

WHERE THE RED FERN GLOWS

Written by

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FADE IN:

EXT. APOCALYPTIC WASTELAND - NIGHT

Glowferns, bioluminescent plants, illuminate a hilltop.

A ruined California cityscape perches on the far horizon. In listing towers, shattered windows reflect the light of stars above as mournful breezes rustle through the structures of humanity's past and flow into the open, barren countryside.

EXT. GUARD TOWER - NIGHT

A red warning light flashes on without sound. MILES, a young watchman, grabs his elderly partner, BRIAN, and shakes him awake. Brian jumps in surprise and annoyance.

BRIAN

Miles?

He sees the warning light and mouths a curse. They scramble out. Miles grabs a crossbow on his way.

EXT. SETTLEMENT - NIGHT

Lights appear all over the valley, red stars. People scatter in silent panic: families lock doors, armed citizens prepare for a fight, dogs sniff around.

Miles and Brandon approach CORINNE, leader of the watch, who stands with a group of guards.

CORINNE

-Saw it coming past our guard post
like a shadow, nearly missed it.

MILES

Corinne, it's not a deathcaller?

The entire group freezes at the name.

CORINNE

Thank God, no. But it's the next
worst thing: a wild dog. We can't
let it bark and attract a
deathcaller, okay?

BRIAN

Yeah, you said dog. What kind?

Corinne tells him with a look. The group groans.

INT. APARTMENT BEDROOM - NIGHT

A light flickers on. DAD (30's, but looks older) steps inside framed by the red glow outside. He sneaks his way to a bedroll in the corner.

DAD
Billy? Hey, Billy.

He touches the shoulder of a sleeping child, who rolls toward us. It's a young girl, BILLY COLMAN (7), lightning in her eyes and scrapes on her arms. She sees the red light.

BILLY
What is it, dad?

DAD
They cornered a stray dog.

BILLY
A dog?! What kind?

DAD
It's a radhound.

Billy's eyes widen with childish delight. Dad smiles.

DAD (CONT'D)
If you want to see it, come quick.

MOM (O.S.)
Be careful, okay? Keep Billy safe.

Dad looks to MOM, a beautiful, pregnant woman. He takes her hands in his own and kisses her forehead.

DAD
I will. Promise.

EXT. SETTLEMENT - NIGHT

Billy and Dad hear dogs fighting. A STRANGE HOWL rings through the night.

BILLY
There it is!

EXT. SETTLEMENT OUTSKIRTS - NIGHT

A crowd of settlers and their dogs surround a LONE RADHOUND, which looks like a beast of hell!

The creature, two times larger than any other dog, has torn obsidian fur and brilliant, white teeth. It GROWLS a frightening challenge and dogs rush in!

The hound falls under a roiling mass of limbs. Billy gasps, but one by one the settler's dogs flee, wailing, and the radhound stands alone. Bloodier, but no less ferocious.

BRIAN

That's a wild radhound for you...

MILES

Brian, move!

Miles draws his crossbow and levels it at the radhound. He prepares to fire, but the creature looks him in the eye and freezes Miles with its gaze.

Billy jumps between them and the dog.

BILLY

Don't shoot!

DAD

BILLY!

MILES

Kid, get out of there!

Miles' finger slips. The crossbow fires!

The dog bites onto Billy's arm and drags her down. The crossbow bolt misses her by an inch. Dad leaps into the battle and the villagers follow.

In the midst of chaos, Billy looks into the dog's eyes. They are surprisingly warm, almost human.

They close.

Dad pries the jaws from Billy's arm, shredding his hands. He scoops his daughter into his arms and holds her so, so close. Billy stares at the dying dog in wonder, unconcerned by the pain in her arm...

INT. APARTMENT KITCHEN - MORNING

Billy flies inside with a huge bandage over the bite wound. She grabs mom's hand and both parents pause in concern.

BILLY

Mom? Dad? Can I get a dog?

Dad chokes on his coffee.

MOM

That's an...interesting idea.

DAD

Well, Luke's terrier had pups, we might be able to-

BILLY

I don't want a terrier, I want a radhound! I'm going to be a hunter some day, the best there was!

Dad's jaw drops.

DAD

No. No, of course not!

The tears rise.

BILLY

Why not?

DAD

Because - because we just can't have a radhound. You can't keep a monster like that in the city, it's just not going to happen, sorry.

Billy starts crying volcanically. She runs into her room, leaving a stunned Dad and Mom.

MOM

Oh, we haven't heard the end of that, just you wait.

DAD

You aren't concerned by this? I need a little backup here!

MOM

What can I say, Wilson? She's your daughter. Nothing will stop that girl chasing down what she wants.

She eats toast as he looks into his coffee for answers.

EXT. MOUNTAIN TRAILS - DAY

SUPER: YEARS LATER

Billy's wound became a SCAR. To her, a badge of honor.

The family horse, BEN, pulls their cart up a small hill. Billy, now 10 years old, notices a sign that says: "Colman Farm - Welcome". She leaps from the cart and scampers up the coming hill, looking over the valley.

BILLY

Whoa...

Their new home awaits: a cozy farm nestled in the mountain foothills. Dad catches up, standing proudly at her side.

DAD

That's it, Billy: our new home.
Just think: this farm could grow
crops for the whole settlement!

Billy takes in the view with delight.

EXT. BILLY'S FARM - DAY

Mom sits on the porch with the little ones; SARAH plays with dolls while ALICE, the youngest, rests in her mother's arms. Mom is already pregnant with another.

Dad and Billy work on a chicken coop, Billy holding up boards as Dad nails them into place. A chicken, NEIL, wanders out. Billy pushes him back inside.

BILLY

Woah, woah! Bad Neil. Stay there.

Neil wanders back out. Billy chastises him.

BILLY (CONT'D)

Neil, if I've told you once I've
told you a hundred times: STAY.

Dad wipes sweat off his brow and smiles at Mom, who stifles a laugh, watching Billy lecture Neil.

EXT. FIELDS - AFTERNOON

Billy holds a wooden airplane, flying toward a field of glowferns. Dad appears and catches her, wearing a gas mask and a beeping air purity tester (APT). He pulls her away and whips off his mask, worried.

DAD

Billy, what are you doing?! You
have to be careful to never go in
this field, those are glowfern
plants. See?

He points at the glowferns, which show the faintest trace of bioluminescence in the fading afternoon light. Billy stares.

BILLY

Glow-ferns?

DAD

Glowferns. They light up at night, and they're very dangerous.

BILLY

Then why do we have them here?

Dad sighs. He gets down on a knee beside her, gesturing.

DAD

Well, after bombs dropped on Earth a long time ago, they left a poison in the ground and the air. The glowferns collect it all and concentrate it in one place so that come planting season, when I remove them, the soil will grow clean food again. But in the meantime, I need you to keep well away, alright?

BILLY

Okay, Dad. I'll be careful.

INT. BILLY'S ROOM - NIGHT

Billy jumps out of bed and tiptoes out.

INT. BILLY'S HOUSE - NIGHT

She grabs a kid-sized GAS MASK from a rack by the front door, checks the filter with a practiced hand, and steps outside.

EXT. FIELD - NIGHT

The ferns became a sea of blue illumination! Billy secures her mask and wades in, brushing a soft leaf. It shines brighter in response and a strange powder puffs up.

Billy pulls her mask tighter, just in case, then goes running through the plants! She dances and twirls, caught up in the excitement of her own majestic light show.

EXT. BILLY'S FARM - DAY

Dad tosses dead glowferns, packed in biohazard shrink wrap, onto a pile by the road. Billy drags one herself and throws it on. They remove their masks on the path home.

BILLY

Dad, I've been helping a lot around the house, haven't I?

DAD

You sure have, Billy.

BILLY

And I don't ask for much, either.

DAD

I suppose not...

BILLY

Could I please get a radhound?! We're out of the city now.

DAD

Again? We've been through this before! We still don't have a lot of money, Billy. Dogs are expensive, let alone radhounds.

BILLY

I'll save up and help pay for it!

DAD

Even then, I don't know where we'd keep the thing, okay? We don't have a home for dogs and they're not coming inside, I can tell you that!

Billy stopped listening. She's got a plan.

EXT. BILLY'S HOUSE - MORNING

Dad walks to the stable where their new cow, GRETA, watches him. A makeshift doghouse appeared beside the barn overnight!

DAD

Oh god.

He looks closer. A sign on the new structure reads: "DOGS".

EXT. RIVERSIDE - DAY

A group of fishermen leave the fishing grounds. Across the river, Billy waits under a tree with her face covered by a newspaper. She sits up once the adults are gone.

Billy wades across and roots around for leftovers. She finds a cool RC Baking Soda Can, and-

BILLY
OW! AUGH, AUGH!

She steps on a fish hook! The metal barb goes deep in her foot. Billy painfully hops to a log, sits down, and works it out of her sole with a grimace. It comes out red.

Billy puts the metal under the running water and looks at the shiny, clean hook with pleasant surprise.

EXT. RIVERSIDE - LATER

Billy applies a worm to her new fish hook, props her wrapped foot up on the log, and casts a homemade rod.

EXT. BILLY'S FARM - EVENING

Billy limps down the drive back home, proudly holding a good-sized fish by its jaw. Ahead, she notices an unfamiliar cart. Upon closer inspection, she notices a red cross.

Billy drops her fish and sprints back home, foot forgotten.

INT. BILLY'S HOUSE - NIGHT

A NURSE guards the door to the parent's room. Dad paces nervously up and down the living room. On the couch, Billy sits perfectly still, pensive.

A DOCTOR emerges. Dad's rockets to his feet.

He tries to get at the doctor, but the nurse steps in the way. The doctor shakes his head.

DOCTOR
The baby didn't make it. And your
wife...

He doesn't have to say more. Dad falls into a chair, weeps.

Billy's eyes go cold and dark. She looks to her young sisters, crying nearby, then stands up and runs outside.

EXT. APOCALYPTIC WASTELAND - NIGHT

Billy tears through a land more lifeless now than ever. She passes destroyed arches, crumbling houses.

Eventually, a strange pile of rubble appears: a collapsed entrance. A small hole reveals the strong, blue light of glowferns within. Billy nears, curiosity taking hold.

She doesn't have a gas mask. Instead, she holds her breath.

INT. DESTROYED THEATER - NIGHT

Glowferns flourish in the rows of chairs and along the walls. Light falls through a hole in the ceiling and onto the stage, now a mound of dirt. At the back, beautiful rays shimmer on the gently flowing curtains.

Billy looks around in awe, then heaves as her breath runs short. She covers her mouth and rushes for the entrance.

EXT. THEATER ENTRANCE - NIGHT

She pauses, breathing deep. After a moment, Billy takes a gulp of air and heads back inside.

EXT. ROAD - DAY

Billy and her family roll past the settlement's wall, dotted with large floodlights. Dad takes a deep breath as they get closer to a trading post.

Ahead, an elderly woman steps out: GRANDMA, in her 60's, young at heart, a remnant of the world long past.

EXT. GRANDMA'S SHOP - DAY

Dad hitches the cart as Billy leaps out and hugs Grandma. Dad stops awkwardly. Grandma raises her eyebrows.

DAD
I'm so sorry-

GRANDMA
None of that now.
(breaks down)
I'm glad you brought the girls.

She hugs Dad, tight. His tears flow into her gray hair as hers flow onto his shoulder. A waterfall of sadness.

INT. GRANDMA'S SHOP - DAY

Sniffing, Grandma leads them through merchandise. Billy's sisters lag behind, examining every barrel. At the back, a few customers sit at round tables. Dad wipes his eyes.

GRANDMA

Shop's been running like a charm,
an old businesswoman like myself
can turn a dime or two. Is
everything alright on the farm?

DAD

Good. The fields are about ready
for planting, I think we can expect
a nice harvest soon enough.

GRANDMA

Then you won't mind me giving you
some supplies before you head back?
It's the least we can do for the
work you're doing out there.

DAD

No. I told you and I'll tell you
again: we won't accept anything
'til after harvest time.

Grandma looks between Dad and Billy. Billy nods, affirmative.

GRANDMA

You're too alike, y'know? You can
ask people for help before you're
able to give back! It wouldn't
break the bank for me to do
something nice-

DAD

Please.

GRANDMA

Alright, alright. But if you're not
going to accept that, at least give
this a try, will you? I think
you'll like it...

They head to the back, where a marked change occurs: trading
post items are replaced by bookshelves. The people at the
round tables are chatting and reading.

DAD

What is all this?

Grandma beams proudly.

GRANDMA

It's our newest lending library!
Things have changed since you last
stopped by.

DAD

Huh. How's this supposed to work?

GRANDMA

Check out a book as long as you
bring it back in the same condition
you found it. Come by here with the
girls more often, Wilson, you could
read something together!

Dad rubs his chin.

DAD

How much did it all cost?

GRANDMA

(friendly reminder)
That's none of your concern, dear.

DAD

How? If you keep spending money on
things like this, you're going to
have nothing left for yourself-

GRANDMA

I appreciate your kindness, but you
do not get to tell me how to spend
my own money!

(softer)

I know you're worried about a lot
of things right now, but please
take me off the list. I can take
care of myself, Wilson.

DAD

But this must've cost a fortune!

GRANDMA

Good. It's an investment, in
people. You remember Lucas?

DAD

Sure do, he was a friendly guy.

GRANDMA

He's gone. Started reading one of the big textbooks - a honkin' thing on electrical engineering - and got a job in the City. He's working on their generator, moved out Tuesday.

She watches the light appear in Dad's eyes.

DAD

He moved to the City?

GRANDMA

If you start learning new things, you open doors for yourself and your family. Impressive, huh?

Dad looks at the girls, thinking. He turns to Grandma.

DAD

Do you have any recommendations?

BILLY

Can I get one too?

Grandma smiles, tapping her chin.

GRANDMA

I think I know just the thing for each of you. Like I said: just bring them back in the same condition you found them.

EXT. RIVERSIDE - DAY

Billy walks across the rocks with more caution than usual, but no less confidence. She notices her fishing log changed; it now has a carving. Inside a heart, it reads:

BILLY

"Dan and Ann"...

Billy cocks her head. It means nothing to her yet, but has a peculiar beauty. She looks below the carving.

A magazine flutters by the water, trapped in brambles.

Billy hops down, picks it up, and reads through a recently printed editorial. On the front, an ad offers radhound pups for sale, priced at \$25 each, practically a sign from God!

She looks around and notices a glint nearby, amongst the rocks. She heads to the light and unearths a muddy container.

After a quick wash, she discovers it's a Nutella jar. Billy pulls out a few measly coins and throws them in. Smiles.

MONTAGE - VARIOUS

A) BILLY'S ROOM: Billy writes a huge title on a chart: "One Month Plan". The target: 50 dollars.

B) APOCALYPTIC FOREST: Billy grabs berries from a bush and drops a few. She watches them fall to the dirt and notices a WORM close by-

C) FISHING GROUNDS: Billy sell worms and berries to the fishermen, who laugh and joke with her as they prepare their hooks with fresh, live bait. Billy waves goodbye.

A way off, she checks the day's profit. Frowns.

D) BILLY'S ROOM: Billy sighs and scratches out her current month plan. Replaces the title with: "One Year Plan".

E) DAD'S ROOM - Dad creates his own chart, showing when he can move his family to the City. He writes "Ten Years".

F) FARM: wearing a gas mask, Billy helps other farmers gather their glowferns in the airtight bags. Billy grimaces whenever she pulls another plant from the ground, as if hurt herself.

G) BILLY'S ROOM: Billy holds up her arm in a mirror, proudly showing the line of her bicep and making faces like Rosie the Riveter. Nearby, Alice poses a doll like Billy.

H) FIELDS: Dad and Billy remove weeds. Dad wipes his brow, takes a drink, and returns to work. Seeing his dedication, Billy starts weeding even faster. At the house, the young girls work together to filter water.

I) DESTROYED THEATER: Billy sits in a chair, wearing a gas mask, and reads "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" while her imagination plays out in the stage's blue light.

J) BACK PORCH: Dad reads a book on botany and agriculture with a pile of parenting self-help novels close by.

K) BILLY'S ROOM: Billy scratches off her second chart and changes her title for the last time. "Two Year Plan"! She thinks a moment, then underlines it. Final answer!

L) DAD'S ROOM: Dad checks his chart. He writes a horizontal line at "First Harvest". They're breaking even...

END MONTAGE

EXT. GRANDMA'S SHOP - DAY

Billy approaches on foot, holding her Nutella jar. She notices a group of hunting dogs leashed in a cart nearby. A radhound sits among them, watching Billy pass slowly.

INT. GRANDMA'S SHOP - DAY

Grandma barterers with MASON PRITCHARD, the town outcast. RUBIN, his oldest son, a thick-headed bully, watches his dad with crossed arms while RAINIE, the younger brother, carves grandma's counter edge with a pocket knife.

Billy heads to the back. They'll be a while.

DEN (O.S.)

- Going along Saint's Ridge with Sam Willis. It's the most beautiful sight I've ever seen, it's green!

BETTY (O.S.)

Grown back? Already? That can't be-

Billy approaches a table of three hunters: DEN and BETTY, both in their 50's, with many tales to tell, and RON, 20's, enjoying a conversation with the old timers.

BILLY

You're hunters? I want to be a hunter too.

They turn to her, surprised. They laugh, somewhat patronizing. Billy stiffens angrily.

BETTY

Well hello! I'm Betty, this is Den, and that's our friend Ron there. What's your name, kiddo?

BILLY

Billy, and I'll be the best hunter!

DEN

That's a big dream. It's hard being a hunter: long nights, chasing creatures in the wasteland...

BETTY

I've nearly died a time or two! In the wasteland, it's a matter of if, not when you'll have to use your wits to survive.

BILLY

I'm ready for it! What kinds of things have you seen? I've heard, but never from actual hunters.

She jumps into a seat, her eyes gleaming. They realize suddenly: she's one of them, alright. Ron lounges back contentedly, hands behind his head.

RON

C'mon, Den, tell her your story. I want to hear it again myself.

DEN

You sure? You have to promise you won't get nightmares. Both of you.

He jokingly points between Ron and Billy. Ron rolls his eyes, throws his hands up. Billy nods. Betty stifles a laugh.

DEN (CONT'D)

Alright, here goes, then... So, long ago, in Betty's time, when dinosaurs still roamed the earth-

BETTY

Easy there! We're the same age, you old coot.

DEN

- Humans still controlled most of the planet. Most of us were cocky enough to call it "ours", even. But one day- (mimes an explosion).

INT. APOCALYPSE STORY

Mushroom clouds spawn in an artistic representation.

DEN (V.O.)

For years, darkness covered the earth and no place was darker than ground zeroes of the attacks, often the most populated cities in the world. No survivor would brave those dead zones. But-

(a beat)

Something living did come out.

Three things.

A dark shape emerges from the dust: a large, rodent-like creature with striped brown and gray fur. A RACCOON.

DEN (V.O.)

The first were raccoons, angry and vicious creatures that spawn worse than rabbits. Mind you, they're not actual raccoons, those all died out after the Last War.

INT. GRANDMA'S SHOP - DAY

Betty cuts in.

BETTY

Good news is, they're considered a pest and an invasive species to boot: since he mean critters don't have natural predators to keep their population in check, we hunters pick up the slack. You can fetch a price for every one you eradicate and sell the pelt!

Den watches her with an eyebrow raised.

BETTY (CONT'D)

Your story needed flavor.

DEN

Well there are too many cooks in the kitchen. And as I was saying-

INT. APOCALYPSE STORY

A noble head rears from the ashes.

DEN (V.O.)

Second came the radiation hounds, which we call radhounds. They're proud and beautiful creatures; smart, kind, resilient, and great companions in the wasteland. But be wary of the radhound that wasn't raised by humans, that grew up wild; they are, dangerous animals through and through.

Den takes a deep breath. In the darkness of their collective imagination, two eyes open.

DEN (V.O.)

And finally, the worst came last. We call them deathcallers because anyone that hears one's cry rarely lives. And that's no joke or folk saying; I personally think every deathcaller is made with the hatred of humanity's past, with the intelligence and power to put it into action.

INT. GRANDMA'S SHOP - DAY

Den sighs and nods to Betty, who waits patiently. "*Take it away*". She launches in:

BETTY

Truth is, deathcallers are like the combination of a mountain lion's graceful ferocity and a bear's raw power. If you even think you might be near one, turn back! Aside from "deathcallers", they earned the name townkillers. When an adult specimen finds a human settlement, they're known to scout the area for days and dismantle it: kill guards, disable defenses, cut off food supply, lay siege like a goddamned army! Pardon my language. Either the citizens evacuate or wake up one day with its huge maw around their throats. And even the evacuees need to be careful: they can follow, spread to other locations! Deathcallers, or townkillers, are singularly the most vicious creatures known to mankind. And we created them...

Billy's eyes are wide. Grandma steps in like a ghost.

GRANDMA

I think that's about enough, folks.
Billy, you were here for something?

Billy nods, breaking from her stupor, and walks to the counter. Meanwhile, the hunters avoid grandma's piercing gaze. She turns and follows her granddaughter to the front.

GRANDMA (CONT'D)
Don't mind their tales too much,
Billy. Was there something I can do
for you-

The Nutella jar lies open on the table, money spread out.
Grandma looks over it in awe.

GRANDMA (CONT'D)
Billy... How much is that?!

BILLY
A little over fifty. Been saving it
up with odd jobs for about two
years now.

GRANDMA
Two years, fifty dollars...what are
you gonna buy with all this?

Billy slides her magazine, now greatly worn, over to grandma.

GRANDMA (CONT'D)
You want your dogs.

BILLY
But...I keep thinking: Dad could
use a mule, or farm hands. Maybe a
second cow! I'm not sure if I have
the right to buy dogs for myself
when he could use the money.

GRANDMA
You earned this yourself, Billy!

BILLY
But it came from people in the
settlement! They gave us our farm
so we could give back and provide
crops. Something tells me they
deserve it as much as I do.

GRANDMA
Well...have you made a decision?

BILLY
No. What should I do?

GRANDMA
There's only one person with a
right to answer that: you. No
matter who this money came from,
you put in the work and had the
strength to save up for two years.

(MORE)

GRANDMA (CONT'D)

I know what I'd say, but the real question is...what will you do?

Billy takes a second to think. She breathes deep and slow, then pushes the money toward Grandma with great effort.

BILLY

I want my dogs.

GRANDMA

(relieved)

And by God you'll have them, Billy! You leave the money with me and I'll take care of everything. We'll have those dogs for you as soon as possible, in a few weeks!

BILLY

Thank you, Grandma, thank you!

She bursts outside, practically skipping. Meanwhile, Grandma reverently gathers the money back into the Nutella jar, halfway between a smile and slack-jawed amazement.

INT. BILLY'S HOUSE - EVENING

Billy repeatedly stabs her fork into a plate of corn, lost in thought, as her family eats. Dad notices her actions.

DAD

Billy, you're not getting away from the table without eating something tonight, you hear?

BILLY

I'm full. I ate lunch.

DAD

You've been hungrier than the rest of us put together the last few months, what's gotten into you now?

She says nothing, just looks at the table. One of the little girls holds a drawing right under Billy's nose. She has to lean back to look at it.

ALICE

Billy, I made this for you. It's a red fern.

Dad wipes his mouth with a napkin and shakes his head.

DAD

They don't exist, you know? Just an old wife's tale. Red ferns are part of something called crypto-botany, they were completely fake. Blue glowferns are all that's left.

BILLY

Dad!

(to Alice)

Tell me about it, why don't you?

SARAH

Yeah, tell us.

ALICE

If I tell you, Billy has to eat.

Billy sighs and rustles Alice's hair.

BILLY

You drive a hard bargain, Alice.

(she takes a bite)

Half now, half later.

Alice nods.

ALICE

A long time ago, two children got lost in the forest-

DAD

Where was that, exactly?

(off Billy's look)

Just want to know the details.

ALICE

A magic forest. They were two Native Americans, a boy and a girl. After they disappeared, their whole tribe went looking for them but a blizzard appeared and the two children died in the cold.

SARAH

This is sad.

ALICE

No it's not! They were buried next to each other and when spring came, the tribe found a red fern growing between the children. It's a sign of true love, and it can only be planted by an angel! The end.

Billy begins eating, exaggerated, and Alice looks relieved.

DAD

Did Grandma tell you that story? I wish she wouldn't do that. None of it's real, the angels or red ferns. I don't like old superstitions-

CLACK! Billy's spoon hits her plate, hard. She walks to the sink, sets her plate in, and goes into her room. Dad sighs, but says nothing.

EXT. FIELDS - DAY

Dad and Billy lead Ben through the fields with a plow.

DAD

Uh, Billy? About last night. I didn't mean a lot of those things I said, it had just been a long day on the farm. Can we move on? I feel like there's something between us, but I can't place it... You don't have to hide things from me, Billy, there is nothing you could do that would make me stop loving you. I just want to know what's going on so I can help...

No answer. Dad checks one of his parenting self-help books so Billy can't see. He shakes his head, pockets it.

DAD (CONT'D)

So, um, I forgot to tell you, what with everything that was going on, Grandma had a note for you at the shop. We could go pick it up later if you want. Billy? Please say something, I- Billy?

Billy is gone: she runs full-tilt across the field! Dad sighs, watching her go.

DAD (CONT'D)

Now what's all that about?

INT. GRANDMA'S SHOP - DAY

Billy skids through the door.

BILLY

Are they here?!

GRANDMA
Not yet, but soon!

Billy looks shot.

BILLY
What do you mean, not yet?!

GRANDMA
Your dogs arrived at the City
station just two days ago! A letter
came in yesterday.

BILLY
But the mail cart should've brought
my dogs, then.

GRANDMA
No, the cart doesn't ship animals.
We have to go pick them up.

BILLY
At the City? Let's go now!

GRANDMA
Billy, that's 32 miles by road, 20
straight through the wilderness.
It's at least a two-day trip that I
would need to plan out! Best we can
do is Friday: Justine plans to go
then, she can pick them up for you.
How does that sound?

Billy's desperation reaches a climax.

BILLY
I can't wait until Friday!

GRANDMA
Well, that's how it is. You've
waited for two years and a couple
of weeks, you can add a few more
days without much trouble!

Grandma's tough attitude melts when she sees Billy's face.

BILLY
I wish you hadn't told me until
they were here. I'm not sure I can
take it, knowing they're so close.

GRANDMA

Oh, Billy, I'm sorry. I got excited when I heard they were in town and I really wanted you to know. I thought you'd be excited too.

(lightbulb)

Maybe this will help; you have ten dollars left over.

BILLY

I gave you fifty, the ad said radhounds cost twenty-five each?

GRANDMA

We hit a recession, so everything's a little bit cheaper! Doesn't that make you feel better? You got your dogs for a great price!

BILLY

Thanks, Grandma. I appreciate it.

She takes the money, still dejected. Grandma slumps as Billy walks out the door, and chastises herself.

GRANDMA

Nice work, you old fool.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - AFTERNOON

Billy walks along. The sun sets at her back, casting her shadow in the dirt. She watches it run further and further down the path, then gets a crazy idea.

Her steps go faster and faster. She runs home.

INT. BILLY'S ROOM - EVENING

Billy lies in bed. Dad opens the door, sits next to her.

DAD

Goodnight, Billy. Sleep tight, okay? You've worked real hard.

He kisses her head, rises, and walks out. The door shuts softly in his wake, cutting off the living room candle.

Under the covers, Billy's eyes appear like raging fires. They bore into her alarm clock, which rapidly lapses to 10:00. All lights in the house have gone out.

Billy's covers fly off.

INT. BILLY'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The medium-size gas mask and APT come off the wall. Billy attempts to check the filter, but her shaking hands can't operate the clasp. She gives up, latches it to her belt.

Apples, biscuits, and beef jerky fly into her backpack.

She pauses by the door: a young girl, no shoes, a gas mask on her hip, a backpack of supplies on her shoulder. She's ready.

EXT. FIELDS - NIGHT

Billy marches toward the horizon, following the river.

EXT. APOCALYPTIC WASTELAND - NIGHT

The air purity tester chirps and Billy secures her gas mask. A few steps further, she reaches a small chasm with glowferns resting inside. She hops over the gap.

EXT. APOCALYPTIC HIGHWAY - NIGHT

In the moonlight, Billy spots the main road nearby, following the river's path. She maintains a course between them, moving through the brush.

EXT. APOCALYPTIC WASTELAND - MORNING

The sun rises on a hill overlooking the city! Billy pulls out an apple, takes a bite, and starts down the slope.

EXT. CITY - MORNING

A huge wall bears enormous floodlights, larger and more numerous than the ones around Billy's settlement. On the walkway, guards lounge around, drinking and chatting. A few notice the girl below with surprise.

Billy reaches the GATE. A hatch opens and the GATEKEEPER, 80's, a grizzled man, peeks out.

GATEKEEPER

Oh! Howdy, kid.

The hatch slaps shut and doors creak open. A GUARD flies down from the wall, into Billy's path. The gatekeeper watches the guard with surprise.

GUARD

Hey, what were you doing outside?!
You're supposed to be in school
right now!

GATEKEEPER

Can't ya tell she ain't from around
here?

The guard looks closer: Billy's clothes, feet, her pack.

GUARD

You're from a settlement? Did you
lose your family, kid?!

The gatekeeper rolls his eyes.

BILLY

I'm here to pick something up from
the station. Can I get directions?

GATEKEEPER

Of course. You want to head
straight down the main road there,
you'll find the station other side
of the City. Can't miss it. Sorry
to bother you, kid. If you find any
trouble, just let me know.

BILLY

Thanks, mister.

She walks off, past the surprised guard.

GUARD

A girl like her shouldn't be
wandering around on her own,
especially not out there. Do you
think she'll be okay inside?

The gatekeeper leans back in a chair, enjoying the shade with
practiced nonchalance.

GATEKEEPER

Seems alright to me.

INT. CITY - DAY

Billy walks through a new world: the market district. She
looks through post-apocalyptic toy stores, restaurants, shops
for survival gear, outlets for new clothes, and more!

Billy checks her extra ten dollars and begins making a tally of certain items: new fabric, nice dolls, and work clothes. Intrigued, she looks in a cigar store window, admires the polished wooden cases and leathery, hand-rolled cigars.

The STORE OWNER, an old woman, waves at Billy through the glass while arranging her wares. Billy waves back.

MARSHAL (O.S.)

They're pretty, aren't they? Look
but don't touch. You're a little
young for those yet.

Billy turns and looks UP.

The MARSHAL stands by her, a wasteland legend. He wears torn clothing with metal plate armor. A badass revolver swings on his hip, one gloved hand hovering close by.

He looks like a giant to Billy! She backs away, scared.

BILLY

I-I have to go.

She walks away. Her walk turns into a run. The Marshal watches her, surprised and flustered, but still looking pretty damn scary. The store owner emerges to chastise him with familiar playfulness as Billy turns a corner.

STORE OWNER

You sent the poor girl running!
Shame on you, Marshal.

MARSHAL

I didn't mean to scare the kid!

STORE OWNER

Please. You scare all the kids.

She chuckles as the Marshal shakes his head.

EXT. STATION - DAY

Numerous mechanics work out repairs on a modern train riddled with old bullet holes from wasteland raiders. Billy passes them, into the station.

INT. STATION - DAY

An elderly STATION MASTER, ROBERT, works on paperwork at a desk. He looks up at Billy pleasantly.

STATION MASTER

What can I do for you, friend?

BILLY

I'm here for a package. I'm Billy.

STATION MASTER

Billy! Let's see here. There was a delivery for someone by that name, meant to go up the river and along the old highway. Last name was something like...Colman?

BILLY

Yes! That's me!

He grins with a twinkle in his eye.

STATION MASTER

Right this way. We've got something exciting in store for you.

INT. STORAGE ROOM - DAY

The station master leads her through dusty boxes to a well-made crate with slits going down the sides. He brushes the top and walks around to the door's clasp.

Billy waits in breathless anticipation. The hinges creak.

STATION MASTER

They've been waiting! I think they'll be glad to meet you-

Paws appear like shadows. The pretty eyes of two RADHOUND PUPS sparkle into the morning light as Billy's dogs move into her arms! She picks them up, buries her face in their fur, and cries. The station master watches.

STATION MASTER (CONT'D)

Why look, they already know you! Do you have names for them?

BILLY

I've been thinking about that ever since I wanted dogs, but now that they're in my arms I can't decide.

STATION MASTER

Oh, don't worry about it, the names will come.

(MORE)

STATION MASTER (CONT'D)

In the meantime, you've got to think about how you're going to get these dogs home. They can't walk too far on their own yet.

BILLY

I didn't even consider that.

The Station Master looks around and spots a sack. He picks it up, checks the size, and feels the material.

STATION MASTER

If you're willing to give it a try, I think I might have a solution. It's an old trick I've seen used a few times before...

EXT. STATION - DAY

Billy struts through the door, her dogs inside the sack over her shoulder, peeking from holes cut in either side. Her backpack is flipped to the front.

The mechanics stop to watch. The station master leans against a post and waves to the departing trio.

STATION MASTER

Happy trails, you three!

BILLY

Thank you for your help!

The Station Master tips his hat and the pups bark: *thanks!*

INT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY

CITY KIDS eat lunch on the town hall steps. Billy heads straight across the main lawn. When she reaches the middle, a boy notices her and points. The others spot Billy's radhounds and rise, headed for the girl and her dogs.

Billy's good feelings vanish like smoke. Instinctively, she changes direction, away from the kids.

MASON RICHTER, a spoiled brat, leads a small group to cut Billy off. He rides an expensive bike and wears a fancy letter jacket with his initials: "M.R."

Billy sighs, unable to escape. She turns to the kids.

BILLY

Hello there. Can I help you?

MASON

Yeah. Give me back those dogs you stole, and leave our town.

Billy's taken aback. A nice boy, THOMAS, responds kindly.

THOMAS

Are they your dogs?

BILLY

They're mine. I paid for them.

THOMAS

That's amazing, radhounds are super rare! Can I pet them, please?

Billy lets him. The dogs lick his fingers and Thomas giggles. A few other kids join in as well. Mason approaches like he wants to pet them as well, but Billy turns them away in suspicion. Mason grabs at the pack.

MASON

Give 'em!

BILLY

No! I said they were my dogs!

MASON

You're a liar! No country girl like you could save up for radhounds, you stole them from someone better than you!

THOMAS

Mason, she said they're hers-

MASON

Shut up, Thomas!

(to the other kids)

Someone go get the Marshal, he'll thank me for catching this thief-

Billy turns away, and Mason kicks at her pack. He connects with a dog and it YELPS! Billy's sets the pack down, angry.

BILLY

Don't you touch them again.

Mason looks at his squad, all against one.

MASON

You can't tell me what to do. Those dogs are mine now, you filthy outlander, and I'm gonna-

He gropes at her shirt and Billy punches him firmly in the nose. CRUNCH! He goes down immediately, eyes tearing up.

MASON (CONT'D)

I'm gonna kill you! Take 'er dogs!

The others rush in. Billy punches one kid and they take her down. Thomas fights to shake the others off, but he's too scrawny to help; they hold Billy down.

From her knees, Billy watches a kid run away with the pack.

BILLY

No! Let me GO!

MASON

We got your dogs now-

Billy ROARS.

She rips her arms away and takes Mason out by the knees, pins his arms with her legs, and pummels his face. The others grab her hands, so she brings her elbow down like a hammer.

Through the circle of bodies, she sees her dogs disappearing. Billy cries in anger and frustration.

MARSHAL

BREAK IT UP, NOW!

Kids scatter as the Marshal descends like a bird of prey. Billy rises and stumbles away. Mason snivels on the ground.

The Marshal grabs his arm and drags him to his feet.

MARSHAL (CONT'D)

Stand up, boy. All of you were fighting one girl, you don't have the right to whine about it.

(to the group)

Now, who wants to tell me what happened here?!

MASON

She stole dogs, radhounds, and we was trying to bring 'em back!

The other boys agree with him. One of them, DYLAN, brings the radhounds out, as if proof of the crime.

DYLAN

They're right here, Marshal.

Marshal takes the dogs carefully and turns to Billy.

MARSHAL

You're the kid from out of town.
Where did you get these dogs?

BILLY

I bought them myself, you can ask
the station master.

THOMAS

It's true. I believe her.

The Marshal turns to him and Thomas flinches. The Marshal gives Billy a questioning look: *is he clean?*

BILLY

Thomas tried to help me.

The Marshal sighs, ragged. To the village kids:

MARSHAL

Listen. All of your parents are going to hear about this from me personally. It doesn't matter if you thought she was a thief, you are not the judge, jury, and executioners of this town. Not even I am. Here, we assume innocence until someone is proven guilty, and we treat outsiders with respect. Do you understand me?

The boys mumble their agreement.

MARSHAL (CONT'D)

Good. Get out of here. NOW.

They turn away. Billy nods to Thomas, who waves before heading off with the other kids. They move away, making sure he can't join their circle. Billy frowns, empathetic.

Marshal turns to Billy and hands her pups over.

BILLY

Thank you for your help, Mister. My name's Billy Colman.

MARSHAL

Billy, you can call me Marshal, very sorry this happened to you. If you don't mind me asking, how did you get dogs like that?

BILLY

I saved up for two years.

MARSHAL

Two years?! Two-!

(angry huff)

Not a single one of those boys has the spine for something like that. I should've made them apologize.

BILLY

It's okay.

MARSHAL

No, it isn't. Please, let me do something nice for you, consider it an apology from our town. How long are you staying around here?

BILLY

I planned to leave tonight, after picking up a few more things.

He looks at her: bruises appear on her arms, but she stands tall and resolute. Beaten, unbroken.

MARSHAL

Then there's no time to waste.

EXT. CITY - AFTERNOON

The gatekeeper helps lift Billy's sack over her shoulder and Marshal hands her a soda, which has a bottle opener tied to the cap by a colorful yarn.

MARSHAL

That's my personal favorite, I hope you like it. Be careful; it can burn a little on the way down.

BILLY

Thank you! I really appreciate your help, Mister Marshal.

MARSHAL

Least I could do, Billy Colman.

The sun's rays glint through the bottle as she leaves.

GATEKEEPER

It's a shame to send her off in the dark. She could stay at the inn for a night and head out well rested in the morning tomorrow.

Marshal watches Billy disappear, climbing the same hill she descended that morning. He winks at the gatekeeper, familiar:

MARSHAL
Seems alright to me.

They share a laugh, but Marshal's final look shows CONCERN.

EXT. CAVE SHELTER - EVENING

Clouds burn red as Billy reaches a cavern in the side of a hill. She sets down her burden and lets her pups wander the clearing while looking over the countryside.

BILLY
We'll stay here for the night.
Don't wander off, you two.

She begins gathering sticks and stones for a fire.

EXT. CAVE SHELTER - NIGHT

Billy lays next to a pile of coals with her smaller pup in her arms, the larger one resting on her head. So cute...

CRACK!

Billy rises quickly, sending the larger dog tumbling. The pup in her arms GROWLS.

BILLY
Shh! Be quiet...

She scours the night, softly illuminated by the moon. Nothing moves: gnarled trees stand still, glowfern patches cast light in placid clusters, a prominent boulder rests on the hill.

The larger pup BARKS a challenge into the night! Billy pulls it close and apologetically holds its mouth shut.

She looks outside. The "boulder" disappeared.

BILLY (CONT'D)
OH NO.

Billy throws all her collected branches and twigs onto the coals. Small leaves ignite quickly, but the branches are slow to set ablaze. Smoke rises, but little else!

Her dogs get louder. Billy follows their gaze.

The reflective eyes of a DEATHCALLER watch Billy outside! The top of its head hangs upside down at the cave entrance.

The creature rises out of sight, leaving Billy in breathless horror. She throws more things onto the fire, including the dogs' carrying pack by accident. It tangles with a branch.

The huge beast steps in front of the cave mouth, blocking the moon itself. Billy's blood freezes under the obscure terror.

Her dogs BARK and GROWL ferociously! Billy joins them.

BILLY (CONT'D)

Ya! Ya! Get out of here, you don't want any piece of US!

For one moment, the trio sounds grown up: an adult human and her veteran hunting hounds. The creature SNARLS, showing awful fangs.

Billy's carrying sack ignites! She grabs the branch it's attached to, brandishes her torch, and rushes the entrance!

BILLY (CONT'D)

I. Said. LEAVE!

She swings her flame and the deathcaller vanishes under the harsh light! Billy breathes heavily in the moonlight, looking around the hill. They are suddenly alone.

Shaking, knees instantly like jelly, Billy retreats back into her cave, drops the branch, and sits down to rest. Her dogs crawl into her lap, huddling together.

Billy holds them tight, wide awake.

EXT. RIVERSIDE - MORNING

Billy's eyes appear tired and sore from her all-night vigil, but she walks with vigor as her pups trot along at her side, diligent and loyal.

They stop at the log where Billy first discovered the magazine advertisement. She regards the carving for a second time and it takes on a whole new meaning: "Dan and Ann". Billy turns to her dogs.

BILLY

Dan.

The bigger pup looks over. DAN, reporting for duty!

BILLY (CONT'D)

Ann?

ANN rears her head. Billy laughs, surprised.

BILLY (CONT'D)

You already know your names! Come on, Dan and Ann, we're almost home. I have some people for you to meet-

EXT. BILLY'S HOUSE - MORNING

Dad paces the front porch. On a rocker, Sarah spots Billy coming through the fields.

SARAH

There she is! It's Billy!

They collectively fly off the porch.

EXT. FIELDS - MORNING

Billy drops her packs and runs to them. She meets Dad halfway and they embrace, his eyes shut tight. Tears are coming!

Dad hears paw steps and looks past Billy as the pups swarm around, barking and sniffing at this unfamiliar person. He lets go of Billy and puts his hand out.

DAD

I don't believe it. Grandma told us where you went, but I didn't-

ALICE

Billy!

The little girl leaps into Billy's arms with wild abandon, nearly knocking her down. Luckily, Sarah hugs them both and stabilizes the group.

SARAH

You brought back dogs!

BILLY

Oh, that's not all. How could I go on an adventure and not bring back a few souvenirs for my sisters?

She reaches into her pack and removes new dolls for the girls, along with a few yards of fabric.

BILLY (CONT'D)

Ask Dad for help with the sewing,
he'll teach you how to make
something with that!

The girls hug Billy and run off in excitement. Sarah holds her doll carefully, but Alice wraps fabric around her neck like a cape and lets it trail behind in the dirt. Billy considers letting her know, then shrugs with a grin.

ALICE

I'm going to be a superhero!

SARAH

I can make a dress with this!

DAD

Billy.

(sets Ann down)

What you did was really nice, but
you can't just run off like that
without letting us know!

BILLY

I'm sorry, Dad. But...well, I got
something for you as well.

She pulls out new work clothes. Dad looks at his own, torn and broken. Even when they were new, his overalls weren't as nice as Billy's purchase. He maintains a stern face.

DAD

Billy, this means a lot to me, but
you do realize you put yourself at
risk, don't you? I can buy new work
clothes. I can't get another you.

Billy cracks and hugs him tight.

BILLY

I won't do it again, Dad. I'm
really, really sorry.

He hugs her, sighing.

DAD

Billy... truth is, you're going to
do things that scare me. I'll let
you go hunting, but I want you to
tell me beforehand so I don't have
to worry. Well, at least I won't
have to worry quite as much.

BILLY

You really mean it?!

DAD

I do. Part of me thinks there's already a radhound inside of you: these dogs are hunters, meant to be out on the trail of raccoons, and so are you. I don't particularly like the thought of you running around in the hills at night, but you earned the right.

BILLY

Thank you, Dad! I'll teach them to be the best hunting dogs ever!

DAD

I hate to say it, you have a responsibility to do just that.

Billy cheers happily. Her dogs bark back, running around her and jumping up in excitement. They're a team.

MONTAGE - VARIOUS

A) GRETA'S STABLE: Billy milks Greta. Sarah and Alice fawn over the dogs outside, their dolls forgotten. Billy nods happily and goes back to work.

B) GRANDMA'S SHOP: Dad buys supplies from Grandma, who takes his money distastefully. He notices a raccoon pelt.

DAD

How much is the pelt going for?
Billy's gonna need a lure to train
her pups how to hunt.

GRANDMA

For Billy, it's free.

She hands it to Dad proudly. Sneakily, he sets a dollar on the counter and exits. Too late, Grandma spots the bill.

GRANDMA (CONT'D)

Hey, I don't need this!

C) BILLY'S FARM: Billy puts the pelt on her makeshift rod and runs past the doghouse. The pups stumble out and chase it on their puppy paws. Billy trails them along, weaving through the fields, and eventually slows down so they can grab it.

D) DAD'S ROOM: Dad examines his chart for moving to the City. At "Third Harvest", he writes a line going up. They're making a profit! He sets his agricultural textbook aside and sits back to rest, grinning ear to ear.

E) BILLY'S FARM: Billy, looking older, books it past the doghouse. Sarah and Alice block the entrance, counting down from ten. When they reach zero, they back away.

SARAH AND ALICE

Now!

Dan and Ann, now full-sized, fly out of the doghouse like bullets! They track Billy through tall rows of corn and catch the lure in record time.

Alice and Sarah catch up. The three sisters congratulate the dogs with plenty of head scratches and belly rubs.

END MONTAGE

EXT. BILLY'S HOUSE - EVENING

Billy gears up with a bit too much stuff. Her sisters bring her an electronic lamp with extra batteries, Billy zips up a bulging backpack, and Dad hands her a two-bit axe. Dan and Ann bounce around, ready for their first real hunt.

DAD

There are a few boiled eggs in there, they'll be fresh whenever you want them. Remember to be safe, and listen to your air purity tester. You know the drill.

BILLY

I'll be fine! We're gonna catch our first raccoon tonight, you know?

DAD

Oh, I don't doubt it. Just make sure it doesn't catch you, okay? Dan, Ann? Protect Billy, please.

He tries to joke, but real worry comes through. Ann barks in reply, with a nod. Dad raises an eyebrow. Billy laughs.

BILLY

Don't worry, Dad. We'll be fine.

She kneels down to her dogs, holding their collars close. They're bigger than Billy now, almost the size of wolves.

BILLY (CONT'D)
Find a raccoon for me. Alright?

Ann licks Billy's face and Dan snorts in agreement, panting with excitement. Billy releases their collars and follows her dogs into the night. Dad watches them go.

DAD
You keep each other safe.

SARAH
Yeah, keep each other safe!

EXT. APOCALYPTIC WASTELAND - NIGHT

Billy leans against a rock with her lantern, listening. All's quiet. She whoops and gets two short, clipped barks in reply.

BILLY
Keep at it, you two.

EXT. APOCALYPTIC WASTELAND - NIGHT

A HOWL rings through the night! Billy calls back and breaks into a run, blood pounding!

She tracks the barks, closing in as they turn toward a long bank of fallen trees. The sounds grow louder, coming her way.

SNAP! Branches break and a RACCOON leaps onto a log above; Billy steps away from its beady eyes, sharp teeth, and angry hiss. Then she draws her axe and runs up the bank.

BILLY
Hiya!

She swings just behind its tail, getting lodged in the bark. The raccoon disappears as Dan and Ann appear, in hot pursuit.

BILLY (CONT'D)
That's it, you've got it now!

She rips her axe from the wood and bolts after them.

EXT. RIVER - NIGHT

Billy emerges on a sandbank as Dan calls mournfully. He turns to her with a baleful whine. She rubs between his ears.

BILLY
Just give her a sec, Old Dan.

Ann roots around, but fails to find anything either. She returns to Billy. Billy kneels. Pep talk time!

BILLY (CONT'D)

Alright, it's crafty, I'll give you that. But you're the best dogs out here and it isn't nearly as smart as you two. Get out there, track it down, and learn its tricks. If you get it up a tree, I promise to do everything else from there.

Ann ruffs fiercely and appears to smile. Dan howls, forcing Billy to cover her ears. She grins.

BILLY (CONT'D)

That's better! Go on, find it!

The two dogs rush to the river. Ann wades in and swims to the other side, sniffing up and down the bank. Excited, she heads to a drift in the middle, by a tree.

BILLY (CONT'D)

It musta jumped.

Ann looks up the branch, toward the trunk. She swims to the other side, sniffs around, then barks once more and runs off into the forest. Dan's booming howl follows after.

Billy crosses the river.

EXT. RUINS - MORNING

Billy leans against an archaic mailbox the moment her dogs loose a protracted call: they've treed their prey!

BILLY

Atta girl, Ann! Good boy, Dan!

She enters the courtyard and finds her dogs by a concrete pillar with the remains of a strut near the top and a hole in the center! It looks like a stone cross. Billy falters.

BILLY (CONT'D)

I can't chop that down.

Dan leaps against the pillar and the raccoon snarls down from its home. He and Ann turn to Billy expectantly, waiting, as she takes in the pillar's size and material. Billy sighs, accepting her fate.

BILLY (CONT'D)

You're right. I made a promise to you both and I intend to keep it.

She whips out her axe and levels the blade at the side of the structure. CRACK! Her first hit barely takes off a chip. Dan barks happily. Billy brings the axe down again and again.

The sound of her toil rings through the ruins.

EXT. RUINS - DAY - LATER

Billy rests against the pillar with Ann's head in her lap. Dan waits nearby, keeping an eye on the raccoon's nest.

Dad drives the family carriage into the clearing with Sarah, Alice, and Grandma along for the ride. He nearly collapses in relief at the sight of Billy and her dogs. Grandma applauds.

GRANDMA

You've already got one on the ropes! See, Wilson? It's just like I said it would be.

DAD

Billy, why didn't you come back?

BILLY

I don't want to leave Ann and Dan. I promised to do everything else if they got a raccoon up a tree, and one's there. I have to get it.

DAD

Okay, but it'll take forever and a day to bring that pillar down. You should come home for breakfast.

BILLY

No, they'd think I gave up. I have to show them I'm true to my word.

Dad approaches, shaking his head and examining the pillar. He picks up her axe, checks the edges.

DAD

Ah, and you ruined both blades! Look, just come back to the house, we'll get you food and rest.

GRANDMA

She promised her dogs to get the raccoon. I think she should stay.

DAD

Not you too. Her dogs won't mind!

He looks at Dan and Ann, who return his gaze. Billy massages her arms as Dad tries to reason with them.

DAD (CONT'D)

Come on, Dan? Ann? Billy has to eat something and get rest, the raccoon will still be here later.

Ann barks and shakes her head. Dad rolls his eyes, grumbling.

DAD (CONT'D)

Damned if she doesn't have the smartest dogs I've ever seen.

(to Billy)

Alright, stay here, then. But keep out of the sun, drink water, and don't try to use that axe any more. Actually, here, I'll take it. When we come back, I'll bring a proper tool and help you out.

BILLY

I have to do this alone, Dad. That might sound silly, but I told them I would take care of everything, at the least this first time. That's what I'm going to do.

Dad brushes his hair back. He's done fighting her.

DAD

Fine. Just wait here and rest. And drink some water!

The family hops back into the cart and heads off.

INT. BILLY'S HOUSE - DAY

The little sisters put together three lunch bags. Dad stops by the kitchen table, confused.

DAD

Girls, don't we have dog food for the hounds?

SARAH

Dan loves ham and provolone, and Anne's favorite is Swiss cheese and mayonnaise. It's their big day!

ALICE
Yeah, big day!

Dad sighs, and looks to an umbrella bucket by the door. He pulls out a sledgehammer. Tests the weight.

DAD
Big day.

EXT. RUINS - DAY

Billy chows down on a sandwich as Dan and Ann enjoy their own. The family leaves in the cart, waving goodbye.

ALICE
Have a good time, Billy!

In their wake, Billy hoists the sledgehammer appreciatively, admiring the metal. She rolls her shoulders, stretches her neck to either side, and flexes her fingers.

BILLY
Showtime.

She brings the hammer against the concrete. CRUNCH! Fractures appear and chips fall away, piece by piece.

EXT. RUINS - AFTERNOON - LATER

Billy sweats fiercely, grimacing through intense pain. The sandwich packages are empty, the water has run low, but the concrete has diminished. She punctuates her swings:

BILLY
Don't. Worry. We're. Almost. THERE!

PING!

Billy pauses. *Ping?!* That's not right. She takes a closer look at the pillar, almost fully destroyed near the base.

There's a rod of rebar.

Flustered, angry, Billy picks up the hammer with a grimace and begins hitting the pillar full-force from various angles. In each spot, after a few hits, she gets the same PING!

Billy scrapes dust away with her hand, exposing the pillar's metal core. Her sledgehammer will never chip it away!

Last ditch effort: crying, Billy rams herself into the pillar, trying to push it over. It doesn't budge at all.

She roars for one final go, then collapses.

BILLY (CONT'D)

I can't.

Ann walks to her, whines, and licks Billy's tears. Dan jumps against the pillar, barking fruitlessly. Billy grabs his collar, trying to drag him away.

BILLY (CONT'D)

Stop! It's not gonna happen, Dan, we can't push it down and I'd break a hundred more tools before getting through that metal.

(softer)

You got it up there, but I'm just not good enough to bring it down.

Her eyes well up. She leans back, looking at the sky.

BILLY (CONT'D)

God, I've done everything I could. I don't ask for much, but...please help me with this one.

Wind picks up in the ruins as the buildings' ancient remains channel air! Billy gasps as it nearly bowls her over. She pulls her dogs back, amazed.

The pillar shakes. Chips of concrete tumble. Rebar groans.

BILLY (CONT'D)

There it goes!

The pillar falls! The raccoon leaps from its nest and Dan chases it down. They engage in a dirty fight: the creature scratches Dan's nose but he holds on until Ann latches on. A shake, a snap, and it's over!

Together, they bring the raccoon to Billy, who hugs them in each arm, scratching their heads. She looks to the sky, and gives silent thanks.

INT. BILLY'S HOME - NIGHT

Billy prays over dinner, the whole family present. Sarah and Alice dutifully close their eyes, Grandma smiles at Billy's fervor, but Dad's hands remain on the table. He frowns.

BILLY

- And thank you, Lord, for our family and my dogs and our hunt today. I appreciate it. Amen.

The others, aside from Dad, repeat "amen" and begin eating.

DAD

You know, Billy, what happened today was your success. All you.

BILLY

But I prayed, and the wind knocked the pillar down. I saw trees in the courtyard that weren't even moving!

DAD

Well, the timing and aerodynamics were amazing. Those ruins make a top-notch wind tunnel when air blows in the right direction, but aside from that, you were the one who put in the effort to make it happen. I don't like watching you give all the credit to some invisible man in the sky.

GRANDMA

We're not trying to discount the work she put in, but you have to admit: that was an answer. God met her work halfway.

DAD

There's no way to be sure of that.

GRANDMA

Sometimes, God requires a small bit of trust to do the impossible. That's why it's called faith.

Dad notices the girls have become somber, listening to them argue. He grits his teeth and goes back to his food.

DAD

Sorry girls, I didn't mean to argue. I'm just happy for Billy and wanted her to know how proud I am.

They nod and move on.

EXT. CITY - NIGHT

At the top of the hill Billy crossed, the deathcaller's eyes look down upon electric lights.

INT. GRANDMA'S SHOP - TIME LAPSE

Grandma proudly displays Billy's first raccoon pelt on her wall. Time goes on and more appear until they surround the counter, with a barrel of them on "clearance".

INT. GRANDMA'S SHOP - DAY

The store brings in more traffic than ever! Grandma boasts to a large group of people at the register. Billy stands nearby, embarrassed but proud.

GRANDMA

Oh yes, they're all Billy's! I don't think there's a single hunter in California as good as her, nor any two dogs that can measure up against Old Dan and Little Ann.

Rubin Pritchard struts in, with Rainie sniveling at his side.

RUBIN

Nah! She ain't the best there is.

The crowd turns, interested. Grandma eyes the boys, hostile.

GRANDMA

What do you Pritchards want in here?

RUBIN

We're looking for a clod of tobacco, what do you think?

GRANDMA

You're too young for that stuff.

RUBIN

Please, it's for our father.

RAINIE

Yeah, lady, he told us to come pick it up. You're not supposed to say no, so go get it for us.

Grandma does so angrily, but takes their money first. The moment the tobacco falls in their hands, they stuff it in their mouths. Grandma turns red.

GRANDMA

You two get out of here. Scram! I have a mind to tell your father why he's out a dollar and the tobacco he was expecting.

The boys' faces turn vicious.

RAINIE

You wouldn't!

GRANDMA

Would I?

RUBIN

'Course you wouldn't. You're a bluff, and you're lying about that like you lied about Billy.

GRANDMA

Pardon, young man?!

RUBIN

I'm willing to bet those hounds aren't the best, not in California or even here in this town.

GRANDMA

You want to bet how?

Rubin's been reeling her in like a fish.

RUBIN

We have something on our farm, a raccoon we call The Ghost. It's got a pale coat, like nothing you've ever seen, and it's faster and smarter and better'n any dog. No hound alive's been able to tree the thing yet, and we've had all sorts come down to our place to try. They all left empty-handed.

BILLY

My dogs can get it. Give them a chance, we'll find the Ghost.

RAINIE

Not that easy, Colman!

RUBIN

Yeah, there's a fee.

Grandma grits her teeth.

GRANDMA

A fee?

RUBIN

Call it a wager. You put down five dollars and we'll let you have a go at it. If you catch the Ghost, you get your five dollars back and five more for your trouble. Ten dollars, fair and square.

BILLY

That's it? Easy, I can-

GRANDMA

No!

Everyone looks at Grandma, surprised.

GRANDMA (CONT'D)

Don't give it to them, Billy.

BILLY

Why not?

Rubin and Rainie busy themselves with laughing raucously. Billy wants privacy, gets only embarrassment.

GRANDMA

They're...they're not worth it. There's probably no such thing as the ghost raccoon. I wouldn't be surprised if they made it up.

RUBIN

Nah, it's real. Ask around: others have seen it, nobody's caught it.

GRANDMA

Oh, I'll be checking into that. In the meantime, get out of my shop!

The Pritchard boys walk out. Billy turns to Grandma.

BILLY

Why did you say that?

GRANDMA

Say what, exactly?

BILLY

That they're lying and I shouldn't take the bet? You don't actually think they're lying, do you?

GRANDMA

Well, it's not the point-

BILLY

You're not sure whether I can win.

Grandma prepares to deny it, but stops.

GRANDMA

Okay, yes. I've heard of it. There's been talk around the settlement for a while about the Ghost Raccoon. It follows the same pattern: hunters go to the farm, pay up the five dollars, and never get their money back. Trust me, the old creature has made seasoned hunters with dogs far more experienced than yours look like laughing stocks! At the very least, them Pritchard boys never let it go. You're my pride and joy, Billy, do you realize what you're risking by taking them up on their bet?

BILLY

Whatever they say, it doesn't matter to me.

GRANDMA

Doesn't it? Maybe it should.

BILLY

Grandma, I promise we'll do it, we'll corner the ghost raccoon. Don't you believe me?

Grandma looks at Billy, wets her lips nervously.

GRANDMA

No, Billy.

Billy takes her words like a fist to the gut.

BILLY

No?

Grandma looks around the shop: people reading, socializing.

GRANDMA

You don't realize this yet because you're young, but it matters what others think about you.

(MORE)

GRANDMA (CONT'D)

Your reputation as one the best hunters is important. You've become well known! More than that, you're an inspiration to the people of the settlement since your dogs brought the raccoon population in check. During times like these, people need inspiration. THIS is what it's all about. The Pritchard boys will ruin that for their own fun.

BILLY

Grandma.
 (maintains eye contact)
 Nobody will ever fault me for trying. Don't worry about what could happen, think about what could be. Believe in us!

Her conviction bring Grandma to tears. She rubs her eyes.

GRANDMA

I-I'm sorry Billy. I can't believe I didn't...

EXT. GRANDMA'S SHOP - DAY

Grandma busts through the front of the store, where the Pritchard boys hang out with their tobacco. Rubin chortles at Rainie, who chokes on the brown slurry.

GRANDMA

You two!
 (they look up)
 Here's your five dollars. Billy will meet you at the farm tonight. If anything goes wrong, you'll answer to me personally.

Rainie takes the money, smells it lasciviously, and shoves it into his pants while they watch.

RUBIN

She'll be safe. I wouldn't risk losing the easiest five dollars I ever made, old lady.

GRANDMA

Yeah, well, don't get too attached.

The boys run off. Billy watches them go, standing next to Grandma. The older woman sighs, a confusing mix of emotions.

BILLY

Why do you let them treat you like that? You should let their parents hear about this.

GRANDMA

There's no point.

BILLY.

Huh. I get it, I bet their parents don't punish them for anything at all! It wouldn't surprise me, seeing how they act.

GRANDMA

Billy, you shouldn't assume why someone acts the way they do. You never know their situation.

Billy follows Grandma's eyes to Rubin's arms. He has terrible bruises! Some look like they're from fights with other kids, but many form in the shape of a BELT. Rainie, however, does not have scars... Billy's breath stops.

She goes deep in thought, remembering her fight in the City. The kids beating her, the welts. She looks to Rubin sadly.

BILLY

I'm sorry I said that, Grandma.

EXT. PRITCHARD'S YARD - NIGHT

Grandma and Billy roll up in the cart. The Pritchard boys wait by a fence with a huge ROTTWEILER, named BLUE, tied up next to them. It bares sharp, white teeth in its blocky, square head. Even Dan lacks the dog's bulk!

GRANDMA

Now, what's that thing for?

RUBIN

Oh, Blue? You can never be too sure if someone else's dogs are tame, so we have a little protection, see?

Blue barks a challenge at Dan, slobber dripping. Dan watches the aggressor silently. Cool, calm, professional.

BILLY

Good boy, Dan.

RAINIE

Aw, too bad. I wanted to see 'em fight. I'm willing to bet your radhound ain't no match for Blue.

BILLY

Hounds are built for hunting. But even then, I wouldn't count out Old Dan, he's tough as nails.

RAINIE

Wanna place a wager?

RUBIN

Not now! First, we let Billy have a chance at the Ghost.

RAINIE

Why even bother-

Rubin cuffs him firmly over the ear, silencing his brother.

RUBIN

Shut up! No more waiting around: are you ready to go, Colman?

BILLY

I am.

GRANDMA

You be safe now, Billy. And listen to me: I believe in you. There are no better dogs than the two at your side. Got that?

BILLY

We know.

Billy crouches between Dan and Ann, whose heads rise by her shoulders like Odin's ravens.

She unlatches their collars, then walks ahead.

BILLY (CONT'D)

Dan? Ann? Find the Ghost.

Dan launches forward, but Ann licks Billy's hand first and then races after her companion. Grandma watches Billy and the Pritchards follow, their lanterns bobbing into the darkness of the wasteland.

GRANDMA

God be with you, Billy.

EXT. APOCALYPTIC WASTELAND - NIGHT

Dan and Ann's tracking howl rings through the night.

BILLY

Ha! They're already onto him!

The Pritchard brothers smile knowingly.

RUBIN

Oh yeah, of course they got the trail. Didn't we tell you already?

RAINIE

It isn't called the ghost raccoon 'cause of its fur alone: it haunts these woods, and the trail leads all over the place. Better hope your dogs can find the freshest, or this'll be a short night-

Old Dan howls: a deep, bass tone.

BILLY

There it is!

Rainie huffs, but Rubin laughs and follows Billy.

RUBIN

I'll be damned, Billy! Your dogs might have what it takes.

BILLY

(surprised)

Yeah, they do. But just wait until we hear Little Ann. Until then, the game's still afoot.

EXT. RIVER - NIGHT

The trio runs onto the bank. Dan and Ann disappear into the forest and return, chasing something.

BILLY

They're on its tail. They're close!

RAINIE

The Ghost is tricking them again.

BILLY

What do you mean?

RUBIN

Every dog's the smartest hunter alive until they have a raccoon right under their nose. The Ghost lets them get close. That's how it disappears. One moment your dogs are the cream of the crop, then they're chasing mist.

Billy growls.

BILLY

I've heard about enough of this ghost raccoon...

As she watches, the GHOST RACCOON itself, a blur in the night, hops onto a log and runs over the water. It swims upstream as Billy's dogs appear and launch into the water and power downstream in the opposite direction, a fake out!

BILLY (CONT'D)

Wait-!

RUBIN

No, no, no! If you say anything, I'll consider the entire bet off and we get your five dollars. Those dogs need to figure the trick out themselves: that's a right good sleight of hand by the Ghost and if your dogs aren't smart enough to figure it out they're not gonna be able to take the final act.

Little Ann barks, right across the river. Dan explodes through the bushes nearby, running in the right direction! Dan looks like a demon and Rubin falls on his back in utter surprise as Billy whoops.

BILLY

Go, you two! Keep on it!

She laughs and runs after Dan as Rubin pulls himself up. Rainie chuckles as well, but his brother kicks his leg. Tripping each other, they pursue Billy.

EXT. GREAT TREE - NIGHT

Billy stops underneath odd, gnarled branches. Dan barks like mad, patrolling the area until Billy arrives. Ann moves around, sniffing here and there. Quiet.

BILLY
This isn't good.

Rainie leans against the tree, smug.

RAINIE
Huh. This tree looks familiar.

RUBIN
Sure does, Colman. This is where
all dogs meet their end. There must
be a portal to the Dead World here,
'cuz the ghost raccoon disappears
every time.

BILLY
Just give my dogs a second.

RAINIE
We ain't got a second. We have your
money already, you paid.

BILLY
I have my full night!

RAINIE
Give it up, Colman! There's no
finding the Ghost raccoon once it
goes in there.

RUBIN
No, Billy's right, Rainie. She
paid, she gets her time. Let the
hounds have their chance.

Rainie looks at Rubin, expecting a joke. Nothing comes.

BILLY
Thank you, Rubin. If Little Ann
gives up, I will. But not before.

Old Dan walks to Billy, whimpering. She pets his head.

BILLY (CONT'D)
I know. Don't worry, let's see what
she comes up with.

Little Ann circles the tree, sniffs the bushes, checks every
inch of dirt without barking. She returns to Billy, head low.

BILLY (CONT'D)
Is that really it, girl?

Ann noses Billy's leg. It's over.

RAINIE

Ha! See? Your dogs ain't better
than anyone else's. The Ghost done
run oft, just like he always...

He continues monologuing, but Ann looks at the tree. Branches
droop toward the surrounding area, but none come close to the
ground. She looks higher and finally notices something nobody
else would during nighttime: a black electrical wire.

She follows the trail, curious. Billy notices.

BILLY

Wait a second...

The Pritchard boys gawk and follow Ann's trail.

The aged electrical wire goes up, up, up into the darkness.
It terminates in ancient telephone pole yards away, hidden in
a copse of saplings. Ann notices a hole above.

She BARKS once, with finality!

Old Dan goes crazy, howling with excitement. He hops over
Ann, licking her ears happily, then rushes around the pole.

RAINIE

No way...

Billy runs over to a sapling.

BILLY

I'm going up.

RUBIN

Stop, we'll just cut it down!
Billy, are you insane?!

She heads up the tree, then wades out onto a branch, level
with the telephone pole. She peeks into the crevice.

WHOOSH!

Billy nearly falls as the Ghost appears, right in front of
her! She catches a branch, watching the animal carefully.

It isn't a white, apocalyptic monster: it's an ACTUAL
RACCOON, silver with age! Billy stares at the remnant of a
world past: its beautiful, long whiskers, wizened mask, and
cloudy, sightless eyes. They appear to ask her for mercy.

BILLY

You're blind, you old thing...

Billy pauses and looks at the boys below. Rubin paces back and forth, wearing his fur hat. Rainie prepares his knife.

She looks back at the raccoon and makes her decision.

BILLY (CONT'D)
Stay right there.

Rubin and Rainie watch her descend, both shifting anxiously. The younger brother licks his lips, smiling with excitement.

RAINIE
So, how's it look?

BILLY
It's...it's not up there, the nest
is empty. My dogs were wrong.

A beat.

Rainie laughs his head off, but Rubin watches Billy intently.

RUBIN
You're lying, Colman. Are you
trying to protect that thing?

BILLY
I'm not protecting it.

RUBIN
Bullshit...it's really up there!

BILLY
IT'S. OLD!

The brothers are stunned for a moment.

RAINIE
What's going on, Rubin?

RUBIN
You're protecting the Ghost because
it's old, huh? That's it?

BILLY
Does it take food from you, Rubin?
Bother your dogs or chickens? It's
blind, it's too old to breed, and
it can't hurt anything, so just
leave the poor creature alone!

Rubin smiles.

RUBIN

Yeah, but it's got a pretty pelt, doesn't it? I wear that fur as my new hat and I'll be the talk of the town. People will notice me.

BILLY

I'm not cutting the tree down.

RUBIN

Who needs you?

He grabs the axe from her belt and pushes Billy over.

BILLY

Stop! I won't let my dogs kill it!

RUBIN

You're not leaving, and your dogs will chase anything that runs out a tree. They're just dumb hounds.

BILLY

Dan. Ann. Heel.

They sit immediately. She addresses them:

BILLY (CONT'D)

You're not going to kill that raccoon, alright? I forbid it.

Dan grumbles. Ann gives a small ruff: *absolutely*. Rubin watches the whole show with annoyance.

RUBIN

Fine. Go get Blue, Rainie!

RAINIE

Right!

He runs off into the forest. Billy tries walking to her dogs, but Rubin blocks her path. Dan and Ann GROWL at him.

RUBIN

Not you. You're staying here. I want you to see what happens when that old thing comes down.

BILLY

I don't want to be here! My dogs and I are leaving.

RUBIN

You're not getting your five dollars! You got the ghost raccoon, I'll give you that. But you're not getting anything if you leave now.

BILLY

You never planned to give me that five bucks. Keep it. I want my axe, I'm leaving!

He holds it away from her, stiff arming Billy.

RUBIN

Not before I cut off the Ghost raccoon's head with it.

They both hear a deep, feral growl, and the sound of a boy struggling. Rubin and Billy turn as Blue, the half-crazed Rottweiler, drags Rainie straight toward Dan.

Billy's radhounds prepare for a fight.

BILLY

Rubin, let us go!

Rubin looks at the three dogs. His face falls as he realizes what he set in motion.

RUBIN

Rainie, hold him! What are you-

RAINIE

I'm trying, Rubin, I-

The boy tries grabbing Blue by the scruff, but the dog turns and bites Rainie, badly. Rainie screams and drops the rope. Blue and Dan engage in a furious battle! Ann takes her calculated shots, tearing into Blue's exposed flank.

Growls and fighting resound. Rubin freezes, mortified.

RUBIN

Oh god, oh god-

Billy grabs him by the collar and locks her eyes with his, snapping him from his stupor.

BILLY

Rubin, listen to me. You're not a bad person, alright? We can stop this: get your dog back now!

(MORE)

BILLY (CONT'D)

I can get Dan to stand down if you
stop Blue, but otherwise my dogs'll
get hurt and yours will get KILLED!

Rubin hyperventilates. He flinches, too many thoughts for his
brain going off at once. He lands on:

RUBIN

N-not if I help Blue...

He flicks Billy's axe in his hand and turns to the dogs. She
rushes to stop him and they struggle, but Rainie tackles her
from behind. Billy swats Rainie away and grabs Rubin's leg-

BILLY

Stop, please!

Rubin falls, turning sideways, and the axe blade slides right
between his ribs, into his chest. He gasps loudly, one awful
time as the steel punctures his lung.

RAINIE

Rubin? RUBIN!

Billy stares as Rainie flips his brother over. The young
brother turns to her, now his only hope, and screams:

RAINIE (CONT'D)

Do something, Billy, please! He's
my brother, he's my brother! I
don't want him to die!

She rushes over to Rubin, her eyes watering. The dogs growl
in the background, adding more noise to her exploding mind.

BILLY

Quiet, stop it!

But the dogs fight on. With shaking hands, she touches
Rubin's stained chest. Holding his body still, she grabs her
axe handle and pulls the tool from him.

Blood cascades onto the dirt. Billy chokes on her own tongue
as the liquid coats her hand. She puts pressure on the wound.

BILLY (CONT'D)

No, no, no! I didn't mean to-!

But she already halved his remaining time. Rubin's eyes open
wide, staring with awful, captivating power. Rainie turns
slate gray, holding his brother's hand. Rubin cries, dying.

RUBIN

I wanted...to be seen.

Rainie melts as his brother's hand goes slack. He grab's Rubin's face, shaking him.

RAINIE

Rubin? Rubin? Wake up, Rubin. Don't go, Rubin, you can't! I'll get the raccoon, you can have the hat, anything! Just, don't...

Billy stands up, looking at the scene. When she does so, her dogs come around her on each side. Where they fought before, the crazed Rottweiler lays perfectly still.

Dan approaches Rubin's body. He licks the boy's face, clearing away the dirt respectfully.

Rainie gives a start as Ann puts her head on his shoulder. He looks deep into her intelligent eyes and finds surprising compassion there. He lets go of Rubin with one hand and touches her dark face. She licks his hand.

Rainie hugs Ann with both arms, weeping.

Billy watches nearby, stroking Dan's head sadly as Ann comforts Rainie. Tears run from her eyes and the axe slips from her hand, falling into the dirt.

EXT. CEMETARY - DAY

The entire Pritchard family gathers around a headstone. FATHER and MOTHER PRITCHARD stand on either side of Rainie, with a single priest in attendance.

Billy watches from a row of bushes on the edge of the property with her dogs beside her. She wears her Sunday best.

Mother Pritchard cries. Rainie watches the proceedings, dead in appearance. Mason Pritchard drinks from a flask, his eyes bloodshot. He goes back to the drink time and time again.

PREACHER

Though I walk through the valley of
the shadow of death, I shall fear-

Rainie looks up. He notices Billy, holding a bouquet of flowers. She freezes in fear, but doesn't hide. Rainie turns away as if she doesn't exist.

EXT. CEMETARY - LATER

The family leaves. When they're finally gone, Billy lays her flowers on top of the grave with items left by the others.

At the door of his house, Rainie turns around, but Billy already vanished into the forest, as quietly as a ghost.

INT. DESTROYED THEATER - DAY

Billy sits on stage, in the center cone of light, as snow falls around her in a swirling cone. She bows her head and tears drop onto the clear visor of her gas mask.

EXT. GRANDMA'S SHOP - DAY

SUPER: MONTHS LATER

California winter came. Tarps covers flower beds outside the house to ward off the nighttime chill. Mountains in the distance bear snow. Grandma's chimney puffs smoke.

INT. GRANDMA'S SHOP - DAY

A Sunday feast covers two round tables, pulled together and draped by a single tablecloth. Grandma closed up shop for the day and invited the Colman family to a special dinner.

The youngest girls dig in without reservation, but Billy takes it slowly, pensive. Grandma beams with far too much excitement, and Dad watches her carefully.

DAD

Alright, out with it.

GRANDMA

With what?

DAD

Whatever you want to say.

Grandma looks at them, unable to contain her enthusiasm.

GRANDMA

I got Billy into the competition!

DAD

What competition?

GRANDMA

The competition. The statewide raccoon hunting championship, it happens every year up North.

(MORE)

GRANDMA (CONT'D)

There will be dogs from all around, the very best hunters this side of the coast! No worry about the entrance fee, I already paid it in full.

SARAH

That's wonderful, Nanna.

ALICE

Billy will show 'em all up!

Dad checks Billy's reaction. She stares into her food.

DAD

Grandma, you shouldn't have done that without asking her.

GRANDMA

Oh, please. It's my choice whether to pay the fee or not. Just as it's Billy's decision whether she'll join or not! Billy, if you go, it may be the best thing you ever tried. Think of how much fun it'll be to compete against the best!

BILLY

I won't.

GRANDMA

Why not?

BILLY

I'll be honest, I didn't want to hunt any more after what happened with...with the Pritchards. But Dan and Ann deserve to hunt, so I accepted it for them. But I won't do anything for glory any more. It's just another bet.

Grandma flinches. Dad puts his hand on Billy's shoulder.

DAD

If that's your choice, we'll stand by you. You don't have to do anything you're not ready for-

Grandma stands up, knocking her chair to the ground! She has their full attention in an instant.

GRANDMA

That's it! Billy, what happened was a terrible mistake, and I accept my part in the blame. In fact, I'd gladly take all of it if that would get you to this competition. It isn't about glory or betting or even being the best. This is about you coming back from what I hope will be the hardest experience you ever have in your life. You spent your time down, but you're a strong girl, Billy, stronger than most and a good example to your little sisters as well. It's time you snapped out of this!

DAD

Grandma! That's about enough-

BILLY

No. She's right...
(shakes her head)
She's right.

DAD

Billy?

BILLY

I've been stuck in a loop. Every time I go out in the forest with my dogs and begin to enjoy myself, I remember what happened. I blame myself all over again and feel worse for letting myself forget... forget Rubin's death.

Billy looks up at them, their amazed faces. Dad's hand slowly hovers away from hers. Billy sets her palms on the table.

BILLY (CONT'D)

You're right, Grandma. I'll accept my part of the blame, shoulder it. But I won't let it break me. What happened to Rubin was an accident.

GRANDMA

That's right.

SARAH

So, you're going to the competition?

Billy mulls the question over. With effort:

BILLY

I...I am.

The family cheers and raises their cups. Dad specifically lifts his with an impressed, appreciative look to Grandma. Billy watches the others drink, takes her cup, and sips.

EXT. LANDREY AND REBECCA'S FARM - NIGHT

The City glows on the horizon. LANDREY and REBECCA, two women in their thirties, share beers while watching the City lights from the comfort of their porch, wrapped in coats.

REBECCA

I always liked the look of City's lights from here. So close, but nice and quiet. No hustle.

BOB (O.S.)

It's a great view, Rebecca.

They look at BOB, a mechanic. They smile. In the distance, OTHER TECHNICIANS wrap up work on harvesters, stored in barns amongst huge fields of winter wheat.

BOB (CONT'D)

The boys just wrapped up the last harvester, I wanted to ask: there anything else we can do, Landrey?

LANDREY

No, that's everything for now-

CRACK.

They spin to the house's DARK SIDE, away from the distant team. Bob looks between both directions, confused.

LANDREY (CONT'D)

Bob, one of your guys out there?

BOB

Shouldn't be. Omar? Dean?

He shrugs, but Rebecca JUMPS in fright.

REBECCA

Something moved!

LANDREY

Where? In the fields?

REBECCA

In our house.

They glance between each other, then to the dark windows, gaping feet away like portals to a realm of horror.

INT. HOUSE - NIGHT

Landrey leads them in, holding a flashlight. Bob following close behind with an industrial pitchfork and Rebecca trails, covering their backs while turning on the house lights.

Together, they move like a SWAT team, clearing rooms.

LANDREY

Listen, there's nothing here, we're a farm! Our "valuables" are being tuned up in the barns outside. We don't want any trouble.

They file into a back hallway to discover the rear door broken and lying on the ground, open to the swaying fields.

EXT. LANDREY AND REBECCA'S FARM - NIGHT

Bob and Landrey emerge. She turns the flashlight in an arc, angry. The expanse of farmland swallows her voice.

LANDREY

What the hell? What the hell?! Who does this? Where are you?!

BOB

Landrey, don't get angry, please-

LANDREY

No! This is just rude, alright? I can accept a thief, but who just does that to a door-

REBECCA

It's not a who.

They turn. The handle itself was torn through the door by something with claws. Large claws.

LANDREY

DEATHCALLER...

BOB

We have to tell my workers-

A protracted SCREAM reaches their ears! Bob sprints around the house toward his employees. He just passes the porch-

Something drags him to the ground and Bob YELLS!

It's Landrey, standing above, a hand Bob's mouth. She grabs his shirt and physically drags him into the house.

INT. HOUSE - NIGHT

Rebecca hurries them into an upper room as tears stream from Bob's eyes. They duck and cover underneath the windows. Landrey drags a telephone from the nightstand and dials with trembling fingers, out of breath.

LANDREY

Hello? Get me the City. Now! I need the Marshal, we have a deathcaller-

She pauses as Bob grips her arm with shaking hands.

Against the opposite wall, the creature frames itself in wan moonlight. As Landrey notices the sight, they become aware of a DEEP RUMBLING...something like a PURR.

The three huddle together like trapped rats.

A paw the size of a human head touches the glass, pushing against it until the window cracks. The survivors flinch.

When they open their eyes, the shadow disappeared. They look up at a well-formed paw print of blood on the window.

The deathcaller left its mark.

INT. BILLY'S HOUSE - DAY

Corinne, leader of the night's watch, slurps down a cup of coffee and smooths her hair back, strenuously. Dad and the girls gather around, enraptured.

CORINNE

The deathcaller hit Landrey and Rebecca's farm. It came in the night, killed a few mechanics, destroyed their equipment, and vanished. Best we can tell, it meant to sabotage the tools. It's planning to starve the City out.

DAD

That's terrible! Is there any way we can help? We only have the mule and one cow, but that might-

CORINNE

They'll be fine, it shouldn't take long to fix the equipment or jury-rig it for harvest. Meanwhile, a posse's coming together to hunt the deathcaller. But just in case it's targeting farms, I needed to make sure: do you have a gun to protect yourself with?

DAD

Shotgun. Double-barreled. It's reliable.

Corinne thinks, unsatisfied.

CORINNE

Well, it's a start. Just keep it close on hand at all times and be careful at night until the City's Marshal gives an all-clear.

BILLY

The Marshal?!

They look at her in surprise. Billy smiles.

BILLY (CONT'D)

He protect me and my dogs in the City! He'll find the deathcaller for sure. The Marshal's almost a radhound himself, I wouldn't be surprised if he sniffed out the creature on his own!

The adults laugh appreciatively, imagining the sight.

CORINNE

I'm sure he'll do a great job. Meantime, Billy, I want you to keep your hunting to the East of our settlement. No sense in going any farther west, alright?

BILLY

What about the hunting competition?

CORINNE

Oh, I had heard you'd joined! I don't see anything wrong with that. The competition grounds are just northeast of the City, but you'll have a full camp of veteran hunters close on hand. Just stay safe and be vigilant, especially at night.

DAD

Actually, this reminds me: the little ones will need a place to stay. Would you be able to...?

Corinne's eyes light up. She turns to the girls.

CORINNE

How about it, Sarah, Alice? Want to come to Auntie Corinne's house for a sleepover? You can stay with Matilda, in her room.

SARAH

You really mean it, Dad?

DAD

I sure do.

ALICE

Yes, yes! We're having a sleepover!

The girls board the hype train as Corinne rises. She shakes Dad's hand, then Billy's.

CORINNE

They'll be as safe as can be in the settlement, Wilson, count on that.

(to Billy)

I'm glad you decided to enter the championship, Billy, I think we can expect great things from you. I'll be praying for your safe return.

EXT. LANDREY AND REBECCA'S FARM - DAY

The Marshal shifts uncomfortably outside the barn with Landrey, gathering his wits.

MARSHAL

Alright. Open her up.

Landrey pulls the door like a mortician.

INT. BARN - DAY

They block their noses against the smell. Marshal grimaces, but pushes toward a body that's been slashed to the bone.

MARSHAL

Wasteful. It's a deathcaller
alright. Some of these weren't
consumed at all.

He notices a trail of blood going up a ladder. Dutifully, he grabs the lowest rung and pulls himself up.

At the top, by a winch, a body leans halfway out the window. It seems almost alive and peaceful, unharmed except for a small cut on the arm.

Marshal turns it over and finds tooth marks on the neck.

MARSHAL (CONT'D)

Snapped his spine like a cat
killing a mouse. It's big, even for
one of them.

He notices movement in the field: the POSSE! He makes sure he's alone for one moment, and takes a huge, shaky breath.

EXT. LANDREY AND REBECCA'S FARM - DAY

Landrey and the Marshal emerge as a group of hunters appear, led by SAM WILLIS, an expert hunter, and his three radhounds. One approaches the Marshal, who backs up a step; the creature stands to his stomach! A full-sized radhound.

Still, their prey would stand to his shoulders...

SAM WILLIS

Landrey.

LANDREY

Sam Willis! Glad to have you here,
it's been too long.

SAM WILLIS

I'd let it be longer if we could
have those mechanics back. Best I
can do now is bring in that
creature's body.

LANDREY

I'm sure you will.

MARSHAL

Sam, the scent's bound to be inside somewhere. You're sure you can-?

SAM WILLIS

My dogs will find the scent, but even I admit there's only a fifty-fifty chance of catching the deathcaller. If the thing doesn't get to us first.

Marshal looks back to the other hunters. They're nervous. Some grasp their reins with white knuckles. Others fondle rifles and firearms like lifelines. The Marshal approaches.

MARSHAL

It found us.

He has their attention. Pep talk time.

MARSHAL (CONT'D)

Deathcallers are smart animals, they know we need harvesters for food. It destroyed the equipment to starve us, the City. Our homes and families will fall under attack next. We're in lockdown.

He hefts his revolver, spins the chamber around.

MARSHAL (CONT'D)

But frankly, I'm not going to wait around, it'll just get smarter the more it knows about us. But if we can track it down during daylight, we can take the advantage back. No matter how fast it moves or how strong it is, bullets will still tear through its body and dogs can still rip into its hide. Let's kill ourselves a deathcaller.

The posse cheers gruffly as the dogs are loosed inside, sniffing around. Marshal turns to Landrey.

MARSHAL (CONT'D)

As for you, Landrey, you and Rebecca should head back to the City for the time being.

LANDREY

Not going to happen. Rebecca and I live and die on this farm, we've made no bones about that...in a manner of speaking.

MARSHAL

You can't do anything here anymore.

LANDREY

Please, there's everything to do! We have to message the families of those mechanics, we can start repairing the farmhouse-

MARSHAL

A deathcaller knows where you are! You'd be hard pressed to stop the thing while holding a gun.

She sighs.

LANDREY

You're right, but we're staying.

MARSHAL

Fine. In that case, you're getting four armed guards every night.

(stopping her)

That's not a question. You need to be safe, alright? Just let us do this for you.

LANDREY

Alright, Marshal. If you insist.

Marshal grins and gives her a bear hug, which she returns. The first dogs emerge from the barn.

MARSHAL

Be careful, alright?

LANDREY

Same to you.

Marshal swings onto his horse as the dogs bark, leaving the barn in different directions! Without hesitation, Marshal follows the sound of the raddhounds.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - DAY

Billy, Dad, and Grandma roll up. They take in the sights.

Hunters sit around fires together, prop up tents in large clusters, groom their dogs, and shoot the shit. Not a single team of dogs lacks at least one radhound. Billy shifts uncomfortably, nervous before the show.

BILLY

I've never seen so many radhounds in one place.

GRANDMA

If you don't come back to the hunting competition, you never will again. I'd say half of the state's radhound population is right here in this clearing.

BILLY

That has to be an exaggeration-

She spots a trio of radhounds sitting together, packed so close they look indistinguishable from the great Cerberus.

EXT. MAIN STAGE - DAY

One sign-in table commands the platform. A wise, aged man, STORM, welcomes them with open arms.

STORM

Hello there, friends! Judging by those fine hounds, you aren't here to spectate. And the hunter is...

He looks from Dad, hovers on Grandma, and settles on Billy. Points at her, raises an eyebrow. They shake hands.

BILLY

That's me, Billy Colman. Grandma signed the paperwork and paid the fee, though.

STORM

Which mean's Dad is supporting this time! Good man.

He greets Grandma and Dad in turn.

STORM (CONT'D)

My name's Storm, the head judge and master of ceremony. The competition works like this: there are three nights of hunting, first two are the qualifying rounds.

(MORE)

STORM (CONT'D)

The top hunters from the first nights go on to the Championship round on the final night. Billy, your qualifying match is the... second night. They'll go over this again soon, but now you know!

BILLY

Thank you, Storm.

STORM

My pleasure! Feel free to set up anywhere for the time being. You can mingle or join one of the small competitions while you wait.

DAD

I think I saw the perfect spot still open-

They turn to leave and Storm remembers-

STORM

Oh, I forgot! There's a little something else: the main prize.

Billy turns. In the cart, Ann and Dan's ears perk up.

STORM (CONT'D)

There are trophies for each of the champions, but we ask every hunter put in two dollars for the winner's pot. It's our little tradition.

GRANDMA

I've got you, Billy-

BILLY

No.

Grandma stops in her tracks. Dad raises an eyebrow and Storm tries to hold back a smile as Billy fishes money from her pocket. She hands two dollars over.

BILLY (CONT'D)

They're my dogs. I let you pay the entrance fee because you were helping me out, but I want to have skin in this game. It'll show Dan and Ann that I'm serious.

Storm looks at the dogs while accepting the cash. Sure enough, Dan and Ann watch intently. His smile escapes.

STORM

Miss Billy Colman, I look forward
to seeing how you perform.

Billy nods and they depart.

EXT. APOCALYPTIC WASTELAND - EVENING

Marshal rides his horse, overlooking a valley as the setting
sun drops lower. Sam Willis pulls up next to him.

SAM WILLIS

Marshal-

MARSHAL

Yeah, I know it's time. Call the
boys back in.

Sam brings out a flare gun and fires into the sky. It gets
answered by a few others, but-

MARSHAL (CONT'D)

Six? One more...

A horse approaches at top speed through the valley, the rider
listing from the saddle. Sam and the Marshal both groan in
awful anticipation.

The horse starts up the hill and the rider falls like a sack.
The horse breaks away, shrieking into the starved wasteland.

MARSHAL (CONT'D)

Heinz! Heinz, come on!

He jumps from his horse and checks the man. Heinz has no jaw.

SAM WILLIS

God.

MARSHAL

It did this on purpose. Must've
killed his dogs before he showed
up, then made sure he couldn't call
for help. It probably let him keep
riding so we'd find the body.

SAM WILLIS

We've gotta get him back.

MARSHAL

We will. But we need to ride full speed for the City, anybody out here after dark is fair game for the deathcaller. And...somebody has to tell Kennedy about her husband.

Sam Willis looks at the Marshal, who clearly means himself.

SAM WILLIS

I've got it covered. You just go back and rest up. We can take care of everything, alright?

Marshal nods thankfully as he wraps Heinz's jaw with a handkerchief and hoists the body.

EXT. CITY - NIGHT

The lights shine full-tilt, making the surrounding countryside glow bright as day. Guards on the wall scour the landscape carefully, guns ready to destroy anything that moves. At the moment, all is quiet.

Marshal patrols the walls. The Gatekeeper stands nearby.

GATEKEEPER

Don't expect we'll see anything tonight. No deathcaller would come into that light. If it did, we would have it down in a minute. Nothing can reach us.

MARSHAL

But it's out there. It's making a plan, moving against us.

GATEKEEPER

It just showed up to the City. It just attacked Landrey and Rebecca's farm. There's nothing it can do so soon after it found us.

Marshal shakes his head.

MARSHAL

That's what scares me. Something tells me the deathcaller found us long before it let us know.

GATEKEEPER

Dumb beast. Should've planned better.

MARSHAL

Don't underestimate it. These creatures aren't known to do the same for humans. It knows exactly what we're capable of and will attack us accordingly.

The gatekeeper pulls his hat over his eyes and throws his legs up over the wall's edge.

GATEKEEPER

The City will be intact tomorrow, the day after, and the day after that. Just make sure to find the damned thing before it gets any ideas. And get some sleep!

Marshal sighs, rubs his eyes, and starts down the steps. He stops and turns back, trying to see beyond the City's lights.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - MORNING

Billy stands in a group of hunters around the main stage as people gather for the first night's lineup. Some men hold up one, two, three raccoons. Billy grits her teeth.

DAD

There's no need to worry, Billy. You just have to get three raccoons in one night to be sure. That can't be too hard, right?

BILLY

I've done it before.

DAD

How often?

BILLY

Twice.

She turns around and walks to her dogs. Leans down to them.

BILLY (CONT'D)

Ann, Dan. Look, they've got a lot of raccoons up there, huh? This area's an infestation site, you're going to have more chances than ever to catch these things, so I'm asking you to get three raccoons or more. Can you do that for me?

Ann nods. Dan ruffs and licks her face. Nearby, a few hunters shift in concern, seeing the radhound bringing its deadly mouth so close to a child. Billy just smiles.

BILLY (CONT'D)
There's my dogs.

EXT. APOCALYPTIC WASTELAND - EVENING

Marshal watches another dying sun and grits his teeth. He loads another flare and fires it into the sky, watching it followed by responses, counting each one...

The number stops short of full. He flicks the reins angrily.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - NIGHT

A line of hunters and their dogs gather for the night. Dad slings his shotgun over his shoulder, Grandma pulls a scarf tight, and Billy says a quick prayer with her dogs.

It's time: Storm fires the starting gun.

Dogs rush into the forest, with Dan and Ann leading the pack and Billy chasing after.

EXT. CITY INTERIOR - NIGHT

Guards patrol through the streets, a number of them looking increasingly tired. Two pass a small, derelict patch of grass. As they do, one part caves in!

Inside the hole, the deathcaller's eyes appear.

EXT. APOCALYPTIC FOREST - NIGHT

Dan and Ann bark into a tree. Dad loads his shotgun and blows a branch to smithereens. A raccoon falls out and Dan catches it in the shallows of a river. He brings the catch to Billy and they rush on to their next prey.

EXT. CITY - NIGHT

The Marshal, sleeping on the wall, BOLTS upright as the lights FLICKER simultaneously. Even the gatekeeper rises to his feet, mouth agape.

The flickers give way to darkness.

After a horrible moment, lights appear in the buildings and houses. Marshal, illuminated by many glowing windows, sprints toward the main generator's building.

INT. GENERATOR ROOM - NIGHT

Marshal skids inside, gun at the ready, and discovers a massacre. One body lies nearby, wearing a name tag that says "LUCAS". Nearby, a trail of blood meanders out the back. Marshal whistles for backup and follows the clues.

EXT. CITY - NIGHT

The deathcaller's tunnel gapes hungrily, blood leads inside. Marshal startles terribly as someone touches his shoulder. It's Sam Willis, holding a flashlight.

The Marshal puts a finger to his lips and points inside.

Sam sighs, bad feelings creeping in. He points the flashlight inside as Marshal leans over and drops down.

EXT. APOCALYPTIC FOREST - NIGHT

A raccoon beelines for a tree. It gets halfway up the trunk when a dark blur rips it into the bushes.

Dan runs into the clearing as Ann steps out, the raccoon in her jaws. He stops in surprise, then licks her ear in congratulations. Billy takes the prize.

BILLY

One more!

The dogs howl and rush into the forest!

INT. DEATHCALLER BURROW - NIGHT

Marshal and Sam crouch, prepared for an ambush. Marshal aims his revolver down the one-way tunnel, fully expecting the deathcaller to be hiding around every bend.

They turn a corner and discover the lair: a partially-dug, partially-natural cave. A nest, looking something like an altar, sits in the corner.

Marshal and Sam examine a collection of items from killed hunters, their dogs, and City dwellers lost in the night's attack. The bully Mason's jacket lies on top.

They sweep their light through the cold tunnels, but find everything empty. Only trophies of death remain.

Tonight, they lost.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - MORNING

Light appears on the horizon as hunters line up, showing their prizes. At the very end, Billy lifts her arms, showing three pelts. Storm gives her a championship round medal.

Tonight, they won.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - DAY

Things are quiet now. The sun shines bright yet cold, and clouds gather in the distant sky.

INT. COLMAN TENT - DAY

Billy lies in bed, trying to get some rest before the big event. Her eyes fix on the tent canvas above and her mind wanders in thought. She watches the sun, visible through fabric. Dad enters and sits down on his cot.

DAD

Billy, there's something I've been meaning to ask you, but I wanted to wait until I was sure...

She turns to him without asking.

DAD (CONT'D)

You, uh, you realize you have a good chance of winning, right?

BILLY

I'm going to.

Dad laughs, a little nervous.

DAD

A little over one hundred and fifty hunters joined this competition, so you're looking at three hundred dollars in prize money, Billy. I'm wondering: how do you plan to spend all that? It's a small fortune!

BILLY

First, maybe a nicer home for the dogs. They earned it. After that, I thought we could finally use that extra mule and some help on the farm, maybe equipment. I know the girls would love a chicken coop! They've been wanting their own pets for a while now. How about a cat-

DAD

You do realize that's enough to move us into the City, right?

She eyes him like a hawk. He shifts.

BILLY

I won't use my money for that.

Dad tries to find the right words.

DAD

It's what your mother always wanted for you girls. To move to the City and have a good education, live a real life. That's where things happen, where-

BILLY

We belong on the farm, where we can help and give back. There's nothing wrong with life there.

DAD

You're smart and young, you have so much potential to do more! I'd hate to see you waste it and become a farmer, or a silly hunter-

Billy's mouth falls wide open.

DAD (CONT'D)

No, I didn't mean that-

BILLY

I don't care what the City has to offer, the farm is our home! I'm going to win the competition and we're going to stay right where we are. It's my money-

DAD

And you're our daughter!
(he stands, shaking)

(MORE)

DAD (CONT'D)

I promised your mom I'd take care of you all. I'm your dad, Billy, I'd never force you to do anything that wasn't in your best interest.

BILLY

I think I can decide what's in my best interest now.

Dad looks her in the eye, resolute.

DAD

Not yet.

He turns out of the tent, leaving Billy alone.

She lies back for a moment, then YELLS. She rises to her knees and punches the bed as hard as she can.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - DAY

Dad hears her outside. He grits his teeth and walks away.

EXT. APOCALYPTIC WASTELAND - EVENING

A large storm rolls across the sky. The first flurries of a snow storm begin to fall, like ashes in the fading light.

The Marshal rides his horse like thunder across the wasteland, eyes trained on a dog ahead. He barely pulls up in time as another rider, INDIE, shows up ahead.

INDIE

Marshal, we have to go!

MARSHAL

Out of my way!

Sam catches up.

SAM WILLIS

He's right, Marshal. Time's up. Time was up a while ago.

MARSHAL

We have to find the thing, dammit!

INDIE

Sir, we're going to die out here or it's going to attack the City when the storm hits and we're away. We have to get back, you hear?

Marshal looks at the storm with helpless fury.

MARSHAL

It knew. I don't know how, but the deathcaller knew. It timed all this for when the storm would hit.

Sam Willis nods.

SAM WILLIS

I know. It's time.

The Marshal lifts his flare gun for the third and final time. He pulls the trigger, hating himself, and watches the signal go up. He doesn't even count the responses, just turns and heads back to the City.

They ride with the storm on their tails.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - NIGHT

Billy and the two other champions stand at the ready as Storm addresses the crowd with an exciting introduction.

STORM

Vying for his fourth championship win, we have Harold Niebolt! Facing him after a loss two years ago, we have Dominique Passel! And finally, appearing for the first time ever, please welcome Billy Colman!

The audience claps their support. HAROLD scoffs at Billy, but DOMINIQUE shakes her hand and wishes her good luck.

Storm raises the pistol. Billy looks at Dad, then away.

STORM (CONT'D)

The championship round begins...now!

He fires. Billy and her dogs launch like rockets. As she goes, Storm approaches Dad and Grandma, firmly clipping a walkie-talkie to his belt.

STORM (CONT'D)

The other hunters will go further North, the lands there have been hunted least.

GRANDMA

Thank you, Storm.

STORM

Also, as it is the final match, a judge will shadow each contestant. I will be going with you.

Grandma shakes his hand.

GRANDMA

Welcome aboard! We better get after them, those younglings are pretty damn fast.

STORM

I'm sure they are.

Together, the group moves off into the forest after Billy. Storm looks at Dad, whose eyes are on the sky. He frowns, following the look, and feeling the air.

STORM (CONT'D)

It's going to snow soon.

EXT. CITY - NIGHT

Able-bodied fighters line the walls, men and woman ready with every weapon imaginable. As the snow begins falling harder, a number of them shuffle down the steps to warm fires nearby. Marshal addresses them from above:

MARSHAL

Remember! Last night we were under siege. Tonight, it's war. Be prepared and don't wander off on your own. Pass the word around!

And so it goes.

EXT. APOCALYPTIC FOREST - NIGHT

Billy hoists her first raccoon pelt as the dogs run off on the next trail. She looks up at the first lazy snowflakes.

DAD

Looking pretty bad, Billy.

BILLY

That's only the first raccoon of the night, we have to keep going.

DAD

I'm sure everyone else is on their first as well, probably still-

Storm holds his crackling radio, looks to them.

STORM

Unfortunately, that is not the case. Niebolt's already searching for his third raccoon.

BILLY

Already?!

STORM

Found the first one by luck as they left camp, I don't know how. He got his second soon after and probably could've had four tonight, if it weren't for this storm. Still, knowing him, he's almost guaranteed to land a third before heading in.

BILLY

Then we're going to match him.

DAD

You only have one right now.

Billy only turns away from her father in anger, more resolute than before. Dad addresses Grandma and Storm.

DAD (CONT'D)

In that case, you two go back. I'll follow Billy myself.

GRANDMA

I'm not leaving, not a chance.

STORM

Then I'll follow.

A silent moment passes, then the dogs HOWL! Billy turns in an instant and runs off, nearly disappearing into the snow. The others call, rushing in pursuit.

EXT. CITY - NIGHT

The world became a dark swirling of wind. The people on the wall wait in silence for something to happen.

A SCREAM rises, somewhere in the night.

Marshal turns to the sound immediately and runs along the walkway. He ends up at a guard post, where a man backs away from the edge, looking at a body in the snow.

MARSHAL

What happened?!

GUARD

It jumped up and dragged grabbed
Nicholson down, quick as lightning
out of nowhere!

Marshal turns to the others, along the wall.

MARSHAL

It's below us, over the edge! Don't
let it jump up, you hear me?! Aim
down or stay away from the wall-!

Another SCREAM, then another, up and down the wall! Marshal
straddles the edge and points his revolver at the ground
below, hardly visible through the falling snow.

MARSHAL (CONT'D)

C'mon, you-

A huge, dark streak rises over the battlements nearby and
jumps into the City. Marshal fires off three times before
it's gone. He blinks in surprise, hands shaking.

The gatekeeper watched the whole thing.

GATEKEEPER

I saw it. I saw it! How does
something that big move that fast?!

MARSHAL

No time for that, it got in! Tell
everyone to form groups and search
through the City, back to back with
flashlights. Anybody who shoots a
friendly will answer to me!

GATEKEEPER

I'll tell them.

He rushes off. Marshal pauses and discovers a blood splatter
from the deathcaller! He smiles bitterly.

MARSHAL

Well, it bleeds.

Marshal reloads his revolver with practiced fingers. The
empty cartridges fall on the snowy ground, melting the ice.

EXT. APOCALYPTIC FOREST - NIGHT

Billy stumbles into a clearing, where her dogs have surrounded a large, hollow tree. She drags her axe out and pauses for a moment, somewhat unnerved by the blade...

She squares up and hacks at the stump. Under her blows, the ancient and brittle wood comes apart like tissue paper.

THREE RACCOONS spring out!

Dan and Ann each take one, but the other runs off through the night! Her dogs bring the first pelts and rush off in pursuit as Billy whoops. Dad and Storm appear, calling.

STORM

Billy, the storm is too bad! It would be wise to return now-

BILLY

They did it! Dan and Ann found three raccoons in one log, they must've been hiding together for warmth. We can get four!

She holds up her catch. Dad shakes his head.

DAD

The storm is too bad!

BILLY

(exploding)
I'm not leaving, my dogs went after the last raccoon! You don't get to decide when I quit, it's my-
(pauses, horrified)
Where's Grandma?

The men turn around, surprised to find Grandma hasn't followed them into the clearing.

DAD

Oh no.

STORM

She must've gotten lost. We would've walked right past you unless you had called out!

Billy runs after her dogs. Dad catches her, angry now.

DAD

What are you doing?! Your grandma is missing, Billy! Don't you care?

She drags her arm away.

BILLY

Storm said it: we could walk past someone and never realize it in the snow. We might need the dogs, they'll help us find her!

STORM

She's right.

Dad looks at the two of them. He nods.

DAD

Then let's find Dan and Ann.

EXT. CITY STREETS - NIGHT

Marshal follows a trail of blood droplets in the snow. He enters a building through a broken door.

INT. OLD HOTEL - NIGHT

He runs through, finding scenes of carnage, and coughs when the smell hits his nose. Past scattered bodies, on the other side of the lobby, he discovers fresh paw prints.

EXT. CITY STREETS - NIGHT

The trail continues, moving right down a boulevard. A group of guards practically walk across the markings.

MARSHAL

Hey, you! Have you seen anything?!

They shake their heads. INGRID answers:

INGRID

Nothing's come by here, sir!

Marshal grits his teeth and looks at the trail, so close by! He braves past them, disappears into the storm.

On a balcony, the deathcaller watches him go.

EXT. APOCALYPTIC FOREST - NIGHT

Billy approaches a tree. Through the snow, her dogs move in circles, patrolling. Billy whistles and they approach.

BILLY

Come on, we're leaving. Now. You have to find Grandma.

She holds out Grandma's comb. They sniff it.

BILLY (CONT'D)

Please, she's lost! You have to give up on the tree, this is more important than the competition!

Ann steps forward. Dan returns to the tree.

BILLY (CONT'D)

Both of you! We can't stay here and build a fire, you're going to die in this storm!

(Dan sits)

Dan, why?!

Dan barks, looking at the other pelts they've caught.

BILLY (CONT'D)

I don't care about that! We already have three raccoons, we've tied!

Ann begins to leave. Dad puts a hand on Billy's shoulder.

DAD

We have to go. Every moment we leave Grandma out there, she's more likely to get hurt, or worse.

BILLY

Dan...stay safe, boy.

Dan barks goodbye as they leave.

EXT. CITY STREETS - NIGHT

A group of guards lie on the ground. Marshal searches for a trail, but the deathcaller's prints go straight toward the bodies and end outside a large building.

MARSHAL

No, this can't be.

Someone opens the hatch on a fortified, powered door.

VOICE

It's the Marshal, open it!

MARSHAL

NO, WAIT!

Too late: the heavy door grinds slowly open and he finds himself face to face with citizens, huddled together in fear. He scans their ranks, making sure everyone looks okay. The cigar shop owner comes forward.

STORE OWNER

Everything okay out there, Marshal?

MARSHAL

Yes, fine! Get back in NOW!

THUMP. A huge shape jumps down from high above, landing behind the Marshal. Adults freeze and children scream before their mouths are covered by others.

The Beast turns, revealing itself in full: a shoulder-high bundle of rippling muscles, claws and teeth. Fast and deadly, a serrated pattern of gray fur behind scorching eyes.

MARSHAL (CONT'D)

Shut the door.

STORE OWNER

If we move, we're dead-

MARSHAL

Shut. It. Now.

The store owner reaches for the button.

Marshal's hand moves over his revolver. He stands like a western gunslinger, coat rustling in the wind.

The store owner SLAMS the button down.

The deathcaller roars its infamous scream and rushes forward. Marshal runs toward his fate, firing until the monster barrels into him, fore claws first.

He's pushed through the mud under its feet.

When they come to a stop, the deathcaller tries to enter the slowly moving door but its foot won't move! The Marshal holds on with a dead man's grip!

It puts its full weight onto his chest and he screams. It brings its large teeth inches from his face. Marshal yells, draws a combat knife, and shoves it into the monster's belly! It stumbles back and ROARS in pain!

Inside the safe room, people watch in horror as the creature sets its jaws around the Marshal's neck. The doors shut.

EXT. APOCALYPTIC FOREST - NIGHT

Grandma sits against a tree, grimacing at a sprained ankle, a trail of frozen blood on her forehead. Her breath comes slow and shallow, her frozen eyelashes nearly bound together. Her breath flutters for a moment and she looks to the sky...

Ann appears and licks her face as a lantern bobs through the white trees, held by Billy. Grandma passes out.

EXT. OVERCROPPING - NIGHT

Grandma lays by the fire, Storm rests. Billy and Dad sit up, watching the dancing flames in somber silence.

BILLY

I did this.

DAD

Well...we both did.

BILLY

It-it was my fault, I wanted to keep hunting and should've known this could happen. We left her.

DAD

And it was my fault for letting her to fall behind without noticing.

BILLY

I should've let you bring me back. I shouldn't have fought when Storm said it was time to leave.

DAD

Now, that one is on me too. You're growing, Billy. You're becoming an adult and I should have recognized that and given the help you needed, but I pushed you. It's only natural you pushed back. And now...

They look at Grandma. Odds of death? Fifty-fifty.

EXT. APOCALYPTIC FOREST - MORNING

The clouds passed. The sun emerged, turning the icy world into a bright, calm wonderland.

EXT. OVERCROPPING - MORNING

Billy wakes to someone shaking her. When she comes to, Grandma stands by her side with a winning smile!

BILLY

Grandma!

They hug tightly.

BILLY (CONT'D)

I wasn't sure you were going to be alright.

GRANDMA

Well, it was a bit hairy there for a while, but after that it was all just a little cold. You know what us old timers say: what doesn't kill you makes for a great nap.

BILLY

Nobody says that.

GRANDMA

No. No they don't.

They laugh and fall silent. Billy notices Dad, who's been waiting nearby, sad. He drops the bad news:

DAD

We need to go find them, Billy. We need to find your dogs.

Biting the side of her lip anxiously, Billy nods.

EXT. CITY STREETS - MORNING

The fortified door opens and the citizens step into the snow. Our cigar store owner bumps into something under a drift. Scared, she wipes away the top layer of ice. Sure enough, Marshal lies there, his wounds frozen.

Others gather around to mourn their protector.

EXT. APOCALYPTIC FOREST - MORNING

Billy and Dad enter the clearing with various levels of surprise and delight: Dan and Ann created a circular trench, all the way down to the dirt! They never stopped moving the entire night to stay warm. Billy's heart soars.

DAD

They kept moving to stay warm!

BILLY

There's my dogs.

She sizes up the tree, drops her other three pelts, and removes the axe from her belt.

EXT. CITY - DAY

A growing caravan of people leave. The gatekeeper watches at his post, forlorn, as the citizens evacuate.

Sam Willis approaches with a cart, his entire family sitting in the back. The gatekeeper catches his eye and Sam walks over to hug the old man goodbye.

When they part, the gatekeeper hands him Marshal's badge.

SAM WILLIS

No, I couldn't. This is his. It should stay here with the Marshal.

GATEKEEPER

There won't be another Marshal, Sam. Not for this town.

Sam Willis fights a hollow despair. He wraps his fingers around the badge, returns to his cart, and moves on.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - DAY

Billy holds up four raccoon pelts, to great applause. Even Harold Niebolt claps for the toughest hunter he's ever seen.

Storm ceremonially hands Billy a golden trophy, filled with cash from the winner's pot. She lifts it above her head and the applause grows even louder. Dan and Ann howl.

Billy makes eye contact with Dad, looks at the money in her cup, pointedly. She nods, smiling. He releases a deep sigh.

A MESSENGER on horseback shatters the jubilee.

MESSENGER

The City has fallen!

The crowd goes dead silent.

STORM

This isn't the time, friend, we're honoring the accomplishment of-

MESSENGER

The City has fallen to the deathcaller!

Billy looks to Dad, who returns a blank, empty stare. Harold steps forward, pushes through the crowd.

HAROLD

What happened?!

MESSENGER

A day ago the creature destroyed the City's lights. Last night, it used the storm as cover for a full-scale attack. Fourteen people are dead, including the Marshal.

The news hits Billy like a freight train. She reels.

MESSENGER (CONT'D)

People are leaving town now. If you have family there, you should return quickly. If you're from a nearby town, you should go too: the creature may follow the refugees!

HAROLD

What about my wife, my kids? Don, have you heard anything from-

His questions spark a firestorm of queries. People crowd around the messenger, vying for his attention like zombies around a wounded survivor. In the chaos, Dad rushes toward Billy but gets pushed to and fro by the mob.

DAD

Billy? Where are you, Billy?!

He reaches the stage. The golden cup and its money stand on the edge, abandoned. Dad yells, but his voice can't be heard.

EXT. FOREST HILL - DAY

Billy leans against a tree above the camp. She turns back, her breath heavy, and watches raw desperation the in once-proud hunters. She clenches her jaw, angry!

Dan and Ann come under her arms in support.

Billy turns west. From her vantage point, she spots the City miles away, with a line of people vacating. Her heart fills with determination.

BILLY

Ann, Dan. I need you to find a scent. Remember the deathcaller you saw when you were just puppies?

Dan and Ann BOTH GROWL, a somewhat terrifying sound. Billy turns toward the City with trembling fury.

BILLY (CONT'D)

Kill it.

They rush off into the forest.

EXT. APOCALYPTIC WASTELAND - DAY

The sun peers through red clouds, creating a bloody day as Billy follows her dogs on their quest. Despite the exertion, her breath now comes evenly, her eyes take in everything.

Dan barks. Billy turns to the sound like a hawk.

She enters the clearing where Dan roars his head off. Ann roots around patiently, finding the most recent trail as she did with the Ghost. She barks and runs off with Dan.

BILLY

Atta girl!

EXT. CLIFFSIDE - DAY

They reach a chasm, far too wide for a human to cross. Billy's air purity tester beeps dangerously and she dons her mask, judging the distance. There are claw marks...

BILLY

It jumped over!

She looks to a fallen log nearby, crossing the divide.

Billy beelines toward it, dogs by her side. They watch as she rises onto the torn roots, and measures the drop. Glowferns and death wait below. Billy crosses fearlessly.

Dan and Ann follow. They sniff around the scratch-marks where the deathcaller climbed up the other side. In a moment, they're back on the trail!

Billy looks ahead. The City nears, closer than the campsite.

EXT. HILLSIDE - DAY

Dan sends up the final howl: the deathcaller is trapped! Billy runs full-tilt to a large cavern entrance, partially carved into the dirt by a deathcaller's paws.

Billy hesitates, sensing something amiss. Dan waits just inside the cave entrance, ready to storm the burrow.

Ann acts strangely, turning in circles, looking around. She chirps anxiously. Billy looks all around, and then UP, at the large rocks perched over the entrance. Her eyes widen.

BILLY

Dan, get back here, NOW! It's a trap!

Hidden, the deathcaller ROARS!

Dan leaps to safety as tons of boulders and dirt cascade down, burying the cavern entrance. The monster itself stands above them, feet resting on a leftover stone.

The deathcaller rushes off, up the hill.

BILLY (CONT'D)

Don't let it get out of sight!

Dan and Ann fly up the nearest bank and scabble to the top while Billy follows. Halfway there, Billy pauses in realization and looks up into the sky.

The sun shines, bright as ever!

BILLY (CONT'D)

Deathcallers are supposed to be afraid of light! If one's coming out during the day...

She whips out her axe and checks the edge. Finding it to her satisfaction, Billy rams it back on her belt and pushes against the incline even faster, watching her dogs.

EXT. HILL - DAY

The deathcaller disappeared. Dan and Ann rush down the incline, but Billy pauses by a tree at the top, scanning around in confusion. After a moment, Ann looks back.

A chill of realization hits Billy's spine. She glances up.

The deathcaller lies in wait above her, a perched mass of killer instinct. Billy glances toward her dogs, then back to the creature. Dan and Ann can't help her now!

She draws her axe silently as the deathcaller's rumbling purr rises to a crescendo. Billy holds out her arms.

She YELLS, and her shout sounds like the Marshal's!

The deathcaller flinches mid-pounce and loses its footing. Instead of tearing Billy to shreds, it catches itself lithely on the next branch down and YOWLS in pain as its wounds from the night before reopen. It searches for its victim!

Billy already vanished...

BILLY

Dan, Ann, to me!

They form up. The deathcaller leaps from the tree and stands upon a ledge, murderous.

Below, Billy and her dogs prepare for the end. With axe in hand and two radhounds at her side, Billy herself appears like a god of death.

Dan and Ann howl their ultimatum. The deathcaller roars.

BILLY (CONT'D)

Bad choice.

She leads the charge.

The monster pounces. Billy slides underneath the bristling paws and swings blindly. The creature shrieks as it lands on a now lacerated paw! It turns to gut the child, but Billy's dogs launch onto its back.

Billy circles carefully, but the deathcaller almost tears into Billy by pure accident! She looks for an opening.

Ann falls to the dirt but darts back in to rip mercilessly into the creature's exposed flank. It succeeds in throwing Dan aside as it's back leg caves in! Angry, it kicks Ann into a rock with the other foot.

It's turned! Billy slashes at the monster's neck, but it dodges in the nick of time. The enraged girl keeps at it, the creature's painful snarl grows with every dodged swing until-

The axe misses and hits a rock. One head breaks away!

BILLY (CONT'D)

OH NO.

The monster stares her down, prowling forward. Billy retreats, nothing between her and death but-

Dan and Ann materialize like magic! They jump right into the creatures pounce, stopping its attack in midair. When they come to the ground, Dan sank his teeth into its neck! Ann falls away but quickly bites into the good leg.

The worst happens: unable to get Dan with its teeth, the deathcaller shreds his stomach with its front paws. Dan can't even wail, he keeps holding on.

BILLY (CONT'D)

DAN, NO!!!

Time slows for Billy. Ann holds the back legs, the front deal with Dan. In the middle, the deathcaller exposes the terrible knife wound that Marshal created.

Billy rushes forward, but gets slashed once across her left arm by the flailing claws, opposite from the radhound scar she received as a child!

Crying in pain and anguish, Billy pushes forward, her axe above the wound, and strikes down with all her might!

The deathcaller finally removes Dan and rips Anne's ear clean off. The trio backs away as their prey limps around, glaring at each enemy in turn. It takes a few final steps toward Billy, then falls at her feet. Dead at last.

THEY WON.

Billy gasps for air and pets Ann's head, careless of grime.

BILLY (CONT'D)

Good Ann, good...

She spots Dan, leaning underneath a tree where they began fighting. He's barely moving. All else forgotten, Billy runs over and cups his head in her hands, frantic. She cries.

BILLY (CONT'D)

Oh, Dan. No, Dan, please move!
C'mon, get up, you can fight this!
(MORE)

BILLY (CONT'D)

You've always been a fighter, Dan.
I love you, please don't do this to me, don't do this to us!

Ann panics. She licks Dan's face, clearing his eyes, whines. She BARKS at him, BARKS for help. Nobody comes.

Billy looks down and sees not only one of her best friends, but Rubin Pritchard lying on the ground once more. She gasps at the image and shakes her head. It leaves.

She grits her teeth.

BILLY (CONT'D)

Not again. Not this time.

She wraps her jacket around his stomach, takes his front paws in her left hand, and lifts him in a fireman's carry. Her first attempt at walking brings her to her knees.

Grimacing with intense effort, she rises with the full weight of her dog over her shoulders. She walks toward camp.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - AFTERNOON

The sun dies on the horizon. Some hunters still call for Billy in the woods, but a number of them form a group around her, following the girl that killed a deathcaller.

Grandma waits by their tent, wrapped in a blanket. She looks up and pales further when she sees Billy. From her soul:

GRANDMA

Oh God, please don't let this be...

Dad rushes into the campground.

DAD

BILLY!

STORM

We tried to help her, but she won't let any of us hold him.

Dad rushes up and stops Billy, seeing the own blood and fatigue on her small face. The face of his daughter. He brushes hair from her eyes, openly crying.

DAD

Let me help you, please. Just this once, I can take the weight from your shoulders. I'm your Dad.

She nods, silent. He takes Dan's body, amazed at the weight Billy carried. She walks by his side and the camp follows.

BILLY

I want to take him home. He needs to be home.

DAD

Then that's where we're going.

He puts Dan in their cart and Ann jumps in, laying beside her best friend to keep him company, to keep him warm. Billy sits in the back, petting Dan's head every moment, holding his head and whispering soothingly into his ear.

Grandma and Dad hop in the front. They get the cart moving.

Behind, Storm stands with the others. A hunter comes to him with a questioning look in front of the whole camp.

HUNTER

What happened to that dog?

STORM

Deathcaller. Only thing that makes wounds like that. And if Billy's still alive...it means they won.

EXT. BILLY'S FARM - NIGHT

Time passes like a dream for Billy. The cart rolls over the hill and the farm sits below, empty and dark. To her, it appears like a sepulcher now. Waiting for a body.

INT. BILLY'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The doctor tries everything he can and Dad helps the nurse. Billy, with a bandaged arm, watches from nearby as they shake their heads: it's a lost cause. She steps outside.

EXT. BILLY'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Ann lays her head in Billy's lap as they look out into the night. Billy notices the dog has begun crying as well. Billy weeps, hugging her last dog so, so close.

Dad emerges slowly, carefully. He sits down next to them on the steps and considers the beautiful, clear sky.

BILLY

Think there's a heaven for dogs?

Her question comes not from naivety, but desperate hope. Dad's words come quicker than even he expected.

DAD

If there is a good place where dogs are welcome, you know as well as I do he'll be there, waiting for you.

BILLY

(not a question)
Then Dan's dead.

Dad's breath catches.

DAD

Yes. He is. From what the doctor could tell, he died while we were still in the cart, when you were talking to him.

BILLY

I think that's good. That's the way I would've wanted it to happen, even if he lived to old age.

She looks down at Ann, thinking unthinkable ideas for a child of her age. Dad tries to comprehend the depth of his own daughter, but can't.

DAD

You are one of the most amazing people I've ever met, Billy Colman.

She looks at him, tears streaming down her face. They hug, with the house behind them and the stars in front.

EXT. CITY - NIGHT

Sam Willis kisses his wife as she drives the cart back through the gates, taking their family home. The gatekeeper welcomes him on the wall with a firm hug.

They look outside. A huge caravan re-enters the City, illuminated by numerous lanterns and flashlights.

INT. BILLY'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Dad sits in his room by a reading light, trying to lull himself to sleep with a book. It isn't working.

Outside the door, Billy sneaks through the living room and grabs her gas mask without testing the filter. She takes a shovel from the umbrella bucket and voyages to the kitchen.

Dan lies on the table, wrapped in a white cloth. Billy uncovers his head and gives his clean forehead one last kiss.

She lifts her dog and walks outside, silent.

EXT. BILLY'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Billy steps across the porch threshold and moves out into starlight. She makes sure to walk silently past the doghouse, listening carefully for any sign of Ann waking.

EXT. APOCALYPTIC WASTELAND - NIGHT

Billy carries Dan over a familiar glowfern crevice without so much as blinking an eye, she holds her breath.

EXT. DESTROYED THEATER - NIGHT

Billy carries Dan through the shadowy entrance.

INT. DESTROYED THEATER - NIGHT

The shovel slices through dirt. A hole large enough for Dan forms center stage. Billy pauses for breath, now wearing her gas mask.

CLACK-

Billy looks around and finds-

BILLY

ANN?!

Ann stands atop the stairway. She descends step by step, breath coming more heavily each second in the deadly air as Billy rises to stop her.

BILLY (CONT'D)

It's poisonous in here, get out!
Get out now, I'm telling you to-

Billy grabs Ann, but the dog bites her! Just hard enough.

With a gasp, Billy stands back and watches Ann walk to her old friend's body with immense effort. Anne's legs give out as she lays next to Dan, breath shallow.

Billy sits with Ann and runs her hand by Ann's missing ear. Ann no longer fights, but softly licks Billy's hand.

BILLY (CONT'D)

Oh, Ann. Sweet, sweet Ann... Why are you doing this to me? Why are you leaving too?

Ann lays her head over Dan's neck.

Billy stays by her side until Ann stops breathing, then cries even harder behind her gas mask. Billy punches the dirt angrily. She rises, hands balled into fists.

Billy snatches the shovel and digs harder, attacking the ground. She punctuates each thrust with a ragged cry.

INT. DESTROYED THEATER - LATER

Billy stops. She stands above one large grave, big enough for the two dogs and herself...

She lays Dan and Ann in the grave and pulls the dirt over them with bare hands. Once finished, she looks at the hole between the two mounds and thinks hard.

BILLY

Why would you do this, God? I never would've asked for dogs if I knew it would end like this! I didn't want this! I can't take this...

She looks into the skylight above, but finds only the cone of drifting dust, settling carelessly into the ground.

Shaking, Billy removes her gas mask.

Her gaze falls from the light to the dirt below. She steps into the grave and kneels, feeling the soil above her dogs, holding her breath with streaming eyes, a reddening face.

She wipes the tears from her cheeks and scrunches her mouth. Her chest heaves, vacillating as long as she possibly can.

Billy runs outside.

EXT. THEATER ENTRANCE - MORNING

She falls to the ground and looks up at the dawning sun with hatred for the world, for everything.

Eventually, Billy rises. She's alone.

EXT. CITY - MORNING

Citizens gather to watch the bodies of their heroes go through the streets in caskets. Leading the procession, Sam Willis pulls the Marshal's coffin in a cart.

The people nod respectfully: somber, but thankful to the many departed for their ultimate sacrifice.

Sam holds the Marshal's badge in his hand, thinking.

EXT. BILLY'S FARM - DAY

SUPER: MONTHS LATER

Billy's deathcaller wound became a scar. To her, a memory of the two friends she lost that winter.

The family packs the cart for their big move to the City. Grandma throws packets of supplies in with abandon. Corinne and other settlers stop by to see them off.

Dad instructs NEW TENANTS.

DAD

We've got the fields in working order and they've been detoxed. You should be ready for summer planting as long as you don't forget to...

Alice and Sarah load their dolls in the back, helping move their own packages. Billy says goodbye to Greta, their cow, and turns to the cart with a forlorn look.

Grandma approaches.

GRANDMA

I, uh, I left some books in there for you, Billy. I hear the City has a better library than I do, but how can an old timer resist giving you a few of my favorite books? I did leave you one about a boy and his dogs, you might just like it.

BILLY

I'm not sure that's a good idea. I don't want to hear about dogs any more, I'm done with them.

GRANDMA

Now, Billy, don't say that.

BILLY

Look what happened! Grandma, I feel like I lost everything when Dan and Ann died, and now we're moving, I'm losing everything all over.

GRANDMA

Trust me: life's not over, dear. You may not like to hear that right now, but it's true. Move on and find more out there. And in the meantime, look back on your time with those dogs with gratitude!

BILLY

How can I? All it did was hurt in the end.

GRANDMA

The end only hurts while it's happening. You'll enjoy remembering the middle someday, I promise you that. Just don't blame your dogs too long. They were your family.

Billy takes in the information, mulling it over.

GRANDMA (CONT'D)

You know what to do when you leave family? You say goodbye.

BILLY

Do you really think I should?

Grandma nods as Dad comes up. Billy rushes away.

DAD

Grandma, it's been- Billy, where are you going?

BILLY

To say goodbye to my dogs!

She grabs her gas mask. Dad becomes concerned.

DAD

Wait, Billy, why-!

He turns, pulls his own mask out, and follows her to the wasteland. Dad calls back:

DAD (CONT'D)

Grandma, keep the girls safe for a moment, I'm going to be right back.

(MORE)

DAD (CONT'D)
 Billy, stop for just a second!
 Where are you going?!

EXT. HEALING WASTELAND - DAY

Billy crosses over the glowfern crevice, passes by flowering colors. The brilliance of spring covers the landscape!

EXT. DESTROYED THEATER - DAY

Billy pauses at the entrance: now a cascade of moss and budding flowers. She heads inside. Dad pursues.

DAD
 Billy, what is- Don't go in there!

He puts on his own mask and tears through the vegetation.

INT. DESTROYED THEATER - DAY

Billy lands on the upper steps and halts, right where Ann stood before. Her breath stops.

DAD
 Billy, come out of there! Where are-

A few bricks and planks tumble as Dad forces his way inside. He stops beside his daughter, taking in the theater of glowferns. Billy points to the stage. He's awestruck.

On the stage, between Dan and Ann's final resting place, in the shallow grave, a RED GLOWFERN sprouts from the soil!

The leaves glow like fire, their ruby radiance a breathtaking combination of sunlight and bioluminescence!

Billy steps forward. Dad touches her shoulder.

DAD (CONT'D)
 It's dangerous in here...

Billy turns and he sees her eyes through the visor: confident, assured. She can take care of herself.

He lets her go. Billy lands on the next step and pauses. Instinctively, she switches on her air purity tester. It beeps off the charts but SLOWS as she approaches!

Dad watches her reach the foot of the stage and walk up the mound of dirt. Her APT goes completely silent.

Billy removes her mask.

Dad hesitates as his daughter kneels within the crimson aura, without a mask in a den of poison.

He goes to her and does the same.

BILLY

The red fern. It's taking away the poison of the others. The theater, it's...it's healing.

DAD

This should be impossible.

BILLY

It is.

Dad looks at the light above, then down at his daughter.

Billy touches a frond delicately and smells the leaf, smiling. She cries, but feels far more than sadness.

BILLY (CONT'D)

Thank you, Little Ann. Thank you, Old Dan. I'll never forget you two.

EXT. BILLY'S FARM - DAY

Billy and Dad return to the cart. Grandma meets them halfway and instantly knows something occurred.

GRANDMA

What? What is it, what happened?

Dad looks at her and smiles.

EXT. APOCALYPTIC HIGHWAY - DAY

The sun tips at the horizon, heading toward afternoon.

Their cart ascends the final hill and Billy sighs as she looks down on the valley. She rolls her shoulders and prepares for whatever's to come. She can handle it.

Dad holds the horses back a moment.

DAD

It's going to be alright, Billy.
Something tells me you're going to
like it here: you, Sarah, and Alice
will have the chance to do amazing
things! Maybe you'll be scientists
or politicians or-

BILLY

I'm excited, Dad.

He looks at her in surprise.

BILLY (CONT'D)

I really am. We'll be happy in the
City, I'm sure of it.

Dad can tell she's forcing it, but hugs her thankfully all
the same. He pulls Sarah and Alice into the embrace and they
laugh for a moment. Then, they're back on the road.

EXT. CITY - DAY

Billy watches the approaching wall and quickly notices
something changed: guards flock the nearest side, shouting to
one another.

BILLY

Something wrong? Why are they all
gathering like that?

DAD

Can't imagine why that would be.

He purposefully keeps his eyes ahead.

EXT. CITY GATE - DAY

The gates stand closed, locked tight. As the Colmans near,
the gatekeeper opens his hatch and peers through, face
scrunched up against the light.

GATEKEEPER

Who goes there?!

DAD

Wilson Colman. I sent ahead. I'm
here with daughters: Sarah, Alice,
and Billy.

GATEKEEPER

You don't say? I think I met one of 'em before, if memory serves correct...Ah, that's right!

He closes the hatch. The gates roll wide open.

GATEKEEPER (CONT'D)

Welcome back, Billy!

A CROWD waits for them inside! The people cheer as the gates open, causing Sarah and Alice to jump from fright. Billy's mouth falls wide open. Dad grins.

He pulls the cart inside as people approach to greet them.

INT. CITY STREETS - DAY

Citizens wait up and down the main boulevard, watching the cart go by and following along once it's passed. Many shout to Billy. One woman, ETHEL, walks up to shake Billy's hand.

ETHEL

Thank you for stopping the townkiller. I lost my husband to that thing, but my kids are safe now because of you. Bless you!

Billy accepts the praise, barely comprehending. Dad's eyes constantly follow Billy's expression, soaking up the moment. Alice shakes Billy's shoulder.

ALICE

Billy, you're a hero!

BILLY

Is this...all for me?

Dad smiles.

DAD

Sorry if it's a little much. A man by the name of Sam Willis said the town likes to celebrate, and you gave them a great excuse. By stopping a deathcaller! They were living in fear the day before your dogs paid the price for their safety and peace of mind.

(rustles her hair)

It's all for you, Billy. You, Old Dan, and Little Ann.

She watches in awe as they pass down the familiar avenue: the shops, restaurants, and toy stores. Thanks to her old journey it feels more familiar than Billy expected, even welcoming.

Nearby, she sees the cigar shop owner waving, and waves back.

Past the next intersection, her friend Thomas climbed a mailbox to watch her go by. He throws a proud salute and she throws it back. Their eyes meet for a moment.

The cart whisks into the City square, the scene of Billy's worst memory in the City.

Things have changed.

EXT. CITY SQUARE - DAY

Sam Willis waits with the rest: families play games and cooks bake food for the celebration. Dad stops the cart by a post and hitches it. They hop out.

Sam approaches Billy and people fall silent.

SAM WILLIS

Billy Colman, I'm Sam Willis. On behalf of the town, I'd like to welcome you back.

BILLY

It's good to be back.
(looks at the crowd)
Thank you all for greeting me, but I'm not sure I deserve all this.

SAM WILLIS

You do, Billy! More than that...

He kneels down and cups her hands in both of his. When they part, the Marshal's badge rests on her palms. She regards the shiny metal with awe. Sam Willis talks quietly so only those close to Billy can hear his words.

SAM WILLIS (CONT'D)

From the moment he met you, the Marshal knew you were a good kid, Billy, there was never a question in his mind. Since you and your dogs fought to save the town from the monster that killed him, I'd be willing to argue that nobody deserves this badge more.

She holds it tight.

BILLY

I appreciate this, Mister Willis.
The Marshal was a good man.

SAM WILLIS

He was.

(winks)

Why don't you put it on and see how
it feels?

The audience APPLAUDS as Billy pins the badge to her shirt.
She looks around at Dad, Sarah, Alice, and the townspeople
cheering. She knows once and for all, despite her fears:

She found her way home.

FADE TO BLACK

THE END