

Quarantine

We've been stuck in quarantine for five days.

Five more days of this infernal ship, that I didn't agree to board in the first place. Carted from Parkhurst to the dock without a word of where we were going. We all knew though.

The Colony.

Survive, and you could be free. The chances are not in your favour.

The sea is as choppy out in the harbour as it's been the whole crossing, grey and angry. The waves smash against us as if it's fighting our arrival and mere presence. The stretch of land ahead, is a bleak and unpromising sight.

I'm about to start hurling my guts up again when Captain gives the order to move the *Shepherd* into the dock, the ship finally given clearance. They thought the Pox was on board. You can't blame them for being careful, it's a bad way to go.

Slowly but surely the port comes into view. Rough and rudimentary compared to where we cast from. Roughly hewn boards form a rickety jetty, our first taste of solid ground in four months.

We lost eight on the way here. Thrown to the sea at dusk, wrapped in white sheets. I didn't know their names.

My small bag of belongings is clutched tightly in hand as I stumble down the gang, onto the jetty. All the while, my silent shadow stays close.

John has been at my side since we were shackled together in transport to the ship. Even once they released us into Captains charge, he stayed close by. Quiet and small, his slightly misshapen head makes him a target for boys looking for someone to pick on.

Quarantine

Those that do, don't see his eyes. The madness lurking there. It took the first stupid fool half a day to try something with him. He'll never see out of his right eye again.

But John just stays quiet, polite to the officers. Says nothing to the other boys. Has barely said a dozen words to me. But stays close.

I don't fear him. He knows I pose no risk. Maybe he saw the madness in my eyes too.

We're hauled into a shed off the dock. Documented. Those that made it this far.

We're told to sleep here on the floor tonight. We'll be given orders and postings tomorrow.

It's bone cold. The wind off the sea chills my very soul. It's cry as it sneaks through the boards makes me feel ill.

Or is that just the lack of constant motion now? Am I land sick now instead?

Sleep does not come quick or easy. I focus on John's breaths next to me, steady and calm.

Sleep does not greet me, but nightmares.

Farmland covered in blood, a woman screaming. The tightness of a rope around my neck. Then silence over white dunes of sand.

When I wake gasping, John is watching me. As he always does when I wake from the nightmare. I wish I could say it was the first time I'd had it.

I told him what I saw once, he never said a word.

Dawn breaks cold and I feel like I'll never be warm again. The officers are walking amongst us, sorting us into districts to be shipped out together.

Quarantine

‘Clayton.’ I step forward. The officer looks me over before checking his document again. ‘Swan District.’ I stand by the officer he points me to, I have no idea where it is we’re going. It doesn’t really matter.

‘Gavin.’ I watch as John steps forward, his lumpy head tilted down, eyes watching the ground. The officer only looks him over for a moment.

‘Murray District.’ The breath I didn’t know I was holding escapes me now. Somehow I’ve grown attached to my strange shadow. John steps up to his assigned officer as they move through the list of boys.

‘Bye George, don’t steal anymore walnuts.’ His farewell takes me by surprise, mostly because of his joke around my arrest.

I only chuckle as they move us outside to the waiting wagons.

‘See you around John’, I call out as I jump up into my wagon. But he’s shaking his head, and I can’t help but wonder why.