



**BLOOD
TIES**

A Short Story By
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Blood Ties

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Zak stumbled through the alley, trying to find a dry spot in the downpour. He'd just been thrown out of a coffee shop for loitering. There weren't a lot of places in town where he could just sit without buying anything. Sure, there was probably a homeless shelter somewhere, but he didn't trust that idea. If his mom had the police looking for him, they'd probably start there.

He'd been on the streets for two days, and he hadn't eaten or slept yet. He hadn't been thrown out. Heck, he could go back any time he wanted to. But he'd have to follow his mom's rules. Wear dresses, grow his hair back out... betray his entire identity. And he wasn't willing to do that. Better to live on the streets than to live as someone else.

Of course, it had been easier to say that on a full stomach. He stopped at a trash can and pulled off the lid. Someone had thrown out some chili, but there were already maggots crawling in it. Zak quickly replaced the lid. He was hungry, but not that hungry. At least not yet. He'd been

raised on foie gras and filet mignon, but he'd always preferred more common foods. Right now he'd kill for a bean burrito, or even an orange.

He found a set of stairs, leading up to the back door of a restaurant. It was beneath a slight overhang, so he sat on the steps, his back against the door. He was still getting wet, but it wasn't quite as bad as being out in the open. He clutched his purse, which held the only possessions he still owned in this world. He must have looked pretty strange carrying a woman's purse, but right now that was the least of his worries.

He closed his eyes, thinking about his nice bed at home. It was soft, maybe a bit too soft, with a thick pink comforter and tons of pillows with those ridiculous lacy frills around the sides. Dolls and stuffed animals were lined up on his dresser and bookshelves, staring at him, judging him, asking him why he didn't appreciate the cushy life he'd been born into. Nothing in that room had been Zak's style, and he hadn't been allowed to redecorate. But at least he'd never had to sleep in the rain.

He was starting to snore when the door behind him opened, and he nearly fell backward through it. A man in a cook's hat held a gun on him, a double-barreled energy rifle that probably wasn't even legal in this city. "Get outta here," the chef said. Zak immediately stood up and backed down the steps, then ran out of the alley without looking back.

A few hours later he sat on a park bench. Lisbon Pointe was one of the nicer cities on Cytrine Delta, which was a bit like saying that weight loss was one of the nicer symptoms of molecular disintegration. The city still had

well-maintained parks, a few nice restaurants, and a slightly lower crime rate than the rest of the planet. A few billionaires lived on the edge of town, in secure, gated communities.

These wealthy citizens kept the factories open, which was great because it meant there were still jobs in town. But they also exploited every possible legal loophole, bribed government officials to keep the minimum wage low, and made it so people lived in poverty regardless of how many hours they worked per week. Zak had first-hand knowledge of this, as his mother owned a robotics company, and he'd witnessed some of her underhanded dealings first-hand.

But at least the park was nice. The rain had finally let up, and while the bench was still wet, Zak barely noticed. His clothing was soaked through anyway. Once again he tried to take a nap. He couldn't lie sideways across the bench, because it had a couple of metal armrests dividing the bench into three sections. It looked pretty, but Zak knew the extra armrests were intentionally designed to prevent homeless people from sleeping in public. Nevertheless, Zak leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes.

He heard a scream in the distance. *What now?* he thought, visions of dancing citrus fruit dissipating as he opened his eyes. A man ran down the sidewalk, clutching a briefcase under one arm. A woman ran after him, but couldn't keep up in her heels. "Stop him!" she shouted. "That's my valise!" She slowed down, rooting through the pockets of her oversized trench coat.

Leaving his purse behind, Zak leaped up and chased the thief. The man was bigger than Zak – most men were – but Zak was faster. He caught up to him and jumped on him from behind. The thief stumbled and dropped the

briefcase, using both hands to pull Zak off of him. He turned and punched Zak in the face, then reached down to pick up the briefcase again. Now on the ground, Zak got to the briefcase first and grabbed the handle.

“Let go,” the thief said, trying to pull the briefcase out of Zak’s grasp. He was much stronger, but Zak was determined to hold on. The thief pulled so hard, he lifted Zak off the ground along with the briefcase. He was about to punch Zak again when the briefcase’s owner caught up to them. She now held a small energy pistol, and aimed it at the robber.

The thief let go of the briefcase and ran. Zak handed the briefcase back to the woman. “Thank you, young man,” she said. “Oh, your poor face. Here, let me give you something.” She once again searched her massive pockets, until she came up with a twenty-credit note, which she handed to Zak.

Zak smiled and started to thank her, but he felt sort of stunned, and the woman walked away before he could get any words out. The money was nice, it meant he could finally eat something. But what had really tied his tongue was being called “young man.” It was the first time a stranger had referred to him that way, and it felt amazing. For just a moment, all his problems went away. It no longer mattered that he was wet, hungry, and bruised. She could have given him a hundred credits, and the validation would have felt like the greater reward.

Still in a daze, Zak wandered back to the park bench. His purse was now gone. He looked around and saw a blue-haired teenage girl running away, Zak’s purse under her arm.

Vex couldn't believe her luck. The purse had just been sitting there, out in the open, no owner in sight. It wasn't even stealing, it was just a case of finders keepers. If somebody stopped her, she'd just act like it was hers. If somebody accused her of taking it, she'd just claim she was looking for the actual owner. Either way, she was free and clear.

So why was she running? Well, for one thing, she didn't want a confrontation, regardless of how it turned out. The sooner she was out of the park, the sooner she could look through the purse for loose credits, without having to look over her shoulder the whole time. She felt like she could talk her way out of any situation, but she wasn't about to push it.

But the main reason she was running? Because she was being chased. She could hear their footfalls behind her, too loud to be a jogger. And then she got a flash – a mild psychic premonition – showing her pursuer. Her flashes weren't very common, and weren't actually precognizant. She just saw the surface thoughts of nearby people, other park-goers who happened to be watching the chase.

It didn't look like it was the purse's owner. It was some guy, about Vex's age, maybe fifteen or sixteen. He had a bloody nose and a really bad haircut. But he definitely wasn't jogging; there was no doubt that he was after Vex. And he looked very angry. While Vex was pretty sure she could come up with a believable lie, this guy didn't look like he was in the mood to listen.

Vex briefly considered just dropping the purse, in the hopes he would break off the chase. But what if that wasn't why he was after her? She could be out the money and still have to deal with this guy. No, she wasn't going to give up so easily. She had more mouths to feed than just her

own. She had high hopes for the contents of this purse. She imagined finally getting a less threadbare outfit, not to mention a couple of hot meals for the gang.

She was out of the park now. She crossed the street without looking, causing a hovercar to swerve around her. The driver shouted some angry invectives at her before driving away. Vex ran into an alley, but she could still hear her pursuer behind her. She was starting to run out of breath, but the guy didn't seem to be slowing down. She reached out with her free arm, and pointed at a trash can a few meters away. The lid flew off and into her hand. Then she turned around and threw the lid at the guy. He blocked it with one arm, shouting, "Hey!"

They were now face to face, about four meters apart. Vex reached into her pocket and pulled out a switchblade. "I will cut you, man," she said, making a couple of threatening slashes in the air.

Zak wheezed, trying to catch his breath. "There's not... any... money in there," he said, pointing weakly at the purse.

"I'll see about that," Vex said, rooting through the purse. *Damn*, she thought. He was right. Still, it was an expensive-looking purse, and while it wasn't in the best condition, it could probably fetch a few credits at a secondhand store. She looked up at the guy, who just stood with his shoulders slumped.

"Please?" Zak asked, looking like he was on the verge of tears.

Vex rolled her eyes. He really did look pathetic, with his banged-up face and puppy dog eyes. But how did she know he hadn't stolen the purse himself? "Look," she said. "If you can name me three things in the purse, you can have it. Not the lipstick or the tampons. Stuff that's not in

every purse.”

“A black book with a lock on it, a small rubber panda, and an ID card,” Zak said.

“Lots of purses have ID cards,” Vex said, looking through the purse. “What’s the name on the card?”

Zak exhaled in resignation. “Charlotte Lisbon,” he said.

“Lisbon? Like in ‘Lisbon Pointe?’ Is that who you stole the purse from?” Vex asked.

“Are you a cop?” Zak countered.

“No, but...” Vex began, but she got distracted. She looked at the ID card again, then back at Zak. Her eyes widened. “Oh,” she said finally. She took a couple of steps forward and tossed the purse to Zak. “Sorry,” she said.

“Thanks,” Zak mumbled, and started to turn away.

Vex watched him take a couple of steps, then called after him. “Wait... do you have someplace to go?”

Zak turned back around. He was quiet for a few seconds, and finally said, “I... have no idea.”

Vex hesitated, going back and forth in her mind. Another mouth to feed. Would the others even accept him? Zak was just about to turn back around when she said, “Come with me.”

She led him to an old pizza restaurant, long since closed and abandoned. She knocked on the back door, and after a few seconds they heard a lock unlatch and the door opened. “Who’s this?” asked a teenage boy. He had tan-colored skin, black hair, and looked about fourteen years old.

“He’s one of us,” Vex said, leading Zak down the stairs, into the restaurant’s basement. The room was poorly

lit, with two ripped-up couches, and some wire shelves full of bottled water, old blankets, and random supplies. In addition to Zak and Vex, there were three other teens in the basement.

“Who are you guys?” Zak asked.

“We’re the East Side Daggers,” said the guy who’d let them in. “We’re a gang!”

“We’re not a gang,” Vex said, turning to Zak. “We’re just like you. We have nowhere to go, so we watch out for each other. Safety in numbers, or whatever. I’m Vex. And you are?”

“I’m Zak,” he answered. “It’s nice to meet you.” He held out his hand.

Vex ignored it. “I’m guessing your parents threw you out for not looking enough like your ID card?”

“I snuck out, but yeah,” Zak said. “I couldn’t be who mom wanted me to be. She was about to send me to some sort of ‘finishing school,’ but I think that was code for ‘conversion camp.’ I’d rather starve.”

“Well, you probably will, living with us,” Vex said. “This is Hugo, Calix, and Keygan.” They all gave Zak a quick wave. “Hugo ran away because his dad kept touching him. Calix is non-binary, which was a dealbreaker with their parents for some reason. And Keygan’s dad used to beat him with a shock-stick every night.”

“Wow,” Zak said, then turned to Vex. “And you?”

Vex held out her hand, pointing it toward one of the shelves. “My parents freaked out ‘cause I could do this,” she said. A bottle of water flew off the shelf and into her open hand. She took a swig of water and offered the bottle to Zak.

“Weird reason to throw you out,” Zak said, taking a drink. Telekinesis was uncommon in humans, but it

wasn't unheard of.

"There's more to it than that," Vex said. "Some other time. You hungry?"

Zak opened his mouth to reply, but his stomach answered for him, groaning loud enough for the entire room to hear.

Vex laughed. "Well, we can't offer you much but..."

"Oh wait," Zak said, remembering something. He fished around in his pocket, pulling out the twenty credit note. "What can we get with this?"

The others stared at him like he'd just walked on water. "Welcome to the East Side Daggers," Hugo said.

The gang had been living on the streets for a while, and knew how to stretch their money. Rather than blowing all the credits on fast food, they sent Calix to the grocery store, where they picked up enough ingredients to feed the five of them for a week. The meals wouldn't exactly be nutritious, but at least they wouldn't starve.

Zak took a nap on one of the couches. When Calix got back from shopping, Vex boiled up some noodles using an old hotplate. They woke Zak up when dinner was ready.

"So, Zak," Vex asked, scooping the noodles onto five plates, "You cut your own hair?"

"I was... angry," Zak said, touching his hair. He hadn't looked in a mirror since he'd run out. Vex handed him a plate, and he started scarfing down food like it was the best meal he'd ever eaten.

"Dude, don't make yourself sick," Keygan said.

"Yeah, it's just a waste of food if it comes right

back up," Calix added.

Zak paused, and forced himself to chew more slowly. "So, what do you do here?" he asked through a mouthful of noodles.

"We survive," Hugo said.

"What else is there?" Keygan added.

"We work together," Vex said. "We teach each other what we know. Calix here is good with tools. They managed to patch into the city's power grid, which is why we're not eating in the dark." As if on cue, the lights flickered for a few seconds. "For now," Vex added.

"My dad's an electrician," Calix said. "I guess he was hoping I would be too. He was always teaching me stuff. Then I came out to him, and he stopped talking to me at all."

"And that's when you ran away?" Zak asked.

"No, mom threw me out," Calix said. "Told me not to come back until I was normal."

"Yeah, 'cause it's so *normal* to throw your kids out onto the street," Vex said. "Just 'cause they want a different name or whatever."

"At least you could go back if you really wanted," Keygan said. "I had to get out of there. My dad hit me harder every time. He couldn't control himself. Sooner or later he was going to kill me."

"Did you ever call the police?" Zak asked, taking another bite of noodles.

"Dad is a cop," Keygan said. "They stick up for each other in this town. Now I'm worried about my little brother. Without me there, Koy's going to get hurt."

"Well, we need to go get him," Zak said. He looked around at his new friends, all of whom looked like he'd just suggested they go bungee jumping in a volcano. "... Don't we?" Zak asked, embarrassed.

Vex smiled sadly, shaking her head softly. "It's not that easy," she said. "We can barely take care of us. We can't fit more kids in this room. And Keygan's dad is tough. He has guns and crap."

"Yeah, but there's five of us," Zak said. "Surely we can—"

"Zak," Vex interrupted. "It's hard enough to get food every day. We can't just—"

"You always say that!" Keygan wailed, his face filling with tears. "Koy's going to die because of you!" Keygan stood up and ran out of the room.

Vex stood up. "See what you did?" she huffed, glaring at Zak. She turned and followed Keygan up the stairs.

"Sorry," Zak said, though he wasn't sure he'd done anything wrong.

A few minutes later, Vex and Keygan came back down the stairs together. "I have an announcement," Vex said, as she came into view. Everyone gathered around so they could hear better. "We're going on a supply raid," she said. "For food, first aid stuff, maybe some weapons..."

"Great," Hugo said. "What are we going to hit?"

Vex paused, biting her lower lip. "Keygan's dad's house," she finally said.

From the outside, the house looked like a monument to paranoia. It was surrounded by a two-meter-high chain link fence, and featured barred windows, security cameras, and guard dogs. One might have thought it was a military base rather than a suburban home. But this was how Keygan had grown up, and he knew how to bypass the security.

First, they had Calix shut off the power to the

street. Of course the house had an emergency backup generator, but it always took a couple of minutes to come online. Keygan no longer had his keys, so Vex picked the lock on the outer fence. As they crossed the yard, two Rottweilers ran up to Keygan and started licking his face. They'd always preferred Keygan to his father, and with good reason. And in the dogs' eyes, Keygan's friends were innocent by association.

The gang ran around to the back door, where Vex once again picked the lock. The kitchen light started to flicker on as the generator finally kicked in. Now came the hard part. There was no way they could grab Koy and the supplies without waking up Keygan's father. Some of them would have to distract him, or subdue him, while the rest of the gang went to work.

Vex looked at her party. Everyone but Keygan wore makeshift masks made out of potato sacks they'd found in the pizzeria. Vex had suggested Keygan wear one as well, but he figured he had every right to be in his own home, and he didn't want the mask to scare his brother.

Vex was the only one armed, and her pitiful switchblade surely paled in comparison to whatever gun Keygan's dad kept on his nightstand. *We're here to save a life*, she reminded herself. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door.

Turk woke up when the power went out. He slept with a fan on, and the sudden silence put him on high alert. It could be nothing, but it could be the first signs of war. His father had always told him, "Assume the worst, and you'll automatically be prepared for everything else." Turk had tried his damndest to teach his own sons the same

lesson. He demanded nothing less than perfection from them.

One of his children had already bailed on him. Keygan just hadn't been strong enough to keep up with Turk's daily regimen. But that was fine. He still had Koy. He'd been too soft on Keygan, he could see that now. Turk resolved to be extra tough on his remaining son, so that he wouldn't wimp out on him like his brother had.

Turk climbed out of bed, grabbing his modified energy rifle off the nightstand. First he peeked out from between his window blinds, and saw nothing. Even the street lights were out, which was a good sign. It meant that The Enemy wasn't targeting his house specifically. But that didn't mean he was out of trouble. It might just be a random power outage, but it could still be an invasion, whether city-wide or even planet-wide. If it was a war, Turk didn't intend to be a casualty.

He quickly pulled on a shirt and pants. As he slipped into his boots, he heard the thump of the backup generator coming on. From outside the bedroom door, he saw the kitchen light turn back on. He always kept that light on at night, so he wouldn't be caught in the dark if there was an emergency. But then he heard a familiar sequence of beeps. Someone was turning off the alarm. Someone who knew the code.

The hallway was still dark, so Turk crouched down and poked his head out the bedroom doorway. It was a home invasion. It looked like four, maybe five intruders. But Turk had the element of surprise. Still hidden in the darkness, he raised the barrel of his gun, aimed for the closest intruder, and fired.

"Augh!" Calix went down, writhing in pain on

the kitchen floor.

“Calix!” Vex shouted, but before she could reach them, a man came running down the hall, shouting something about victory. The man was about to fire again, but he stopped when he saw Keygan.

“My own son?” Turk asked, his face contorting with rage. “You’d betray your own family?”

“Dad,” Keygan said, holding up his hands. “Please put the gun down.”

“My own son?” Turk repeated, louder this time. He held up the gun again, this time aiming at Keegan’s head.

Vex threw her switchblade, and used her telekinesis to guide it through the air. It hit Turk in the upper torso, and he shrieked like a toddler.

Vex went back to checking on Calix, and the rest of the gang pressed their advantage. While Turk pulled the knife out of his chest, Hugo, Keygan, and Zak rushed him. Turk used his rifle like a club, swinging it at the approaching trio. The first swing hit Hugo in the head, knocking him down. Then Keygan tackled his father, or at least he tried to, but Turk was much heavier and shrugged off his son’s attack. Zak tried to help, but Turk hit him in the face with the butt of the rifle.

Keygan punched his father in the stomach, but once again Turk was more annoyed than injured. Turk grabbed Keygan by the neck, picked him up off the ground, and slammed him against the wall. Keygan’s face started to turn purple. He reached out, trying to grab his father’s throat, but his grip was too weak to hurt him.

Attracted by all the shouting, the two Rottweilers burst in through the open kitchen door. They saw their two masters, literally at each other’s throats. Two masters fighting. One master who always played with them,

and pet them, and treated them with nothing but kindness. Another master who always beat them, and went out of his way to be intentionally cruel.

The dogs rushed forward, attacking Turk in a frenzy.

Calix woke up in a hospital bed. Their left arm was bandaged, from the shoulder all the way to the wrist. There was a huge patch of gauze taped to their ribs. It hurt to move anything on the left side of their body. They were still looking at the bandages when a nurse walked in.

“Oh, good, you’re awake,” he said. “Your parents are out in the hallway, shall I send them in?”

Great, Calix thought. “I don’t...” they started to say, then they paused. What was Calix going to do, climb out the window? With one working arm? Might as well get it over with. “Sure,” they finally said. “Send them in.”

Keygan and Koy sat in a social services office. They were starting to get bored when their case worker finally arrived. A blond woman in her mid-thirties sat down at her desk, and read over their case file. “I’m Joyce,” she said, and got straight to the point. “I just got word from the hospital. You’re not going to see your father for a long time. He’ll recover, but his injuries were pretty severe.” She watched their faces, gauging their reaction.

The boys looked at each other. Koy smiled, a wide toothy grin that looked out of place on a face that currently sported a large, fist-shaped bruise. Keygan looked relieved, but also worried. The longer Turk took to heal, the angrier he’d be when he finally got out of the hospital.

Joyce leaned forward. "We have evidence that your father was abusive," she said. "A lot of it, actually. He had cameras all over your house, and he never deleted any footage. Talk to me, tell me everything you can. I promise you, I'm on your side. I don't care if he's a cop, I'll make sure he's never in the same room with you again."

"But what's going to happen to us?" Keygan asked. He didn't want his little brother begging on the streets for food like he'd had to.

"We'll try and find some relatives to take care of you. In the meantime, you'll be placed in a foster home. There's a couple waiting outside right now who will take you to your temporary home."

Keygan nodded. The thought of living with strangers made him nervous, but it was better than the streets. Another thought occurred to him. "What about the dogs?"

"We'll find good homes for them, I promise," Joyce said.

After getting their statements, she led them out of her office and introduced them to their temporary caregivers. It was two women, each in their mid-forties, with genuine smiles and a tendency to hug a lot. They seemed like nice people, the kind who wouldn't use shock-sticks to dole out punishment, though it was impossible to know for sure.

Outside the glass doors of the social services office, Keygan saw Zak, Vex, and Hugo standing around, just talking and waiting. Zak kept holding his hands in front of his face, wary of the building's security cameras. The caregivers were busy filling out paperwork, so Keygan asked if he could go talk to his friends for a minute. They told him it was fine as long as he stayed where they could see him. Keygan walked out the front door and approached his

friends.

“How’s Calix?” Keygan asked, after hugging each of his friends.

“They’re doing much better,” Vex said. “They’re back with their family. We said goodbye to them this morning.”

“But I thought—” Keygan began.

“Calix’s mom was so happy to see them alive, she came around,” Vex said. “She said she’d respect their name and pronouns. ‘Anything to keep her child happy and healthy.’ That’s a direct quote.”

“And their dad?” Keygan asked.

“He didn’t seem as enthusiastic about it, but I think he’ll get used to it,” Vex said.

“I’m gonna miss you guys,” Keygan said.

“We’ll miss you too,” Zak replied. “But I’m also happy to see you go. Frankly, I’m a little jealous. Your new moms look nice.”

“They could probably find a home for you too,” Keygan said.

“Maybe later,” Zak said. “Right now, I can’t risk being in the system, my mom would find me.”

“But if your new moms don’t work out,” Hugo added, “you’re welcome back any time.”

Everyone hugged, and Keygan went back inside.

A few weeks later, Zak was walking through an alley – the same one he’d once sought refuge in, before being threatened by an angry chef – when he saw a teenage girl sitting against the wall. She had auburn hair, a fair complexion, and was wearing a dirty school uniform. Her face was buried in her hands, and Zak could hear her

sobbing.

Zak crouched down next to her. "Are you okay?" he asked.

She nodded for a second, then stopped and shook her head no.

"What's wrong?" Zak asked. "Maybe I can help."

The girl looked up at Zak, her eyes red from crying. "I ran away from home," she said.

Zak nodded, his face full of concern. "What happened? Did they hit you?" he asked.

She shook her head. Through her sobs, she said, "They just don't listen. Look at this." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a brand new, state-of-the-art comm unit.

Zak practically salivated at the sight of it. He'd seen signs for this model in store windows; it cost enough to feed the East Side Daggers for an entire year. "Wow, that's a beauty," he said.

"But it's the wrong color!" the girl wailed. "I wanted the purple one. I never wear black. It won't match my ensemble!"

Zak was stunned. After a few seconds, he said, "So you ran away."

"And I'm never going back," the girl said, pouting.

Zak nodded slowly, an odd smirk forming on his face. "Good for you," he finally said. "Stand your ground. You're doing the right thing."

"You really think so?" she asked.

"Sure," Zak said. "You'll love the freedom of being on your own. Sleep when you want, stay out all night..."

"Damn right," the girl said, her face taking on a

look of conviction.

“Never changing clothes, always bathing in the river, using old newspapers as toilet paper...”

The girl stared at him, her mouth open.

“Just this morning I had the best breakfast,” Zak said. “I found a half-eaten hot dog in a garbage can. I had to shake the bugs off of it, but it was still the best meal I’ve had all week. What did you have?”

“Eg... eggs Benedict,” she said.

“I’m sure that was good too,” Zak said. “And you’re going to love sleeping in the rain. It’s refreshing. And efficient. You get to sleep and shower at the same time. And with your looks, you’re going to love all the attention you get. Guys won’t be able to keep their hands off you, if you know what I mean. And these guys won’t take no for an answer.”

The girl had turned pale. She started to say something, but Zak was on a roll.

“And I hope you’re used to getting judged. Everyone who looks at you is going to assume that you’re an alcoholic. If you ask for money, they’ll accuse you of wanting to buy drugs with it. If they see you sleeping, they’ll ‘accidentally’ kick you on the way by. And it’s a good thing you don’t like that comm, since you’ll have to sell it anyway. It’s not like you can afford the monthly service charges. Say goodbye to texting your friends all night. But hey, it’s not like you’ll have time for friends, you’ll be too busy looking for food all day.”

“What... what do you think I should do?” the girl said.

Zak reached over and took the comm unit out of her hand. “Is this thing insured for theft?” he asked.

“I think so,” the girl said.

“Go home,” Zak said, tucking the comm into his

pocket. "Tell your mother you were mugged. Apologize for how you reacted to her very thoughtful gift. Thank her for the privileged life she's given you. Appreciate your warm bed, and the roof over your head. Tell your mother you love her every day. Remember that listening is a two-way street. Pay more attention to what she says, and she'll probably listen to you more too. And if you have a problem, talk to her about it, don't just run out the door."

The girl nodded, and climbed to her feet.

"And just one more thing," Zak said, standing up.

"What?" she asked.

"The next time she won't let you go to a party, or buys you the wrong present, or yells at you for not making your bed or whatever, please try to remember that other people have it worse. Running away won't solve any of your problems, but it will give you a whole bunch of new ones."

"If that's true, then why don't you go back to your home?" the girl asked.

Zak smiled, shaking his head. "It was never my home, not really. It belonged to some girl." He turned around and walked away, headed back to the abandoned pizzeria.

It wasn't the life he would have chosen. Not for himself, and not for his gang. But it was what it was. Family wasn't blood, it was love, and he loved his friends more than anything.

- Xine Fury 2023
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