

Runaway

Blistered hands grabbed the worn handle of the pitchfork and thrust^{ed} it back into the mass of soggy woodchips then hauled the load onto the growing pile in the wheelbarrow. An ear-splitting sound rang out across the hills. The echoing sound of metal on metal. Dinner time. Austin gratefully leant the rusty pitchfork against the wall of the ancient clay-brick stable and wheeled the screeching wheelbarrow over to the massive pile of manure, struggling under the weight. Even after years of working as a farm hand, his lean, 12-year-old body still sometimes struggled to complete a day's work. That's what eating only two chunks of stale bread and some mushy peas every day does to you.

Austin dumped his load and set off for the silhouetted building on the horizon. His steps quickened when he thought of what would be waiting for him alongside a plate of crusty, stale bread and cold peas. Shawn. His wonderful brother, Shawn.

Austin had been three when they were taken away from their family. Shawn had been eight. Austin didn't remember anything before life at the mission, then later, the station. Sometimes, though, when Shawn was telling one of his stories, he caught glimpses of dark silhouettes spearing fish or gathering berries. He sometimes imagined faces to fill the wispy outlines. Sometimes it even felt like he was really there, gathered around a campfire with the family he couldn't remember. Every spare moment they had together, Shawn would add another detail to the growing pictures in Austin's head. And every time the deep longing to be with his own people tore at his chest.

"There he is! Grab him!" Austin paused just inside the doorway of the dining hall and tried to duck away but it was too late, hands were grabbing him from all directions and pinning him against the wall. Then Mr Greenhill was standing in front of him, grabbing the tender part of his ear, and marching him outside, over the hill to the rusty, old, tin shed that was reserved for the purpose of locking troublesome boys in. Austin had been there only once before, when he and Shawn had been caught using their language. But even then, that had been with Shawn.

"W-what- ow! What h-have I-ow d-d-done, S-sir? His brain whirred, trying to think of anything he could have done to make his boss this mad.

"Oh-ho! Don't try that on me, you little rascal." The scrawny man's shaky laugh echoed through the hills, "You were in on it all along, I should have known!"

"I-I d-don't know w-what y-you mean, S-sir." He sobbed.

"I don't know why you're still playing dumb. You knew what that rascal of a boy was planning. Why bother denying it? It doesn't matter anyway, he's gone now. We won't waste resources tracking him down, I'll just get another one sent out from the mission. I never did like your brother anyway."

Austin stopped dead in his tracks or would have if Mr Greenhill didn't still have a firm grip on his earlobe. Meanwhile, his boss yapped on, oblivious to his prisoner's horror.

Austin had no way of telling the time, for the one small window had been boarded up long ago. It felt like it had been forever since he had actually seen his brother. His stomach emitted a low growl, like a bear hunting for prey. Austin sighed; it would be a while before this bear caught anything. But right now, he had other things on his mind. The only way he had survived in this place was because of Shawn. He couldn't understand why his brother would leave without him. Suddenly he was distracted from his thoughts by a shaft of moonlight that had found its way through a gap in the planks covering the window. Austin frowned; it hadn't been there before. Upon closer inspection, he

saw that one of the planks of wood must have fallen out. His frown deepened as he wriggled his hand through the small gap and to the right a bit. Maybe if he stretched just a little bit more- yes! The door latch. Austin's frown disappeared. He had a plan.

His heart rattled in his chest, choking him. Austin gripped the reins. It wasn't the first time he had been on a horse. In fact, he felt more at home in the saddle than on the ground. No. it was the prospect of what he was about to do that scared him. He wasn't the daring type, that had always been Shawn, but staying here wasn't an option. He placed a shaking hand on his steed's neck, "You ready, Ted? D-don't worry, I-I'll take care of you." And giving his favourite horse a pat, he nudged him on into the night.

The night was still, even the stars barely twinkled. Austin had no idea where he was going, he just knew he had to get away. They rode and rode. Finally, when thin rays of light started to streak across the sky, they stopped in a small clearing. Austin slid to the ground. Trying to coax his sleeping fingers to unbuckle the straps on Ted's bridle, he gazed into the beast's knowing eyes. "Thank you, boy," he whispered, inhaling the sweet scent of horse. He had played his part; gotten Austin as far away from the station as they could in one night. Fat, salty drops trickled onto Ted's Chestnut coat. "Be safe." He stepped back and waited for the beast to whirl around and gallop away. Austin turned around, snivelling. He bent down to his rucksack. A blast of warm air shot across his neck. He whirled around, flinging his arms around his best friend. "Oh Ted," he sobbed, "You should have gone." But his insides were flowing with happiness. And so that's how they slept, boy curled up between beast's legs, ready to face the world and whatever it threw at them together.