



For Darkness Shows the Stars

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DIANA PETERFREUND
author of RAMPANT and ASCENDANT

For Darkness Shows the Stars

DIANA PETERFREUND

BALZER + BRAY

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Dedication

*For my mother, who loves Jane Austen as much as I do,
And my daughter, who I hope someday will.*

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PART I

The Unbroken Engine

There could have been no two hearts so open, no tastes so similar, no feelings so in unison, no countenances so beloved. Now they were as strangers; nay, worse than strangers, for they could never become acquainted. It was a perpetual estrangemen

—JANE AUSTEN, *PERSUASION*

TWELVE YEARS AGO

Dear Kai,

My name is Elliot, and I am six years old and live in the big house. Everyone says your smarter than me but I know I am the smartest. I bet you can't even read this letter.

Your friend,
Elliot North



Dear Elliot,

I can so read and write. I red your letter and your not so smart. Your just ~~riteh~~ rich. You get tutors in the big house. My da teaches me to read after we work for your da all day long. So I can read and can fix a tractor too. I bet you can't.

Your friend,
Kai



Dear Kai,

You are very nice. Thank you for teaching me how to change the tractor tire today. It was really fun but my mother got mad about the mud on my dress. Don't worry I didn't tell her. I hope you like this book. It is one of my favorites.

Your friend (now I feel like I really mean it!),
Elliot



Dear Elliot,

Thank you for the book. Your right, it's really good. My favorite part was the story about Jason and his ~~adentures~~ adventures on the ship. I would like to be an Argonaut. Or even Jason. Do you know the used to build ships like that right here?

Your friend,
Kai

P.S. If you want to come back to the barn, I will show you more about the tractor.



Dear Kai,

Yes, I know about the ships. That was my grandfather who did that, when he was younger. They call him the Boatwright, but his name is Elliot too, just like me, and my mother says he was the smartest man on the whole island. But he's been sick for a long time.

I have bad news. My sister Tatiana told on me about the tractor, and now my father says you can't come to the big house. So from now on, if you want to write me a letter then fold it up and put it in the knot in the board write next to the barn door. I'll come by and get it.

*Your friend,
Elliot*



Dear Elliot,

That is nice about your grandfather. I don't know mine. My da says he was Reduced. He says both my ma and da were Reduced, and that they died a long time ago.

I hope you like this letter. If you fold it up exactly like I had it, it will fly on its own. It's an air glider. I can teach you how to do it if you ever come see me again. I know your da said I can't come to the big house, but he didn't say you can't come to the barn.

*Your friend,
Kai*



Dear Kai,

I am sorry I couldn't come to see you. I hope you like my glider. It's like yours but I think it flies even farther.

I am also sorry to hear about your grandparents. Is it strange to think you come from people who are Reduced?

I would like to come back to the barn. My father goes to Channel City every month and I think it's best if I come when he's gone. He usually takes Tatiana too, so she can't tell on me.

*Your friend,
Elliot*

One

ELLIOT NORTH RACED ACROSS the pasture, leaving a scar of green in the silver, dew-encrusted grass. Jef followed, tripping a bit as his feet slid inside his too-big shoes.

“You’re sure your ma said the southwest field?” she called back to him.

“Yes, Miss,” he huffed.

She picked up her pace, hoping there was still time to save some of the crop. But she could tell it was too late even before she saw the stricken look on her foreman Dee’s face. “It’s all gone,” she said, meeting Elliot on the road. “I’m so sorry.”

Elliot crumpled to the ground and rough road gravel scoured her palms. She scraped her fingernails against the dirt. All her work had come to nothing.

Jef came running up behind them and grabbed the edge of his mother’s gray skirt. The woman swayed a bit, off-balance due to her rounded belly. At the end of the road, Elliot could just make out the figures of her father and Tatiana standing at the edge of the field and watching the Reduced work.

“He moved fifty laborers over first thing this morning,” Dee was saying above her.

Of course he had. Ten or twenty would not have gotten the job done before Elliot had heard of it. Only she hadn’t locked herself in the barn loft at first light. If only she’d attended the family breakfast. She might have been able to talk him out of this.

Elliot took a deep breath and straightened, unclenching her fists at her sides. She couldn’t betray the extent of the damage to her family, but she needed answers.

Tatiana turned as Elliot approached, alerted by the sound of boots on gravel. Elliot’s sister was in slippers, of course, and a day dress, and above her head she twirled a shell-pink parasol with deep pink fringe, despite the fact that there wasn’t even a hint of sunshine this morning. In all of Elliot’s eighteen years, she’d never seen her older sister in work clothes. The closest Tatiana ever got was her riding habit.

“Hello, Elliot!” she warbled, though her expression remained sly. “Have you come to see the new racetrack?”

Elliot ignored her and faced their father. “What’s going on here?”

Only now did her father turn, but his placid countenance betrayed nothing. “Ah, Elliot. Good to see you. You should have a talk with that COR foreman.” He gestured vaguely toward Dee. “She was here full ten minutes moving over the laborers this morning. Is she too far along in her pregnancy to be of any use to us?”

Elliot watched as the last of the green-gold sheaves were trampled beneath the feet of the Reduced and their plows. Most of the workers were now raking up the remains of the carnage, and the field was returned to a dull, useless brown. The culmination of two years’ work, destroyed.

“Father,” Elliot said, fighting to keep her voice from shaking. She couldn’t let him know. She had to treat it as if it was any other field. “What have you done? This field was almost ready for harvest.”

“Really?” He arched a brow. “The stalks seemed terribly short. Of course, I don’t have your way with wheat.” He chuckled, as if the very concept were preposterous. “And besides, this field was the best choice for the racetrack. We’re going to build the pavilion right over there, near the creek.”

Elliot opened her mouth to respond, then shut it. What was the purpose? The crop was destroyed and no amount of pointing out the folly of the move would induce her father to consider his actions before repeating them. She could tell him the percentage of his harvest he'd lost, and what that would mean in terms of money at market or Reduced that would go hungry this winter unless he imported some of his neighbors' grain. She could tell him how very near *they* were to going hungry given his lack of consideration to the farm. She could even tell him the truth; that the wheat he'd just plowed under was worth more grain than most in fields of this size. It was her special wheat.

It was important wheat.

Of course, that confession would come with even worse consequences.

So as always, she swallowed the scream building in her throat and kept her tone light. Helpful. Dutiful. "Are there any other of the planted fields you think you'll have need of *before* the harvest?"

"And if there are?" Tatiana sniffed.

"I'd like to make sure you don't suffer any more delays," said Elliot, mildly. "I can arrange for the laborers very quickly."

"So can Father, and so can I," said Tatiana. "Or do you think you have some special pull with the Reduced?"

Only because they would recognize her on sight, and not Tatiana. But Elliot would never say that. It would only serve to dig her hole deeper. "I'd like to make it more convenient for—"

"Fine," said Baron North. "This field will be sufficient for my needs. It was the only one I found"—he kicked at a stray stalk—"problematic."

He turned then to his eldest daughter and began pointing with his walking stick to illustrate the boundaries of his proposed racetrack. As he wandered off, Elliot did a quick calculation of how many laborers and how much money he'd no doubt require for that project. They'd have no extra grain to sell this fall, and hardly enough money to buy what they needed to make it through the winter. But her father wouldn't see it that way. He deserved a racetrack more than his Reduced laborers deserved bread.

Elliot slid between the crossbars of the split-rail fence and into the field. Moist, freshly turned earth crumbled beneath the heels of her boots, and here and there in the deadened dust she could see flecks of gold.

"I'm so sorry, Elliot," Dee said, joining her. "They were growing real nice, too."

"There was nothing you could have done." Elliot's voice was flat, but she spoke the truth. Any delay on the foreman's part would only have incited her father's anger—and his need for retribution.

"What did your da— What did Baron North say about me?" Dee's eyes were filled with concern. "I know he—"

"He's not going to send you to the birthing house." He'd probably already forgotten the Post's existence. Dee was nothing more to him than a tool, one he could use to direct the Reduced laborers . . . or punish Elliot.

"Because there'll be no one to care for Jef if—"

"Don't spend another moment worrying about it." Elliot cast a glance at the older woman's stomach. "You have more things on your mind."

"I only have to deal with two mouths to feed this winter," Dee replied. "I can see on your face that you're worried about a hundred."

"Not 'worried.' Disappointed that my project won't be tested for another year, but—" Her brittle smile cracked. Another year! Another year of rations, another year with no harvest festival, with watching the Reduced children grow thin and sickly when the weather got cold, with enduring the pointed stares of the few remaining Posts on the property as Elliot struggled to fairly allocate every sack of grain. This field could have saved them.

“Are things really so bad?” Dee’s voice filled the space Elliot had abandoned to silence.

“~~And what would you do if they were?~~” She knew what she’d do in the woman’s place. Pack up J and depart for whatever points unknown Dee’s common-law, Thom, had gone to two years previously during the bad time when so many of the Posts had left the North estate.

Legally, the Post-Reductionists still held the lowly status of their Reduced forefathers. They were bound to the estate on which they were born. But lately, even that system had been breaking down. There was no way to police the movement of Posts who wished to leave the estates they were born to and no incentive to try if you were a wealthy Luddite who attracted skilled Posts to your estate at the expense of your neighbors. Year after year, Elliot watched helplessly as the North estate emptied of its skilled labor force. But how could she begrudge them their chance to look for opportunities elsewhere for possibilities her father would never allow? There were even whole communities where—Elliot had heard—Posts lived free. But up here in the north, the only *free* Posts Elliot had ever seen were beggars desperate for work or food.

She worried that was what had happened to Thom. She worried that was what had happened to everyone who’d left.

“I would find a way to help you,” Dee said. “Like you’ve always helped everyone here.”

“Yes. I’ve been so good at helping them,” Elliot said ruefully. She knew Dee must see Thom occasionally. Her pregnancy confirmed it. But the older woman had never told her where he spent most of his time. Dee didn’t even trust her enough for that, though Elliot had long ago shared with Dee the shape of her own heartbreak.

Elliot couldn’t afford any more Posts leaving the estate. She was already too much alone here.

Dee gestured to the field. “I know you wouldn’t have done this if things weren’t desperate, Elliot.”

That went without saying. She was, after all, a Luddite, and while what she’d done was not strictly against the protocols, it was at the very least in the gray area. She looked out over the savaged field. Perhaps this was a divine warning—maybe her whole experiment was a mistake. After all, if her father suspected the truth, she was lucky that all he’d done was plow the wheat under.

It was always hard to tell with Zachariah North. What some men might do as an act of deliberate cruelty, her father was just as likely to do out of laziness and caprice. His comments had been just ambiguous enough to scare her—another talent at which the baron excelled.

“You’ll figure it out,” Dee said. “Don’t be brought low by a setback. Not when your goal is so high.”

The Post’s hesitation said it all. Elliot’s goal was high indeed. It belonged to a realm that the Luddites had long ago abandoned. What she sought was nothing short of a miracle.

ELEVEN YEARS AGO

Dear Elliot,

Thank you for coming over yesterday, and for bringing the new books. I hope you liked lerning about the thresher. It was a good idea to come in those old ~~elose~~ clothes, even though I almost didn't recognize you!

I talked to my da about the words we were fighting over. He says that your people call people like me CORs because it means Children of the Reduction. There is another word, but my da says we would be in trouble for using it in front of you. It's called Post-Reductionist. My da and his friends call themselves Posts. Except you are my only friend. There are no other ~~Posts~~ CORs on the North estate who are my age—or even anywhere near seven years old, and none of the Reduced children can read.

I hope I don't get in trouble for telling you that word. Da says the Luddites don't like it because it means the Reduction is behind us.

*Your friend,
Kai*



Dear Kai,

Your new glider is the best ever! It even does loops!

If your da's friends call him a Post, then I will call you that too. Because I want to be your friend. I have herd the word before, from the CORs that work in the big house, but they would never tell me what it ment. Now I know why. But it makes more sense to me than calling you a COR. After all, you are not a child of someone Reduced. Don't worry, I won't use it in front of my family.

I was worried maybe you were mad at me for asking all those questions about the Reduced. It is just that you are the only ~~COR~~ Post who will talk to me. Did you know that you and I were born on the same day? That's how I knew who you were, because the CORs in the big house were always talking about us both. There is also a Reduced girl born on our birthday. Do you know who she is?

*Your friend,
Elliot*

Two

RO LIVED ALONE IN a cottage at the far side of the Reduced block. She'd once shared it with two other Reduced girls, but they'd borne children and removed to barracks nearer the nursery. Ro appreciated the extra space, and filled the cottage with her precious pots. Elliot had given her even more on their eighteenth birthday a few months back. Her presents had grown a bit more indulgent these past four years, since it was just the two of them celebrating now.

Ro had been on dairy duty that morning, and hadn't been one of the laborers to help destroy the wheat crop, so Elliot had come to Ro's for comfort. Tatiana and her father might prefer the darkness of the star-cavern sanctuary, but there were only two places on the North estate that Elliot considered a refuge, and the barn loft was too crowded with notes about her wheat to be a comfort today. Yet here, for a few precious minutes, she could be silent and fill her hands with soil and pretend that there were no worries that awaited her beyond the confines of this sun-drenched hut. It was pointless to dwell, anyway. What good would it do?

Ro was already digging among her flowers when Elliot arrived. She dripped mud across the unfinished planks of the floor as she crossed the room to greet Elliot.

"Good day, Ro."

The girl's green eyes—so unusual, even among the Reduced—searched Elliot's face, and she frowned.

"Yes, I'm sad," Elliot admitted. She'd never successfully lied to Ro. Reduced her friend may be, but not insensitive. Elliot had been taught as a child that the Reduced could sense your emotions, like dogs. Over the years, she'd begun to wonder if their general lack of speech made it all the more important for them to read faces.

To some Luddites, the Reduced were children, fallen and helpless, but still human. To others, they were beasts of burden, mostly mute and incapable of rational thought. Elliot's mother had taught her that they were her duty, as they were the duty of all Luddites. Cut off as the population of these two islands had been since the Wars of the Lost, they might be the only people left on the planet. The Luddites, who had kept themselves pure of the taint of Reduction, therefore had the responsibility to be the caretakers not only of all of human history and culture but of humanity itself.

It had been generations since any Luddites had tried to rehabilitate the Reduced. Mere survival had taken precedence. But Ro was more than Elliot's duty. She'd become Elliot's friend, and sometimes Elliot even dared wonder what Ro could be—what any Reduced could be—if the Luddites had the resources to try.

Ro brightened and took Elliot's brown hand in her own reddened, muddy one. She pulled Elliot over to the pots, grinning, and Elliot allowed herself to be pulled. She knew what was coming. Ro's pots had been yielding the same profusion of blossoms for the last four years, but Ro still greeted even one with squeals of delighted surprise.

Ro led her to one particular group of pots set apart from all the others and Elliot's eyes widened in shock. These flowers were different from any she'd seen before—not red or yellow or purple or white, but a pale violet with streaks of scarlet running in veins along each petal from the depths of a deep crimson heart.

“They’re beautiful, Ro!” she blurted, while inwardly, she tried to work out the genetics. A simple cross-pollination perhaps, the purple flowers set too close to the red ones . . .

Ro bounced and clapped her hands. She pointed at the red and purple flowers planted nearby and then at Elliot herself. Elliot narrowed her eyes, remembering evenings Ro had spent by her side in the barn loft.

No, it was impossible. She was Reduced.

A few words, a few signs, and simple, repetitive tasks were the most the Reduced could handle. They were capable of being trained, but not for any skilled labor. And they required close observation. The young, the sick, the pregnant, and the elderly had an odd propensity for self-violence, which was why the Luddites were forced to confine them. The birthing house that Dee had feared was an unfortunate necessity for Reduced women, but torture for a Post like Dee.

But Ro was nodding eagerly, miming picking flowers then pressing her palms together. “Ro wheat,” she said, in the awkward monosyllabic speech that was all the Reduced could manage.

Ro wheat. Ro’s special wheat. It was impossible. A Reduced could never comprehend what Elliot had been working on in secret, could never re-create the grafts herself. Ro was Reduced. It was impossible.

But no repetition could truly banish Elliot’s suspicion. “Ro,” she said, “you mustn’t show the flowers to anyone, do you hear?”

Ro frowned, her pretty, freckled face wrinkled with confusion.

“I love them, I do!” Elliot took the girl’s hands in hers. “They are beautiful flowers and I’m proud of you. But it must be a secret, right?” She pressed a finger to her lips. “Shh.”

“Shh,” Ro agreed, muddying her mouth with her forefinger. Elliot wished she could be sure the girl was doing more than just parroting her. But this was the way it was, the way it had always been, even since the Reduction. Each generation of Luddites would care for the Reduced and their offspring. They’d tend the land, obey the protocols, and keep humanity alive.

Then came the CORs.

Some reckoned there were four generations of them now, though others claimed only two. They were more every year, though, as if the human spirit itself had risen from the ashes of the Reduction. CORs—or Posts, as now almost everyone but holdouts like Elliot’s father had taken to calling them—came from Reduced ancestry, but they were born and developed completely normally. Posts were as intelligent and capable as any Luddite. They’d been rare in the time of Elliot’s grandfather, but now people said one in twenty babies born to a Reduced was a Post, and a Post parent never produced a Reduced child.

Posts quite naturally stepped into positions of power on the Luddite estates. By the time Elliot was born, it was a given that the Luddite farms, instead of being overseen by the actual Luddites as they had been for generations, would instead be manned by a staff of Post foremen, mechanics, chefs, and tailors. The Luddites themselves presided over all in a life of relative leisure.

When Elliot was younger, she’d asked her tutor why, if the CORs were as capable as the Luddites, did they still have the legal status of the Reduced? The conversation hadn’t gone well. No one could deny the existence of the CORs, but it was still taboo to deviate from the Luddite way. No one had even studied the origin of the Posts, nor tested their genetics. It was not for Luddites to question the will of God or the nature of man. Such thoughts had led to the Reduction, and by their piety alone had Elliot’s people been saved.

What, Elliot wondered, would her teacher think of her Luddite piety now? She knew her wheat was a sin, but what choice did she have? The North estate could not go hungry.

These flowers, though—they were something else. There was no reconciling it. She knew what everyone else would see. A creation of frivolous beauty, made by a Reduced who’d aped Elliot

crimes. It was insupportable. Unforgivable.

It was also pure Ro. She loved pretty things, which was why she grew flowers, and she loved Elliot which was why she tried to do everything just like her. And she was Reduced, which meant she bore the punishment for the hubris of her ancestors. Ancestors who had held themselves higher than God and had been brought lower than man.

If Elliot wasn't careful, Ro would suffer punishment for a sin of Elliot's making, too.

Ro began to shuffle the pots, burying the hybrid blossoms among the others. "Shh," she said. "Shh shhh." But she couldn't be trusted to keep the secret. Not like Dee or any of the other Posts.

Elliot plucked a single bloom and rubbed the petals between her fingers. They were so small and perfect, so alive and vibrant. How could such a thing, such a tiny, beautiful thing, be a sin against God? Surely a sinful flower would wither and die, but look how these prospered under the care of the most humble of creatures. Whatever else this meant, the existence of these flowers, on this day, told Elliot one thing: Let her father trample what wheat he may—Elliot would not give up.

ON SUMMER AFTERNOONS, BARON North and Tatiana made a big show of descending into the star-cavern sanctuary for Luddite services. Their piety waned in the winter months, however, when the ancient refuge was less a cool retreat from the sun and more the frigid, punishing darkness that their ancestors had endured only because the wars had driven them underground.

Elliot didn't begrudge them their activities, though. She used the time to have uninterrupted access to her father's study, so she could deal with his correspondence. Once, the job had been her mother's and so by rights it should now be Tatiana's, but Elliot's sister showed the same interest and head for numbers as their father—which was to say, very little at all. Left to them, the desk would collapse beneath the weight of unanswered requests and unpaid bills—mostly the latter variety of late. Then again, people stopped asking for favors once they knew you owed money all over. Even if your name was North.

When her mother was alive, there'd been economy in their house. Economy and industry both, to balance out her father's worst tendencies. His older brother had been raised to manage the farm, not Zachariah North. Elliot's uncle had died before Elliot's parents were even married, leaving behind an infant son too young to take over and Zachariah, who hadn't been fit to lead but became the baron nonetheless. The North estate had never been the same. Elliot's father possessed the Luddite sense of superiority, but without its corresponding call to action. And ever since his wife died, he deeply resented anyone who made him remember it—by, say, suggesting that one's debts ought to be repaid.

Most days, that was Elliot. She had to be very careful with the bills now, or risk lectures from her father on the honor due to Baron North. They were not even ordinary Luddites, the Norths, but one of the last great baronic families who had preserved the world in the wake of the Reduction. Their ancestors had led the remnants of humanity out of the caverns. They had held their land for generations.

Hard to remember all this family honor when Elliot spent every day staring into the eye of a cyclone of debts called due.

Her wheat could have saved them, kept the estate from needing to import food this winter. Even allowed them a surplus for the first time in Elliot's memory. But it was not to be this year. Her father would rather build a racetrack for horses he could barely afford.

One of the letters caught her eye. An unfamiliar correspondent, and a Post by the look of the address. Elliot opened it.

Most Admirable Baron Zachariah North,

Forgive me the trespass of writing this letter. I have never had the honor of being introduced to such a lofty person as you. Most likely, you do not know me, nor of my reputation amongst your illustrious

fellows. I am an explorer in the service of my Luddite lords, and in the past ten years my activities have brought great distinction and wealth to my patrons, who include the honorable families of Right Grace, Record, and Baroness Channel. For my references, you may apply to any of these families.

I have learned that you are currently in control of the shipyard belonging to Chancellor Elliot Boatwright. If the facility is not in use, I would be interested in renting it from you, as well as some residential properties and the use of some of your labor force while my shipwrights work. I seek to build a new ship, one much bigger than any of my current facilities can handle. I am told the Boatwright shipyard is the best in the islands, and I am sure we can come to an agreement that is profitable and advantageous to us both.

*I remain your ever-humble servant,
Nicodemus Innovation, Admiral of the Cloud Fleet*

Elliot had heard of the renowned Cloud Fleet. There weren't a lot of seaworthy vessels on the island—at least, not since her grandfather's shipyard had shut down before her birth. And since the wars had rendered magnetic compasses useless, very few braved the trip out of sight range of their shores. Was the Cloud Fleet, staffed entirely by free Posts, attempting an overseas journey? Elliot's heart raced at the very thought. It had been ages since she'd allowed herself to dream of that. Not since Kai had gone away.

Of course, she did her best not to think of him, either.

As far as anyone knew, there was nothing left of the world but these two islands, these quarter of a million square kilometers, these people and these mountains and these animals and this society. Admiral Innovation might change all that. His Fleet had first captured the population's notice when one of his exploratory trips to nearby islands had brought back a breed of horse not seen for generations. Sturdier, taller, and faster, the Innovation horse had quickly become the preferred means of transport on the trade routes. Another one of his expeditions had resulted in the rediscovery of wild game hen that produced twice as many eggs as the standard estate chickens. Even Baron North had filled his henhouses with them. Most recently, Elliot had read of a Cloud Fleet expedition, one run by a Captain Wentforth, in which he'd found another island and a cargo hold full of salvaged, solar-powered vehicles in near-pristine condition.

This news, of course, had been greeted with mixed reactions from the Luddite community, who frowned upon any technology they hadn't already been using for centuries. But as many disapproved, there were other Luddites, not quite as fastidious, who had declared the machines nothing more than an innocuous, long-forgotten form of transport, and turned the sun-carts into a hot commodity. The Norths, of course, had not indulged. They couldn't afford to.

And now this Admiral Innovation wanted to build himself a new ship—and using the Boatwright facilities, too! This would be a tricky proposition to get by her father, but if she could manage it, it would certainly solve their financial woes. Innovation must be very wealthy to be able to rent the whole shipyard. Elliot wondered if the money would be enough to sway her father, or if he would view such matters as too tawdry for his taste.

Maybe she could find another incentive, though. Admiral Innovation had more than just money to offer, and her father did have that splendid new racetrack.

NINE YEARS AGO

Dear Kai,

I'm sorry I can't come see you today. In school last week, we had to write a paper about the Reduction. I don't know what I wrote that was so bad, but the tutor told me she had to give it to my parents, and now we're all four of us having a "conference." My mother said it's probably best if I stay away from the barn for a little while. It was hard enough getting this letter to you.

I'm really scared. Last year, when my cousin Benedict got sent home from boarding school, my father beat him. My father yells at me a lot, but he's never hit me before. I can't figure out what I put in the essay that was so wrong. Can you?

Your friend,

Elliot

WHY THE REDUCTION HAPPENED

By Elliot North

Before the Reduction, there were two kinds of people: people who trusted in God to create mankind in His own image, and people who thought they could do better than God. The first kind of people were my ancestors, the Luddites. The second kind of people, the Lost, did lots of experiments to make themselves better than God. They tried to create new kinds of plants and animals, the way God did. They gave themselves fake arms and legs and eyes that worked better than the ones God gave us, and they did experiments on unborn babies, too, so that they could make them different and supposedly better than their parents.

The Luddites were the only people who knew how evil this was. They refused to give themselves the fake body parts, or even the fake brains that were supposed to make them smarter than God. First they refused to eat genetically enhanced foods, and then they refused the ERV procedure to enhance their babies. They tried to warn the Lost, who believed Gavin and Carlotta and all had the ERV, but the Lost didn't believe them.

Finally, God got angry at the Lost, and cursed them and all their children. From that point on, they would no longer be born in His own image. They were Reduced. After that, there were also two kinds of people: the Luddites and the Reduced.

The Luddites took pity on the Reduced, and helped them survive.

Except now there's a third kind of people, called the Children of the Reduction, who are born just like Luddites, which must mean that God has forgiven the Reduced. There are many of those on the North estate.



Dear Elliot,

~~I hope you are okay. I read your essay and it sounds like what we learn too. I don't think there's anything wrong with it. I don't know why you would be in trouble. The only thing I never heard about before was the part where you said that the Posts were a sign of forgiveness. They never say that to us at services. Do you think that's true?~~

Your friend,
Kai



Dear Kai,

I am grounded. I had to bribe Benedict with my dessert to send you this letter. I hope it gets to you and he doesn't read it. My mother says he's a very naughty boy and I shouldn't spend too much time with him.

It was the part about the forgiveness that made my teacher so worried. She and my parents explained to me that we don't have the right to decide when God has forgiven you and your ancestors, which I guess makes sense. But at the same time, doesn't it seem like He must have? For so many years, the Reduced only had Reduced children. But now there are people like you and your father. If we were God, and I wanted to show that I had forgiven the Lost and the Reduced, that's what I would do.

But when I told my father that, he got very angry and slapped my face. It's the first time he's ever hit me, and I hope it's the last. He said I also don't have the right to pretend I know what God would do and why. Although, if that's the case, then how is it that we know that the Reduction was punishment from God? It's so confusing.

Since I'm grounded, I can't pick up letters in the knothole. If you write me back, try to get the letter to the housemaid Mags. She likes me ever since I gave her baby one of my old dolls. I trust her more than Benedict.

Your friend,
Elliot



Dear Elliot,

I hope your grounding ends soon. I miss you.

You're right, it's very confusing. I asked my da what he thought and he just stared at me for a really long time without saying anything, then told me to go clean out the stalls. I hate cleaning out the stalls. I'd far rather work on the machines than with the farm animals.

But what you wrote made a lot of sense to me. After all, God never tells us what he's thinking. At least, he never tells the Reduced or the Posts. I think that's supposed to be part of our punishment, right?

It's really unfair, I think, being punished for something I didn't do. If I was going to have to be punished, I'd at least like to have the fun of being fast and never tired and having superhuman eyes and super smart brains and everything first.

DON'T TELL ANYONE I WROTE THAT.

Your friend,
Kai



Dear Kai,

Your secret's safe with me. But I'm glad you sent this one through Mags and not through Benedict. Mother tells me I'll be done with my grounding next week. Please find something fun for us to do. I'm going crazy stuck here in the house.

Your friend,

Elliot

Three

ELLIOT BOATWRIGHT'S HOUSE WAS located on the border between the Boatwright lands on the tip of the island and the North estate. It was covered in flowers during the spring, but now dying russ vines crackled in the breeze as they crawled up the eaves and arched over the door. She'd hoped to make some improvements to the place before the Fleet's arrival, but time had been in short supply recently. Harvest was coming on, and even with the influx of money from the Fleet's rental of the Boatwright estate, it was vital that she produce as much grain as possible.

Perhaps the Innovations and their staff would consider these unruly vines pleasingly rustic after their years spent in the Post enclave down in Channel City. This was the home where Elliot's mother, Victoria, had grown up, and she always liked to remember the way her mother had cared for the garden, pruning the hedges and trimming the flowers twining over the railings of the porch.

The Boatwright had three nurses to tend to his needs. They were all Reduced. A few years ago he had had a Post housekeeper as well, but now they didn't have enough Posts to spare for the care of Elliot's grandfather. Once there had been fifty, but ever since the bad time, there were scarcely ten adult Posts to share between the two estates. Still, she knew her grandfather preferred this state of affairs to moving in with her father and Tatiana. Elliot liked to think that he wouldn't have minded so much if it was just her.

The Boatwright himself was seated on the porch now, and his good eye narrowed as she came up the path to greet him. "Good morning, Grandfather," she said. "This is the day, you know."

He grunted at her and seemed to sink down into his chair. Elliot sighed. So it was to be an obstinate morning.

"We talked about this, remember?"

The good side of his mouth frowned, and he did his best to look confused, but Elliot was not taking in. The strokes had destroyed his body and his speech, but not his memory.

"You know we've rented the house to those shipbuilders."

He stamped his good foot against the floorboards of the porch.

"Grandfather, you can't stay here. They need the room." And we need the money. She almost added it aloud.

But Elliot Boatwright was no fool. He made the sign the Reduced used for "father" and then the one for "mistake." She cringed. Luddites did not sign to each other—it was a mark of the Reduced. For her grandfather to use signs in reference to Baron North was as good as an epithet in the mouth of a man who could speak.

"My father did not rent out your house," Elliot said, even if he had made it necessary. "I did. If you want to be mad, be mad at me."

The good side of her grandfather's face smiled and he shook his head. No, he'd never be mad at her. She did what she ought, just as her mother had. Which was all well and good, but it still meant that her ailing, aged grandfather was losing the only home he'd ever known.

She brushed past him into the house, where, sure enough, she found his trunks waiting by the door just as she had instructed the Reduced nursemaids to do several days before. The house had been cleaned and aired, and vases of fall flowers stood everywhere, ready to welcome the Cloud Fleet.

Elliot took a quick tour of the house, checking to see that all the linens were laid out on the beds brought down from storage, that the larder was stocked with food quite as good as the kind they had at the big house. Her father had been insistent that the visitors would not think the North estate lacking in opulence, even as he loudly complained about sharing his supplies “with CORs.” He’d even had ice delivered. Ice, this late in the fall, while Elliot was worried about how to keep the laborers in bread and coal this winter. She shook her head.

Her father had kept her tutors until she was sixteen, just as he had with Tatiana before her. They received the standard Luddite curriculum: history, music, literature, religion, and art, but as to what she’d need to know to keep the estate on its feet—that was trial and error. That was luck. That was whatever she could scrape together on the side.

Perhaps it would have been different had her father been raised to take over the estate, but it was his uncle who was supposed to be Baron North. Elliot’s father had never liked anything but horses and the comfortable trappings of the Luddite lifestyle. The North estate had been paying for his disinterest ever since her uncle’s death. Elliot’s mother had done what she could when she was alive—raised Boatwright, she had her father’s work ethic—but she’d died four years earlier.

At the time, Tatiana had mourned the fact that her mother’s death prevented them from traveling to Channel City for her debut, but Elliot feared worse than a deferred holiday. Her mother’s death left two estates in peril: the one belonging to Elliot’s invalid grandfather and the one her father had never bothered to maintain.

Elliot had been fourteen. She hadn’t even been finished with school, but she had learned enough to know that only one thing mattered: the hundreds of people—Luddite, COR, and Reduced—who depended on the estates to survive.

Down on the porch, the Reduced were fighting to get the Boatwright loaded into the litter that was to take him to his new home, and he swatted at them with his cane. Elliot stood by the window and shook her head. She hated removing him, but this was the only house on the estate suitable for someone of the admiral’s station. They could hardly put the Cloud Fleet in a Reduced cottage, and Elliot shuddered to think of the daily indignities they would be forced to suffer as guests of Baron North. Elliot’s father would not care that these were free Posts, nor that they were paying him good money to rent his land and labor. Station was station to Zachariah North. He’d refused even to stand and greet the Fleet, but had instead left those duties to Tatiana and Elliot, while he rode out the “indignity” of being paid and saving his workers from starvation with a prolonged visit at the estate of one of his Luddite friends.

So much the better. Though Admiral Innovation’s letter had been all that her father deemed proper, Elliot hoped to see the Fleet settled here before Baron North returned and was forced to deal with the reality of Posts over whom he did not have complete control.

Elliot placed her hand on the yellow plaster walls. This house needed people again. The admiral was bringing his wife and a large staff: shipwrights and metalworkers and captains of the Cloud Fleet. She hoped they would enjoy this house; enjoy the vines and the bright, sunny rooms; the shiny, worn wood floors and the creaking staircase. Elliot wondered what they were like, these free Posts who’d found success beyond the confines of the indentured estates.

For four years she’d waited for Kai to come back, too, but he never had. Nor had he ever sent word of his whereabouts. In her dreams, she liked to imagine he’d ended up like one of the admiral’s men, content and employed. With his mechanical talent, he’d have made an excellent skilled laborer. But she’d heard too many stories of the things that happened to Post runaways. She’d heard of the dangers in Post enclaves. The brothels and the workhouses, the organ trade and the people who sold their bodies for illegal experimentation.

Elliot let her hand drop and curl inward. She brushed her left fingers over the back of her right hand

touching each knuckle, tracing the path of each vein. She couldn't bear to think of Kai like that. She would stick to her fantasy of him being a safely employed mechanic somewhere—though that was hope she kept to herself. She hadn't even shared it with Dee. After all, Thom was out there, too, and he was Dee's common-law and the father of the woman's babies. Kai was only a friend. Nothing more.

One of the Reduced nursemaids appeared at the door. The Boatwright was ready to go. Elli nodded. Somehow she'd make it work. She always did—she managed the farm, she managed her family, and she managed her own heartbreak.

But perhaps . . . perhaps some of the Posts coming here were runaways who'd found a place of their own. Perhaps one of them had heard something of Kai and could tell her at last where he'd gone. Perhaps he was somewhere in the world, safe and happy, somewhere where a girl like her was straightening a picture frame or smoothing a bedcover in hopes of making the Post that slept there feel more at home.

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