, which would cause the element to react in such a way that it mutated your body and granted psychic powers based on your will and intent. Sterl became the home city of Aileen and Ash Hargrave (though I didn’t come up with Ash until around the fourth or fifth iteration of the story), while the Roman Empire stand-ins became the far more fleshed out Xiphoc Empire. Instead of being an ongoing threat, the head of the Xiphoc Empire would be destroyed by the bomb that split the continent in two, causing a swift collapse in the already struggling state. The demonic cult that had infested Sterl instead became the Phoenix Cult, a group of post-war remnants who had seized onto the idea that their empire had been at its strongest when it was also at its cruelest, using the model of their ancestors to try and brutally

conquer the Xiphoc Wasteland. The Mechtropolis eventually became the mining crawlers that lumber up and down the walls of the Divide, though this was more of background detail than anything else for much of the project's lifecycle.

At this point, the basic premise that all future versions of this story would come to be based on was set. The new protagonist, Elwood Hargrave (who later became Eliot Hargrave when I realized I needed to dramatically revamp his character), would be from the western half of the continent, which had been the side responsible for splitting the world in two – the result of them attempting to harness a power that they did not truly understand to try to end the war faster. This western half was largely spared from the immediate aftermath of the detonation of the patridium bomb, as the bomb had detonated deep enough in Xiphoc territory that it had little direct impact on the western confederacy; however, in the years since the bomb had gone off, mass industrialization had kicked into full swing, and the heads of the states – who had defaulted back to their old rivalries as soon as the dust from the bomb had settled – were slowly losing influence to the burgeoning corporations without realizing it, to the point where the corporations will eventually replace them as the ruling powers. This, in turn, would serve the dual role of allowing me to explore the real-world issues of industrialization and the terrifying power of modern corporations through a more fantastic lens while also giving Elwood a reason to want to leave his relatively safe world for the far more dangerous wasteland of Xiphoc, which, in the intervening years, has become a mutant-infested hellscape.

As most of the general story elements were set for this point onwards, with the overall evolution of the story being a fairly slow but steady process, I'm going to primarily focus on Elwood's evolution from the first iteration to where he is now, as he by far has seen the most dramatic changes over the course of the remainder of the project, the rest largely being

expanding what was already there and reworking the story to overcome whatever issues had been present in the previous version.

The initial version of Elwood, I'm a little ashamed to admit, was a bit of a surrogate character for myself, at least in part. The first two versions of the story written up for the Junior year novel writing course were actually much closer to the archeologist version than the current version. Initially, Elwood's time on the island was going to encompass roughly the third of the book (though it's now been relegated to simply the first arc), with him grappling with his concept of who his mother was as a person. This was intended to be a way for me to discuss my own relationship with my father, which, at the time, was in a rocky position (something which has thankfully changed dramatically in the time since then), with inspiration taken from the character of Pink in Pink Floyd's *The Wall*. I was trying to go for a subtle character study about the impacts that one generation had on another (a theme which has resurfaced in a more general sense in the current version of the story); this was not when I actually ended up writing. Instead of being a subtle character study, I unintentionally made Elwood seem more like Norman Bates than an actual human; he frequently heard his mother's voice in his head, and at one point even broke down during a high stress moment under the stress that his view of his mother put on him. It was intended to be a coping mechanism that El knew wasn't real (with El finally realizing that his perception of his mother was not accurate to who she actually was and coming to peace with her memory during the climax of the novel), but it just came across as someone writing about mental illness who didn't actually understand it, largely as a result of me leaning too far into the Pink Floyd influences while forgetting that story and symbols presented in *The Wall* are intentionally over exaggerated in a way that works in a rock opera but not in a grounded narrative.

In later versions, Aileen's influence on Elwood's life was fairly dramatically changed, making her a much more sympathetic character who had done the best that she could for her son but just been dealt hand after hand of bad luck in life. I very quickly realized that this allowed for an opportunity to show why the status quo of rampant industrialization in the western half of the continent was a problem that needed to be resolved. As mentioned before, many of the elements of this story (at least at this point in development) act as exaggerations of the issues faced daily in our real world, with many of the fears that I personally have come to develop, such as a fear of loss of individuality in an increasingly machine-like society that pushes people to grind themselves to the bone for the benefit of others, acting as the building blocks. I believe around iteration four I finally developed the character of Ash Hargrave and realized that there was actually a lot of potential for me to dive into the impacts of cross-generational trauma through the use of the Hargrave lineage while also giving me an opportunity to present some stronger female characters at the start of the book. As Ash is one of the people responsible for detonating the bomb that splits the world, an incredible level of guilt ends up on her family. This (along with a desire to not work herself to death in a factory, which makes her ultimate fate a tragic reminder that the society they live in is fundamentally broken and needs to be changed and pushes El onto his own quest) drives Aileen to move out towards the now mutant-infested frontier that's developed along the Divide, as she feels a burning desire to try to repent for her mother's actions, something which, alongside her actual strengths, she unfortunately also instilled in her son.

Ultimately, one of the greater themes of this book is actually going to be about finding balance and peace to create the best possible (if imperfect) society, discussing the dangers of extremism and how easy it is for people to become dangerously married to a philosophy and

simply fight for it without taking the time to consider why they are doing such actions or how comfortable they actually are with the group as a whole, an increasingly common occurrence in our modern world.

Although a peaceful solution may seem odd for a post-apocalyptic gun-slinging adventure, it actually meshes surprisingly well. One of themes that I came to realize I wanted to cover was the concept of people putting aside their differences to have actual, well-thought out discussions on complicated matters – something which I, as someone born at the turn of the millennium, feel like I've seen very little of in my time on this earth, with the actual conversations that were happening gradually being replaced by increasingly extreme partisanship.

The majority of media we have now, at least in my experience, is very focused on problems with society and how horrible said problems are, but seldom provides an actual solution for the problem, or an alternative. This isn't inherently a problem—sometimes the best thing to do really is just to raise awareness about an issue. However, there comes a point where we need to stop simply acknowledging that issues exist and start actually working out ways to solve these problems. The main crux of this book is to present an apparently hopeless world, with factions driven to their extremes in endless, bloody war, and then take that world and show how there still is hope for peace through finding balance and communication, all within the context of an action-packed adventure.

Although there's significantly more that I would absolutely love to say about the project, if I were to say everything that I possibly could here, I would just be writing out the actual book instead of a simple preface. That being said, hopefully this limited window into the creative process that has gone into the development of this book over the past two to four years

(depending on when you classify it as officially beginning) has given you some insight into my novel-in-progress. After years of preparation, through multiple drafts, rewrites, genres, and worlds, I finally feel like I'm in ready to write this novel.



## Prologue: Retribution

Through the tinted goggles of her hazard suit, Captain Ash Hargrave watched the *Comet* pull away from the station, its dark form shimmering faintly under the waning prairie moon. She could already see Richard lumbering back to the caboose, his movement hampered by his own set of protective gear. She fumbled through her pockets, hunting for her brass watch. The characteristic nighttime chill of the badlands had been replaced by the stifling warmth of the hazard suit, its thick layers of leather and lead making it hot and cumbersome. In the hours since she'd put it on, the reek of sweat-soaked leather had built up to near-nauseating levels. The canister in front of her mouth and nose made a wheezing sound as she breathed, one loud enough that it had nearly given away the squad's position while they were approaching the train station.

Not for the first time, Ash was thankful that the Rangers didn't have a designated uniform like the other branches; she could only imagine how much harder it would have been to creep up to the station in the gaudy red and silver getup that Sterl, her home city-state, had chosen for its colors. The Rangers, as one of the few cross-national regiments, was outside of the Confederacy's normal requirements, meaning that its commanders were able to keep their uniforms ambiguous and unassuming – perfect for the clandestine strikes they made against Xiphoc.

As she drew the timepiece, a stocky, similarly clad figure standing beside her broke the silence.

“Richey’s ginnin’ about at the back of the train. Got your ticker ready?” Jeremiah’s frontier drawl was muffled and distorted by the air filter, making him sound like a bad phonograph recording.

“I’m all set,” Ash replied. With her free hand, she wiped away at the condensation building up on her lenses. She wanted this to be precise; if the bomb didn’t go off on time, they needed to report it to command as fast as possible.

Moments later, Richard gave the signal.

“Time?” Jeremiah asked.

“Eleven thirty-six.” Ash closed the pocket watch.

The pair watched from the station’s platform as Richard leapt from the back of the accelerating steam engine and disappeared into the tall, dry grass of the Comonok. In the few seconds it took for his head to reappear, the *Comet*, still picking up speed, had already traveled almost two miles from the station. Within minutes, the train would be nearly out of sight, distinguishable only by the void its smoke left in the stars above.

The match had been struck, the fuse lit. Now, all they had to do was watch and wait, as three hundred tons of forged steel stuffed to the brim with refined patridium and capped off with timed explosive charges burned a path across the badlands, an unstoppable silver bullet fired straight into the heart of the Imperial beast. In just under an hour, Xiphoc’s capital would be reduced to a smoldering crater of purple-tinted ash. With it would go the empire’s leadership – her emperor, her nobles, her generals – victims of a war they’d started but never expected to suffer from. And, in the end, it would be the very innovation that had won Xiphoc its early victories that would be its undoing.

Ash was twenty when the railroad made its debut. Now, eleven years later, she couldn't help but look back at that time with a certain degree of envy. The world had seemed simpler then, the future brighter. She remembered how, only a week after their wedding, she and Gregor had pushed their way to the front of a crowd to get a glimpse of the first steam train as it pulled out of the rudimentary station that had been put up in Sterl. Though the initial buzz never seemed to die down, the cost of establishing railways had seemed too prohibitive for most nations, a point apparently driven home when traders came back from the east with news that the Xiphoc Empire had nearly bankrupted itself by investing in this new invention. Ash had seen the machine's merits, but, like most, she assumed that Xiphoc had gone in too far too early.

It wasn't until Xiphocian trading posts started appearing along the edge of the Comonok – maybe a year before Ash's first child, Nettie, was born – that westerners started taking things seriously. Trips that would've normally taken months were cut down to days, only for the discovery of refined patridium a year later to cut those days down into hours once the machines were upgraded to handle the new fuel.

Ash understood why the steam engine had become such a prevalent part of life leading up to the war, why people had become so fascinated by it. The wholesale adoption of patridium, though, that had always rubbed her the wrong way. It felt like the world was diving headfirst into something that it didn't fully comprehend. A train was a machine; a fast one, sure, but at its core it was still a bunch of metal made into moving parts. Refined patridium, on the other hand, felt like magic. Somehow, a harmless purple crystal was turned into a dangerous fuel that was more potent than coal or kerosene, all the while emitting an invisible, transformative force that people had taken to calling "the Taint." It sounded more like sorcery than hard science.

Still, when her squad went into the briefing, she hadn't objected. None of them had. They were too shocked by the plan itself, by the idea that the war could end in one night, to fully process it. When the time came around to put on the suits, Ash had obliged. A swift end to the years-long conflict that had torn the continent in two – how could she object to that?

The click of a lighter pulled Ash from her thoughts. Behind her, Jeremiah was lighting a cigarette, his protective hood tossed to the side.

“What the hell are you doing, Jeremiah? You got a death wish?”

Jeremiah took a long drag on his cigarette, savoring the experience. Ash knew he was doing this to fuck with her. Three years in the same squad and yet the backwoods prick still seemed to think he was better than the “city slicker” he'd been placed under.

Just as Ash was about to begin berating the man, he spoke.

“What? A little smoke never hurt nobody.” He stopped to cough for a second. “Besides, when did you take such a shining to my bodily health anyways?”

“I don't give a damn about your ‘bodily health,’ Jeremiah. I just don't want to deal with a fucking ripper because you wanted to smoke.”

The mention of the ripper made Jeremiah pause. They'd both seen what happened to those who got exposed to refined patridium, either through carelessness or simple ill fortune. The Taint would destroy their minds as it mutated their bodies in random, unpredictable ways. The lucky ones died, their mutating organs unable to still sustain them. The unlucky would turn into what people had started calling “rippers,” savage beasts driven mad by the process of growing or losing limbs, organs, teeth, sometimes even whole heads. At that stage, the only cure was death.

“Alright, Captain, alright. No need to cuss.” Jeremiah dropped the cigarette, taking care to snuff out the flame with his heel before replacing his hood. “But you better believe that I’m lighting another one before we scoot. Patridium’ll be long gone by then.”

Ash sighed. “Suit yourself. But Richard and I’ll put you down at the first sign that you’re turning.”

Jeremiah snorted in response, before sitting down with his back against the station’s ticket counter. He ignored the corpse that was slumped over the front desk, hands still reaching for the rifle that it had tried to pull on the squad when they’d attacked. Ash stayed where she was, turning to scan the horizon for any sign of approaching troops. If reinforcements arrived, they’d more than likely be spotted as they passed over one of the many ditches or small hills that covered the Comonok. Xiphocian tactics preferred intimidation and force over stealth and cunning, and Ash had gotten used to spotting the telltale way that the prairie grass would twitch when dismounted troops moved through it. For now, though, the only movement she saw came from the steady waves of wind that rolled over the grass and rustled the branches of the few trees that dotted the landscape. Occasionally, she turned to check the hill behind the station for signs of movement. The numerous rocks that covered the low ridge made it the ideal location for a stealthy assault, hence why the trio had used it when they were scouting out the station’s defenses. They’d left their horses on the far side of it to keep the station’s guards from spotting them. Although they hadn’t seen any signs that Xiphoc patrols might pass through the area, that didn’t mean it was impossible. If anything did happen to approach from that direction and managed to move past the horses without alerting the animals – Ranger horses were trained to cause a ruckus if they were approached by strangers – Ash wanted to make sure that she’d spot the enemy before they could cause any trouble.

For now, she settled into her watch, and waited for the final member of the unit to return.

---

---

It took Richard around thirty minutes to reach the station. Neither member of the waiting pair had spoken since Jeremiah sat down. Ash nodded to Richard as he stepped onto the platform; Jeremiah remained still.

“Charges set without issue. Loaded up enough fuel to keep her going for a while. Even if someone realizes something’s wrong and sends a telegram to the capital, there won’t be enough time for them to do anything about it,” Richard said, taking a seat on one of the station’s benches.

Ash respond with a curt, “Good,” her gaze still focused on the horizon. She heard Richard sigh, then begin to speak again.

“I still can’t believe that this is it. That this is how it all ends. It... it just doesn’t seem right.”

Ash knew what he meant. Six years of bloody warfare would come to a close tonight, not with a dramatic final stand or a heroic cavalry charge, or even a chance for the beaten commander to raise a bloodied flag in surrender. Just with a bomb, an explosion that would kill thousands of men and women in their sleep, never knowing that today had been their last, never having had a chance to defend themselves. And those on top, the brass that had started all this in the first place, wouldn’t even get to suffer for what they’d started.

“I know, Rich. I don’t like it either.” Ash sighed. She turned to face him, noticing that he was staring at the corpse of a young woman who they’d shot while securing the station. Specks of blood covered her cheeks, and a reddish-brown pool had formed underneath her, drawing

Ash's eye towards the revolver that was still clasped securely in the guard's holster. She couldn't have been older than seventeen, barely younger than Richard.

Sometimes Ash forgot how young he was. The son of farmers, Richard had joined the unit only a year prior. He'd enlisted in the army as soon as he turned eighteen so none of his younger siblings would be drafted. His knack for stealth and subterfuge made him a prime candidate for the Rangers, and he was swiftly plucked out of the normal rank and file and placed in Ash's squad. There, he'd proven himself time and time again as being one of the best soldiers Agoris had. Yet behind all of his talent and success, he was still little more than a kid, and Ash knew how often he struggled with what he did. She used to have the same problem when she first joined up. Over the years though, she'd learned to ignore the guilt, or at least pretend to when she was in front of the squad. However, she wasn't sure if she'd be able to keep that up after tonight.

Ash sat down next to him, putting her hand on his shoulder. "It had to end somehow. The way things were going, this war could've kept on for years. They weren't going to stop until they'd taken every inch of land from us." She paused for a moment. "We're saving lives this way, Rich. You have to look at it like that. Not just our lives, those of Xiphoc, too." She gestured towards the horizon, moving Richard's gaze away from the corpse. They could faintly make out a splotch of blackness in the night sky where the *Comet's* smoke covered the stars. She continued. "We sacrifice a few in their capital to save all of us from more suffering. If it isn't stopped now, my Nettie and Aileen would end up fighting in the war, as would your brothers and sisters." A wave of guilt washed over Ash as she thought about her daughters. She hadn't seen either of them in nearly three years. Aileen would be six by now – did she even remember Ash?

Richard nodded. “Yeah, I know. It still doesn’t sit right with me, though. Doesn’t feel like any peace can come out of this.”

Before Ash could respond, Jeremiah finally spoke up. “Peace? After all this, you want peace, boy?” They heard the sound of Jeremiah’s lighter, as well as the leathery slap of his hood falling to the ground. “I just want to watch `em burn.”

This time, Ash said nothing. Jeremiah’s town had been right on the edge of the frontier, only a few miles from Xiphoc territory—and from this very station. Here, the first wave of troops had exited the *Comet* and started the war by butchering the town’s denizens in their sleep. The similarity between what had happened then and what the squad was doing now hadn’t been lost on any of them.

The trio remained quiet for some time, each member lost in thought. Eventually, Jeremiah walked up to Ash, cigarette jutting out from the center of his greying beard. “How long `til it happens?” he asked, his eyes fixed on the horizon.

Ash pulled her pocket watch back out and checked it. The hands pointed to twelve thirty-five.

“Any second n—”

A brilliant flash of light cut Ash off. She looked up to see a massive fireball race into the sky, lighting up the plains like it was noontime. Purple smoke billowed upwards, briefly dimming the sky, before the flames pushed back through.

Jeremiah, screaming, fell to the ground, clutching at his eyes.

“Holy shit,” Richard said, his goggles fixed on the rising toadstool of ash.



The flames illuminated what looked like a small crack that had formed, a growing ravine that was arching out from the blast zone and tearing the continent in half. Ash began to panic. It wasn't supposed to be this big. It was just supposed to destroy the capital, but already she could tell that what it'd done was far, far worse.

An earthshattering *BOOM* suddenly echoed around them, making Ash's ears ring, as a blast of force slammed into her. All three were thrown backwards, Richard slamming his head into a wall as the ground began to shake violently.

Ash pulled herself to her feet, fighting to stand amidst the earthquake. Jeremiah lay to her right, still screaming, his arms tangled up with a pile of bodies from the shootout. Rich lay to her left, unmoving. Ahead of her, she could see the billowing cap of the explosion beginning to spread out and fall, the flames illuminating the growing rift. The fault seemed to be racing towards them, followed closely by a falling cloud of Taint-infused death.

Ash lunged towards Richard, throwing his still form over her shoulders. Blood coated the inside of his goggles. She didn't have time to check if he was still alive, just to run.

Jeremiah screamed louder. Ash turned to help him, only to see the edge of his foot fall downwards as he was swallowed by a gaping chasm. Just as swiftly as the hole had appeared, it vanished, as earth rushed into the pit.

Ash began to sprint for the hills, trying to keep Richard on her back. If she could just get over the hill, she'd reach the horses. They'd outrun this. They'd get to safety.

The long grass seemed to tug at her legs. A massive burst of dirt flew into the air and slammed into her chest, trying to throw her back. She stumbled, fell, dropped Richard. She

pulled herself up, trying to force her way through the collapsing earth to him, only to see him disappear in a wave of soil. Behind him, the station was falling down into the growing chasm.

Ash ran. The earth was falling apart around her, creating a maelstrom of dirt, grass, and stone. A rock smashed into her knee, making her cry out in pain. The tremors had reached the hill, making it shake apart. A wave of shadow rushed past her, the falling ash blocking out the light from the explosion.

She pumped her legs as hard as she could, bounding past large rocks and shrubs as she closed the distance to the summit. Thrusting her hands in front of her, she reached out, ready to pull herself over the ridge, but, just as her fingers were about to make contact, she felt the ground beneath her feet begin to slide back. Time seemed to slow as she tried to run through the falling soil, desperately reaching out for the disappearing ledge as the earth pulling her backwards into the pit. She was enveloped in a world of swirling darkness, buffeted by earth and fallout alike, titanic forces breaking apart her body. She screamed as the earth swallowed her.

*A quick note from the author – as briefly mentioned in the preface, this novel-in-progress entered its current major rewrite quite recently, with what I had written of the first two chapters needing to be completely scrapped for a new start that works with the current version of the protagonist (which is discussed in greater detail in the attached character sketch transcript). Since this is a project that I’m deeply invested in, I simply could not bring myself to just rush out a hollow facsimile of what the chapter will be just to have something to turn in. What is included here, though still likely subject to change, has the same degree of thought, passion, and effort put into it as any other stage of the process; the sole reason that this chapter is not currently finished is because of time, nothing more. However, as I’d still feel uncomfortable submitting it as is, I’ve decided to use this as an opportunity to present what my writing process looks like, using footnotes to give a bit of an “author’s commentary” to provide context and explain what’s going on. I’ve also included a brief summary of my outline for the rest of the chapter at the end of this section. The content from the start of the chapter up to the line break is the most complete portion of this chapter.*

## Chapter One: Progeny<sup>1</sup>

*Forty-two years later...*

Mikael woke to the sound of someone yelling and beating at his front door like a wild pistonbull<sup>2</sup>. Instinctively, he’d snatched his pistol from its normal position on his bedside table

---

<sup>1</sup> Referring to both Aileen and Eliot, as this chapter starts with the death of Aileen directly following the death of her mother, symbolically representing how Aileen’s life was largely kept trapped in her mother’s shadow. Initially, this chapter actually started with the section after the line break, with this section actually happening later on. However, when I began writing about the events of the night before, I realized that it was a far more natural and interesting start to the story. Additionally, it puts more of a focus on El.

<sup>2</sup> A mutated variation of a bull that is infamous in this world for the speed with which it can repeatedly bash things with its head, akin to a piston.

and aimed it at the door.<sup>3</sup> As he cocked the hammer, ready to take down his assailant with him, the dregs of sleep finally cleared enough for him to recognize the voice on the other side of the door as that of his apprentice calling out his name.

He pushed himself up from his bed and hobbled to the door as fast as his arthritic joints allowed for, his readiness to go out guns blazing quickly replaced by mounting concern for his apprentice. The boy – Eliot hated that he still called him “boy” at twenty, which of course only made the aging mechanic use it more – had woken him up in the middle of the night before, usually out of an eagerness to show him how he’d somehow managed to fix an item that Mik had deemed beyond repair, but never like this.

He set the pis<sup>4</sup>tol down on his windowsill – keeping it within easy reach of his one arm – and opened the door.

It only took a single glance for Mikael to realize what had happened. Eliot’s copper hair was drenched in sweat, the leather duster he was never without (despite the fact that it was several sizes too large for his small frame) nowhere to be seen.

What stood out the most to Mik though was Eliot’s eyes. Normally bright and inquisitive, they were instead filled with a hollow desperation that Mik knew all too well.

---

<sup>3</sup> I wanted to mention how he started sleeping with a pistol after a ripper broke into his house and killed his husband and their daughter, but I just couldn’t find a place to naturally fit it. I’m not sure if I’ll include the detail in actual text of the final version, but even if I don’t, this will be the behind-the-scenes reasoning for it.

<sup>4</sup> The coat used to belong to his father before he died. Both of Eliot’s parents were in the Rangers, which, following the Sundering War, was reorganized from being a military organization into a defense force to help fight off the wave of mutants created by the fallout of the patridium bombing. Both the father and Aileen would have remained Rangers for the rest of their lives, alternating which parent would stay with Eliot and which would fight mutants whenever possible. Unfortunately, Eliot’s father died while Aileen was pregnant, and Aileen, wanting to make sure that her son still had at least one parent, was forced to leave the more immediately dangerous job as a Ranger for the long term danger of mining. Aileen blames herself for not being there to save her husband, a trait which she passed on to El.

The mechanic pulled his apprentice into a tight embrace, letting him sob out the pain that Mikael knew no words could relieve. They sat together on the edge of his bed for most of the night, until an exhausted Eliot had finally drifted off to sleep just before dawn. Careful not to disturb the boy, he quietly stood up and left the cabin, and began his journey to the grave keeper's house on the south side of town.

---

<sup>5</sup>The burial of Aileen Hargrave occurred largely in silence, broken only by the harsh *scrape-thud* of Amon the grave keeper's rusted shovel tossing dry earth onto the coffin and the distant *hiss-clang* of the mining crawlers as they made their daily climb up and down the great cliffs of the Divide. Occasionally, when the wind picked up, the clouds of purple smoke constantly belched out by the spider-like machines would be blown in front of the sun, bringing momentary relief from the oppressive heat of the midsummer prairie to the aging grave keeper and the funeral's sole two attendees.

They made for an odd pair, the striking visual contrast between the two almost absurd. Mikael was tall and thickly built, his long mane of curly black hair pulled back into its signature ponytail. Though he was well over sixty – a rarity out on the frontier – he seemed to bear only a few of the traditional marks of his age. His olive skin was still free of wrinkles and spots, his hair still ran as thick and wild as it had forty years prior, (a fact he'd proudly boast about after a few

---

<sup>5</sup> As mentioned before, this chapter originally started here, though once I got a bit farther in, I realized that it made more sense to just start the book proper with El running to Mikael's house instead of making it a flashback (which would have also confused the narrative flow). I'm not entirely satisfied with this paragraph and will more than likely continue to tweak it.

drinks down at the Cracked Casing). He could still hold his own in the rare tavern brawl that broke out, though his days of leaping back up for a second round were long gone.

Those who knew him, however, knew that Father Time hadn't spared Mikael from his withering embrace – rather, the old bastard had simply decided to attack him in less conventional ways. Where other men gradually shrank with time, Mikael was bent and contorted by years spent hunched over his workbench and lifting heavy objects with his back instead of his legs – something he could still hear his late-husband (lovingly) nagging him about. Where other men lost their muscles to atrophy, Mikael lost his arm fighting the ripper that had slaughtered his family in their sleep. Where other men died young, Mikael was forced to watch the people he loved leave this world before him. <sup>6</sup>

He turned his gaze from Aileen's casket over to his young companion. He'd barely said a word all morning – come to think of it, Mikael wasn't even sure he'd heard said anything since the previous night. Eliot was taking it hard, which didn't particularly surprise Mikael. Aileen had been Eliot's only family for the entirety of his life, his father having been killed protecting the town from mutants shortly before his birth. She'd done her best to raise him right, at least in Mikael's eyes, even if it was a challenge for her to make time for her son when she needed to work double shifts on the crawlers to put food on the table.

---

<sup>6</sup> The slightly comedic tone of the previous paragraph was specifically designed to help emphasize the suffering that Mikael had gone through by providing a fairly direct contrast between expectations and reality. From here on out, the material included is pretty much entirely up in the air – even if I don't ultimately use any of the following material, I've at least got it parsed out enough that I can easily pull the elements I do like and put them in other locations, or even just move sections around to better fit the overall flow of the chapter. I like to bounce around within whatever scene I'm in when I'm writing if I feel like I'm struggling with part of it; this helps keep my writing fresh, as often I'll work out a solution to the problem by the time I've finished the next section.

Eliot – or just “El,” as he preferred to be called – was a young man of around twenty years, with the copper hair and emerald eyes typical of those whose families hail from the northwestern end of the Confederacy.<sup>7</sup> Unlike the gargantuan mechanic, El was short and scrawny for his age, to the point where many a stranger had, at first glance, mistaken him to be in his mid-teens instead of his early twenties. This issue was only further exacerbated by the massive brown overcoat that Eliot insisted on wearing most every day, despite the fact that it was almost large enough for Mikael to fit into.

Were the stranger to look at El for more than a few moments, however, they’d quickly realize their mistake.<sup>8</sup> His pale, freckled face bore the pockmarks that only came after acne had finally been conquered, and his features were too well defined for one still experiencing the tremendous physical changes brought on by puberty. Though thin, he still had the base layer of muscle that came with growing up in a rural mining community, pushing him just over the edge from “gaunt” to “wiry.”

He’d never actually mined himself—his ma, Allmaker<sup>9</sup> preserve her, had made him swear that he wouldn’t destroy his body out on the crawlers like she had. The promise had proven to be unnecessary—watching his ma<sup>10</sup> get slowly broken down by years of hard labor in

---

<sup>7</sup> Some of the information here (primarily El’s hair color) is now addressed in the new opening; however, both the hair and eye color are distinct for the region, so I kept it in in case I found a better spot to talk about it later;

<sup>8</sup> Originally, I presented a theoretical stranger in town as a tool for describing the characters to the reader, but I realized that this clouded more of the action than it clarified, and toned it down to only a few mentions. Although I do like the paragraph on its own, I’m not quite satisfied with where it is in context. More than likely, this paragraph will be removed, though the descriptions in it will likely be reused elsewhere in the first chapter.

<sup>9</sup> The deity in El’s monotheistic faith; this deity is very creation/building focused, which meshes well with Eliot’s mechanical inclinations. There are a multitude of other religions in this world that will make appearances throughout the novel, though ultimately which one could be considered the “correct” fait for this world (if there is one) is largely inconsequential to the rest of the story.

<sup>10</sup> Although it’s a bit cliché, previous versions of El often felt very bland (except for one instance when he came across as a very edgy teenager, a portrayal which lasted exactly one chapter before I realized what I was doing and scrapped it). I want to try to string some classic “frontier dialect” into his manner of speaking, though whether or not that will stay in the final version remains to be seen. By then, I’ll have either hopefully gotten the hang of

the taint-infused miasma that constantly hung over the mining crawlers had done enough to convince him that consigning oneself to mining was tantamount to signing up for an early death.<sup>11</sup>

And yet, even though he knew that, even though he'd known that the taint-induced cancer that had been eating away at her body for years would never be conquered, his knowledge of what was coming still hadn't prepared him for the cold reality that settles in when Death comes knocking on your mother's front door.

In the town's early days, funerals were always elaborate affairs that made the most of what little the frontierspeople had. A host of traditions had been adopted to try to foster community amongst the town's myriad of settlers, to help make the passing of a loved one easier in a land of strangers. Tradition dictated that a pre-funeral meal must be held, where well-wishers would share stories and comfort distraught family members, the warmth of a loving community and the rich taste of dumplings and pot pie forming a salve for the wounded soul. When the feast was finally done, the coffin would be brought by wagon to the graveyard out on the southern side of town, flanked by a long line of the grieving. Once the procession reached the gravesite, a minister of the departed's last professed faith would step forward and say some words before the final interment. Family members would weep over the casket as it was lowered, a sign to the other attendees of their love for the lost. Although a lengthy process, the

---

making it feel natural, or I'll have scrapped it like Emo-wood (as the edgy teen version of Eliot was still called Elwood at the time).

<sup>11</sup> Although this was a little direct, I wanted to try to find a good way to start building up El's motivation for leaving on his adventure. This will likely either be toned back a little bit or rewritten elsewhere.



frontierspeople who had settled Mancil twenty-five years prior had found it to be an effective way of finding closure in a time and place where death lurked around every corner.<sup>12</sup>

For Aileen, however, there'd been no pre-burial remembrance feast. No long procession of family and friends tailed her wagon, no crowd of mourners wept on her casket as it sank into the soil. The minister hadn't even come to the graveyard, opting instead to say a quick sermon in the street—he had work on the crawlers in an hour, he'd said, and couldn't spare the time to go out to the graveyard.

Time is a finite resource. The people of Mancil knew that better than most. Time spent away from the crawlers was money lost, a fact which grew clearer as it became harder and harder to find ore.

### **Outline:**

Following the burial, Mikael brings Eliot to the Cracked Casing, not wanting to leave his young friend alone. At the bar, El and Mikael talk about life, with Mikael quickly realizing that El is struggling with the concept that he may suffer the same fate as his mother, but unable to come up with any possible alternative. Mikael knows that Mancil is a dying town with no future, and that if Eliot stays there, he will likely be forced to work in the new factory being built in the town of Bainwhich to the north. Remembering a letter he'd received from an old friend a few weeks prior asking for Mikael to work as a mechanic on his ship, Mikael has the idea to send Eliot in his

---

<sup>12</sup> This was originally the second paragraph, though I moved it because I didn't like the fact that it immediately pulled us away from the scene that was being established. The greater purpose of this paragraph is really just to establish the sorry state that the town of Mancil is in and help the town feel a bit more like a living (well, dying, technically) entity. It also helps establish a bit more of what's going on in Agoris.

stead. This ship, the *Steady Bailer*, is transporting a group of settlers to the Xiphoc side of the Great Divide, the massive, water-filled chasm formed by the patridium bomb that ended the Sundering War. This serves as El's first call to adventure, though he's hesitant to agree, unsure if he's ready to throw away what little life he does have in Agoris in order to possibly get a chance at something different as either a mechanic on a boat or a settler, though he's encouraged by the fact that his childhood friend, Yarra, has already gone to the colonies. Mikael manages to convince El to at least come with him by barge to Bainwhich so that El can speak to the ship's captain about what's going on. El, after some hesitation, agrees, leading to a time jump to the next day, when the two are on the barge. After a few moments of calm to set the scene, a crewmate suddenly spots an odd shape quickly approaching on the horizon. As it gets closer, the barge crew, El, and Mikael are shocked to discover that the object is an ancient sailing ship manned by a crew wearing ancient Xiphoc armor (roughly similar to Roman heavy armor in terms of design, but made out of scavenged material from the wasteland) and wielding spears, crossbows, and swords. Although the identity of the approaching crew isn't known to the protagonist (or the reader) at the moment, they're a group of raiders hired and outfitted by the Phoenix Cult (a cult centered around the worship of their leader, Rebonna Ashborn, who they believe will rebuild Xiphoc in the image of its glory days, and who is secretly using patridium bonding to psychically influence her followers, despite the outwards hatred the cult holds towards anyone touched by the taint) to raid Agorisian vessels for supplies<sup>13</sup> (as manufactured goods are in short supply in the wasteland) and untainted slaves. A Phoenix Cult officer by the

---

<sup>13</sup> Much of the knowledge and infrastructure needed for manufacturing goods was lost post war, though some groups (Phoenix in particular) have just about started to get the old factories up and running. Whichever group succeeds in this first will gain a significant advantage in the war to come.

name of Cassius Venomfang<sup>14</sup> is on the boat to ensure that the raiders don't pocket more than they were supposed to. After a brief scuffle, the ill-equipped barge crew is quickly overpowered, though Mikael and Eliot manage to sneak below deck during the fight. Eliot is able to hide inside a crate thanks to his small frame, but Mikael is unable to find a hiding spot in time. The leader of the raiders, Split Tongue Sullivan,<sup>15</sup> finds Mikael and slashes his throat after the mechanic confronts him about his actions. El begins frantically loading his firearm as fast and quiet as possible, enraged by the death of his mentor.<sup>16</sup> However, he drops the third bullet as he loads it into his revolver, alerting the raider leader, who turns with unnatural speed and throws a purple-tinted dagger<sup>17</sup> into the box Eliot is hiding in. The dagger stabs into El's shoulder – had his growth not be hampered by malnourishment, the blade would have gone straight into his heart. El kicks down the door and fires at the raider, wounding but not killing him, the blood from his wound touching the patridium inlay on his mother's revolver and making him bond with it. El barely manages to escape into the river, with the chapter ending as he dives into the water.

---

<sup>14</sup> Cult members are given a single first name at birth based upon classic Xiphoc naming conventions and must earn a last name by performing noteworthy acts,

<sup>15</sup> This name is intentionally silly as the raiders in this world (as dangerous as they are) often are fairly eccentric characters, though it's entirely possible that I'll change the name in a later version to something a bit less silly.

<sup>16</sup> Providing El with the motivation he needs to start his adventure, giving him a reason to want to specifically go to Xiphoc and avenge Mikael, which will in turn bring him into the greater plot thanks to the raiders direct connections with Phoenix.

<sup>17</sup> The unnatural speed and reflexes of Sullivan and the extreme penetration of the knife are the result of the dagger that Split Tongue bonded to, granting him psychic powers. His gang is particularly infamous in the wasteland for hunting down other people who are bonded to patridium, killing them, and then imbibing a combination of their blood and shavings from their bonded objects to absorb their power, which again provides Eliot with solid motivation for hunting this man down. Sullivan, in my current draft, will be killed by El at the end of the first arc, when the story will begin shifting focus from Eliot's original vengeance quest to the overarching conflict of the novel, which will largely be focused around Phoenix.

## Character Sketch Transcript

*The following is a direct transcript of the character sketch I made to develop the character of Eliot Hargrave. For legibility reasons, I've opted to simply copy over notes from the Fallout The Roleplaying Game and Dungeons & Dragons Fifth Edition character sheets that I used for developmental purposes. As this is a direct transcript from multiple handwritten sources, I've kept any instances of grammatical errors, shorthand, or conflicting logic that were in the original. When necessary, I've included footnotes to break down any vague statements or shorthand, or to clear up any conflicts that these notes have with the current version of the story. It should also be noted that many of the original entries had crossed out sentences; I've chosen not to include these as any information they contained was either inaccurate or better worded elsewhere. When possible, I've omitted any character stats that had little to no impact outside of gameplay mechanics, such as hit points or carry weight. If an included stat doesn't have an attached note, it simply means that I found the stat important for the purpose of character creation but of little use in terms of specifics that fleshed out the character. The two character sheets were chosen to utilize specific elements of both while ignoring others—essentially, the Fallout character sheet was primarily used for its statistics, whereas the Dungeons & Dragons character sheet was used to help develop the character's background, with the actual game mechanics largely ignored in favor of utilizing the game's role playing elements as prompts for specific details that I may not have otherwise thought to write down. In the Fallout The Roleplaying Game section, I've included a quick rundown of the SPECIAL system, as my notes were written with my rather extensive background with the game series in mind.*

### Fallout The Roleplaying Game Character Sheet Transcript

*On SPECIAL:* “SPECIAL” stands for “Strength, Perception, Endurance, Charisma, Intelligence, Agility, and Luck.” In *Fallout The Roleplaying Game*, these seven attributes are used to define your character's natural strengths and weaknesses. During character creation, the player distributes a set number of points amongst the stats in a manner of their choosing, with no stat being under four or over ten. Although these stats have specific gameplay functions, they also help determine what the character is like in terms of the game's story, which was the primary reason for the use of this rather unconventional version of a character sketch. As a reader, all that you need to know is that a five in a stat is considered to be average, with any level above or below that (as certain conditions can lower a stat below four) representing a corresponding increase or decrease in ability respectively; at the upper end of the spectrum, a ten means that a character's particular ability is borderline superhuman, whereas if a stat were ever to reach a one, that would mean that the character was so bad at that particular ability that they would struggle

to accomplish even basic tasks associated with it (and would more than likely hurt themselves in the process).<sup>18</sup>

Strength: 4 – Not v. strong<sup>19</sup> – Aileen<sup>20</sup> fed him as best as possible, but often times he only received 2 meals a day. As such, he is generally smaller than he'd otherwise be – he's probably around 5'6" or 5'7" with a smaller (but still filled out) frame.

Perception: 8 – V. perceptive, El has often been lauded for his keen eye. Details that most would miss are picked up with ease. He has a knack for sussing (sic) out where to look when fixing a machine. Often mistaken for high intelligence, he's just very good at spotting things and making conclusions fast – a trait Aileen taught him at a young age.

a. He'll work out that the powers are attached to the gun pretty fast<sup>21</sup>

Endurance: 5 – Avg. End.<sup>22</sup> Would be lower b/c<sup>23</sup> of malnourishment, but the Hargrave line is of strong constitution, which would increase his end.<sup>24</sup>

Charisma: 5 – Avg. Cha.<sup>25</sup> Although he has a knack for bartering/negotiation (thanks largely to his high Per.<sup>26</sup>), he's otherwise of fairly avg.<sup>27</sup> speaking ability. His strength in bartering comes more from his Perception than his Charisma. He's good at making logical points, noticing fallacies, and reading his "opponent," but his delivery isn't anything special. Were he to go to a city, he'd likely be mocked for his frontier mannerisms.<sup>28</sup>

Intelligence: 6 – Slightly above avg. Int.<sup>29</sup> El is naturally smart, but a lack of proper schooling out on the frontier has prevented him from being as "Intelligent" as he should be, if book smarts are any measure. If needed, he could fake being smarter with his Perception – he has very good deduction skills (like a lesser version of Shawn from *Psych*)<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> More information on the SPECIAL system, as well as the other various character attributes mentioned here, can be found in *Fallout The Roleplaying Game*, published by Modiphius Entertainment, on pages 42 to 74.

<sup>19</sup> "V." and "v." are used interchangeably with "very"

<sup>20</sup> The daughter of Ash from the prologue and the mother of Eliot in the first chapter. Including the second "I" in her name was a mistake; she was already named "Aileen" in earlier drafts.

<sup>21</sup> Lettered lists are used here to denote smaller notes that were written into the margins later in the process; when multiple notes occur in a list like this, it means that they were written in a specific order, typically attached by an arrow in the original copy, but omitted here for the sake of legibility and clarity.

<sup>22</sup> "Average Endurance" – any use of "Avg." or "avg." stands for "average."

<sup>23</sup> "because"

<sup>24</sup> "Endurance"

<sup>25</sup> "Average Charisma"

<sup>26</sup> "Perception" – I didn't think to make the connection between Aileen's parents being merchants and El being good at bartering until I reached the "Tag Skills" section of the character creation process.

<sup>27</sup> See note 4

<sup>28</sup> I specifically underlined this in my notes to make sure that I wouldn't forget about it, as I'd often struggled with remembering to give him a unique voice in the past.

<sup>29</sup> "average Intelligence"

<sup>30</sup> *Psych* was comedy detective show that ran from 2006 to 2014 that my family watched regularly while I was growing up. The core premise of the show revolved around the protagonist, Shawn, pretending to be a psychic to

Agility: 7 – Quite agile, El has turned his smaller frame into a benefit, using it to reach places others can't inside of machines. He has the potential to dominate an early fight thanks to his speed – he's perceptive enough to notice when a fight is coming before others (an ability which is bound to improve over time) and the speed to act on it.<sup>31</sup>

Luck: 7 – El has a noticeable (though not overwhelming) luckiness to him, not powerful enough to give him a killer<sup>32</sup> life, but definitely enough to make a difference. However, bad things do still happen, and he certainly isn't safe from everything. This luck helps him escape the ship,<sup>33</sup> though his Perception + Agility also help.

#### Tag Skills-<sup>34</sup>

1. Barter:
  - a. Where did he get this from? Natural skill or his mom taught him?<sup>35</sup>
  - b. Learned from her dad being a merchant
2. Repair:
  - a. Natural aptitude honed w/  $\approx$ <sup>36</sup> five years working on machines
3. Energy Weapons/Bond:<sup>37</sup>
  - a. Strong force of will + intent

#### Skills-

- Athletics: 1
- Barter: 3

---

solve crimes for the Santa Barbara Police Department; in reality, Shawn was just extremely talented at noticing tiny details and making quick and accurate deductions based on them.

<sup>31</sup> One of the few times that a character statistic that wasn't an ability was important for my understanding of the character – El's perceptiveness and speed refer to his Perception and Agility stats respectively, which are combined in-game to determine when a character gets to act in combat.

<sup>32</sup> Informal use of "killer" that means that something is extremely positive instead of the more traditional meaning of the term.

<sup>33</sup> At this point in the creation process, I had yet to think of either El's disastrous barge trip to Bainwhich or the Phoenix operatives raiding the boat; instead, El was to take the *Steady Bailer* directly from Mancil to Xiphoc, only for the ship to be attacked and wrecked by a massive river mutant.

<sup>34</sup> In addition to their primary attributes, characters also have a series of "skills," which are more specific abilities like "Lockpick" or "Repair." During character creation, the player must select (or "tag") three skills to mark as being particularly good for their character, giving those skills a base level of two instead of zero during the skill point allocation portion of character creation. The highest a skill can be set to during character creation is three, the lowest is zero.

<sup>35</sup> I occasionally pose questions to myself while planning if I feel like I'm struggling with a particular detail. Bold text was circled in the original version to indicate that this was the preferred answer.

<sup>36</sup> "with around"

<sup>37</sup> "Energy weapons" refers to laser and plasma weaponry in the *Fallout* universe; as these do not exist in my story world, I instead replaced the stat with "Bond" to refer to his natural aptitude for honing the powers granted by his bond with patridium and his ability to use those powers effectively; since El bonds with the patridium inlay on his mother's revolver, this would also refer to how effectively he's able to use his powers in a fight.

- Big Guns: 2 – from knowledge of the heavy mining equipment learned while repairing crawlers
- Energy Weapons/Bond: 3<sup>38</sup>
- Explosives: 1
- Lockpick: 1 – never learned, could pick up with relative ease
- Medicine: 1 – taught basic first aid by mother
- Melee Weapons: 0
- Pilot: 1 – never learned, but could pick up quickly
- Repair: 3
- Science:<sup>39</sup> 0 – not book smart – little to no formal education opportunities on the frontier
- Small Guns: 2 – decently skilled, but max potential will only come out with his bond
- Sneak: 1
- Speech: 1
- Survival: 2 – Aileen taught him many of the skills she picked up in the Rangers
- Throwing: 0
- Unarmed: 0

First Perk-<sup>40</sup> Jury Rigging (used for boat repair on island)

Traits:<sup>41</sup>

- Gifted
- Small Frame

---

<sup>38</sup> See note 20

<sup>39</sup> Science is usually used for high concept tasks that would require some form of education to be able to handle – in *Fallout The Roleplaying Game*, it's mostly used for hacking computers or robots, performing chemistry, or recalling information on scientific concepts. Although hacking isn't present in my story world, I thought it made sense to keep Science as a stat because there are still a variety of other applications for it that are unique to this world, with the exploration of the limits of patridium standing out as the clearest area for its utilization.

<sup>40</sup> Perks are powerful special abilities that characters pick up each time they gain a level. More information on the Jury Rigging perk may be found on page 66 of *Fallout The Roleplaying Game*, though the general concept of it is that a character with the perk can temporarily fix an item faster than normal and for free, with the caveat that an item repaired in this manner is more likely to break until it's fully repaired.

<sup>41</sup> Traits are special characteristics that give a character both a positive benefit and some kind of negative trade off. Traits are given during the character creation process based off of the starting origin for the character; since most of the available origins are specific to the *Fallout* universe (such as the Super Mutant and Mr. Handy options), I chose the closest possible option, which was the "Survivor" origin, which also allowed me to select two traits from a list instead of being forced to take a specific trait. More information on these specific traits can be found on page 56 of *Fallout The Roleplaying Game*.

## Dungeons and Dragons Fifth Edition<sup>42</sup> Character Sheet Transcript

Age: 20 – Born 22 AS (After Sunder)<sup>43</sup>

Height: 5’6”

Weight: ≈ 135-145 lbs

Eyes: Vibrant green, usually in motion

Skin: Fair and freckled

Hair: Red, cut short

- a. Keeps it short to avoid it getting caught in machinery
- b. Cuts it himself, so it looks kind of scruffy

Scars: Right palm (eventually),<sup>44</sup> mild acne scarring on face

Character Appearance: Short, w/ a scrawny build indicating semi-regular periods of malnourishment

Allies:

- a. Yarra – childhood friend, already in Xiphoc
- b. Doc Mikael – town doctor, was already friends with family, but became close with El while tending to his dying mother<sup>45</sup>

Personality Traits: “I get easily distracted by new machinery – if it’s broken, I want to take it apart and repair it to a better state than it was in when it was new; if it’s working, I’ll still take it apart and try and improve it.”<sup>46</sup>

Ideals:

- a. “Death in freedom is better than death in chains.” – Independence
- b. “I must repent for the sins of my ancestor” – Repentance
  - a. Sense of justice/duty?
  - b. Feels the need to help the world, but doesn’t know how

---

<sup>42</sup> Additional information about the character creation process (such as the mechanical elements that I omitted) can be found in the Dungeons & Dragons Fifth Edition *Player’s Handbook*, published by Wizards of the Coast, on pages 11 to 143.

<sup>43</sup> Referring to the detonation that split the continent in half at the end of the book’s prologue.

<sup>44</sup> Referring to the original source of the wound that bonds El to his revolver – in previous versions of the story, El cut his palm while escaping the sinking *Steady Bailer* and bonded with the gun’s inlay when he reached the beach.

<sup>45</sup> Mikael was originally planned to be a doctor so that I could discuss what happened to Aileen, but when I started working on the current iteration of the book, I realized that there wasn’t much that he could add in that role. Instead, I ended up making him the town mechanic and El’s mentor/surrogate father figure, combining him with a character named Goris who was in one of the earliest versions of the story but had gradually disappeared from later versions.

<sup>46</sup> Goes hand in hand with his ultimate quest to help Xiphoc create the best society possible



- c. Does he have loftier ambitions, then? How would going to Xiphoc help atone for his family's sins?
- d. Doesn't know, but has to do something – similar to his mother's reasoning for becoming a Ranger and moving to the frontier
- c. "I ask questions first, shoot second – but when I do shoot, I never miss a shot."
  - a. Bit farther down the road in terms of character development, but the roots of this are already there at the start of the story
  - b. Barter skill comes to play here (as well as in its traditional use, of course) – by the time he's actually a hardened gun slinger, he has a code of peace first, creating an interesting contrast with how inherently violent his bond is and the common image of the wandering gunslinger<sup>47</sup>

Bond: Will protect his mother's gun with his life, seeing it as his last connection to her during his travels.

Flaws:

- a. "I will take any risk to save my friends. If anything happens to them, I blame myself for it, whether I deserve it or not."
  - a. Rooted in El's childhood growing up in an isolated mining community with minimal friends and family; he's terrified of the prospect of being truly alone
  - b. Aileen's obsession with what her mother did also impacted this – El was taught to hold a deep seated guilt for his family's actions, a guilt which, in turn, has spread to many of his other actions.
  - c. Partially attached to his obsession with repairing things – he feels like he always needs to be the one to fix a problem, and if it isn't fixed, then he's at fault.

---

<sup>47</sup> Referring to his psychic connection with his firearm, as most of his powers come from there.