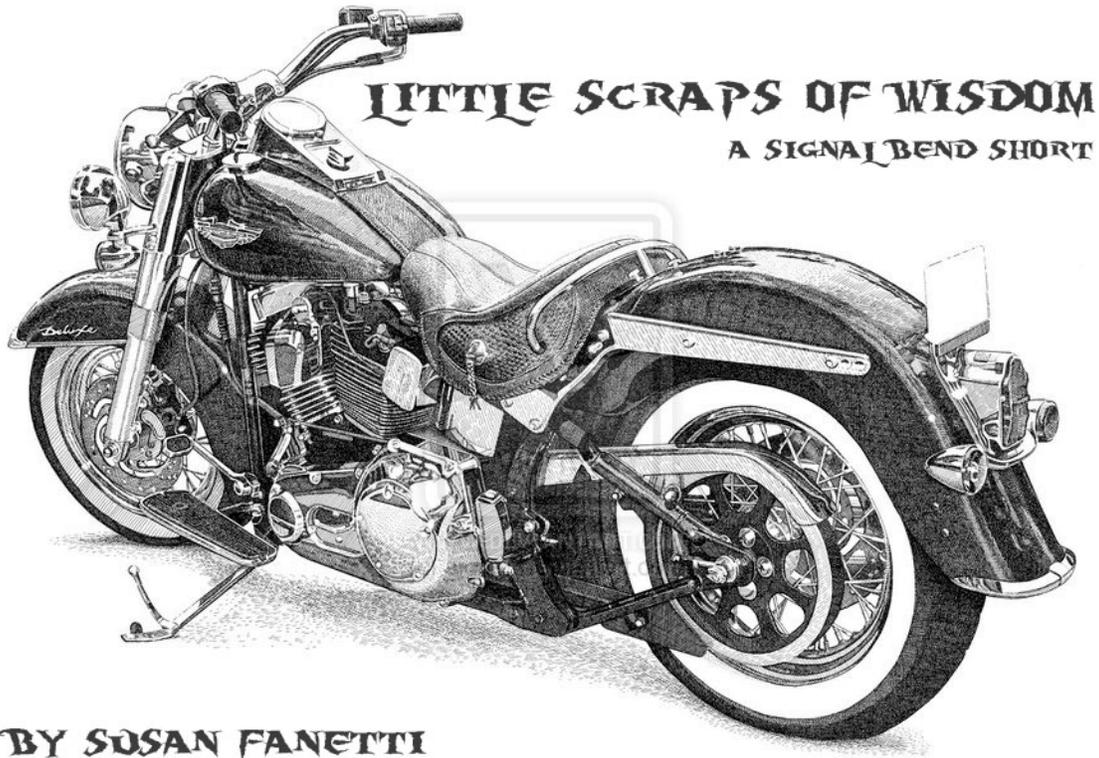


NOTE: *This story, in Nolan’s POV, takes place near the end of Leave a Trail, the last book in the Signal Bend series. Thus, there are spoilers here for the entire series.*

BIG SPOILERS. SERIOUSLY.



I believe that what we become depends on what our fathers teach us at odd moments, when they aren’t trying to teach us. We are formed by little scraps of wisdom.
—Umberto Eco, *Foucault’s Pendulum*

“Nowan! Birfday!”

Nolan woke with a start and a grunt when his baby brother jumped on his back.

“Birfday! ‘Fetti muffins!”

He reached back and grabbed Loki’s chubby legs, then rolled to his back, keeping Loki in place so that he ended up on his belly. “Morning, tough guy.”

Loki flexed his arms and growled, as he did whenever Nolan called him the nickname.

“Muffins!”

“Happy birthday. We made snickerdoodle muffins. Loki put sprinkles in them in honor of your day. Lots of sprinkles. Lots.” Their mother, Cory, stood in the doorway, smiling at her sons.

Wrestling Loki into a hug, Nolan grinned at his mom. “Thanks. Don’t suppose I could stay home today, since it’s my birthday and all?”

She shook her head. “We already got the truancy warning, kiddo. You promised you’d graduate. Only a few weeks left.”

“I know, I know,” he sighed and ruffled Loki’s curly, dark hair. “Okay, Loke. Let’s get muffins.

“With ‘fetti!!”

“With confetti, yep.” His arms still wrapped around his little brother, Nolan scooted out of bed and followed their mother into the kitchen.

He sat Loki in his booster seat. At his own place, there was a small box wrapped in red foil paper and topped with a black bow. As he sat down and Cory brought over a basket full of aromatic muffins, he asked, “Can I open this now, or should I wait until tonight?” The Horde were throwing him a birthday party at the clubhouse tonight. And, hopefully, he’d be getting his Prospect kutte, too.

He was trying really hard not to consider that a sure thing. He hadn’t started packing up his room yet, even though Prospects lived at the clubhouse. It was a rule. But he was afraid he’d jinx something if he got too cocky.

“I set it on the table so you could open it now. When it’s just us.” She set the basket down. As he turned the package over and started to tear the paper, though, she turned back to the kitchen. “You want coffee or juice?”

“Coffee,” he answered, and handed the discarded paper and bow into his brother’s outstretched hand. “Don’t eat it, guy.” Loki began tearing the paper into shreds.

The box was almost a cube, like a jewelry box or something. But it would be weird if his mother bought him jewelry, so that couldn’t be it. He lifted the lid.

Yeah, that could be it. And no, it wasn’t weird.

Inside the box was a heavy silver ring. Nolan picked it up. It was like a signet ring, with a thick, raised ‘H’ across the top. The crossbar on the letter slanted downward.

His mom set a mug of hot coffee in front of him and sat at his side. “If I could have given you his rings, I would have.”

Havoc's rings had not come back with his body. The people who'd killed him had probably just thrown them out with the garbage. With his fingers and his guts.

Nolan stared at the 'H.' His mom put her hand over his arm where it lay on the table. "It's more than just his initial. It's a Viking rune, called a 'haglaz.' It's supposed to represent chaos."

He couldn't help it; the laughter was on him before he'd even understood that he'd found that funny. But not funny in the normal way. Funny...painful. Funny...bittersweet. Funny...apt. That 'H' meant 'Havoc' in every possible way.

By the time the laughter had passed through him, he was crying. His mom leaned over and put her arms around him. "He'd be so proud of you, kiddo. So proud. Like I am."

With his mother's arms still around him, Nolan slid the ring with his father's initial on the middle finger of his right hand. His dominant hand. His strong hand.

It fit perfectly.

~oOo~

Early that evening, Nolan sat at the bar in the Horde clubhouse and stared at the double doors that led into the Keep. The club was having its usual Friday meeting. All around him, women—his mother, Shannon, Tasha, a few club girls—were scooting around, setting up food and supplies for his birthday party, which would start after the meeting. Debbie and Bethany were watching Millie and Joey and Loki. Lilli and her kids weren't there yet. Nolan wasn't sure they were coming. She had been staying away from the clubhouse since Isaac and Len had gone away.

"Getcha anything, sweetheart?"

Nolan turned at Candy's voice, and she smiled and winked. Candy had given him his first blowjob, the night of the first anniversary of Havoc's death—more than six months ago. She'd found him sitting on the floor in the bays, crying, his arms resting on the front wheel of Havoc's bike, and she'd given him comfort.

He'd had a hardcore crush on her for a while after that, but she was kind of old, maybe almost thirty, and she wouldn't pop his cherry. He was too young, she'd said. Jailbait. He'd only been a hangaround, Havoc's kid or not, without any real pull, so when he pressed her a little, she'd just laughed and said she was a Good Samaritan, not a pedophile.

He'd thought that was a pretty fine line she'd drawn, but he wasn't sorry for the beej. He hadn't lasted long, but it had been fantastic, and it had made him feel better. He'd had a bunch more from other girls since; he'd done a lot with different girls since. His cherry was long gone, and he lasted a lot longer now, but that first beej was still his favorite. He jacked off to that memory all the time.

"Thanks, Candy. I'm good."

She leaned over the bar and kissed his cheek. "Yeah, you are. You're eighteen now, baby. So you let Candy know if there's *anything* you need."

Maybe she was old, but she was fucking gorgeous. Long, bright blonde hair, huge tits, a tiny waist and a flat belly, and a really tight ass, barely clad in Daisy Dukes—she had a rose tattoo on one butt cheek, and at least part of it was almost always visible, whether she wore tiny little shorts like these or tiny little skirts. Nolan thought pretty often about that tattoo. Sure, she dressed like a hooker, but so did most of the girls, and he was a dude. He liked girls who dressed like hookers. It meant there was plenty to look at.

His jeans suddenly got really binding and uncomfortable. He readjusted as well as he could and smiled, hoping he wasn't blushing but pretty sure he was. "Thanks, Candy. I'll find you later. Be ready for me...sweetheart."

That had sounded smoother in his head.

"Oh, I will be." She winked again and twirled away.

As he slid his eyes away from Candy's rosy ass and back to the Keep doors, he found his mother watching him, standing a few feet from the kitchen door, her arms crossed, something not quite a smile on her face. He shrugged. Hey, he was a dude. He was surrounded by scantily clad, easy women. And now he was eighteen.

She shook her head and turned to the kitchen.

Twisting the new ring on his finger, Nolan went back to his vigil. They had to vote him in. They had to. He knew that Zeke didn't want him to prospect at eighteen. He knew that a few members had serious misgivings about giving him a kutte while he was still in high school. He knew that it wasn't a sure thing. But he didn't know what he'd do if they didn't vote him in. He wanted only this. The Horde. He wanted his life to be this. He needed his life to be this. He'd lost the only father who'd ever really loved him, the only man in his life who'd really had his back, who'd understood him, who'd helped him make sense of the world. Havoc was Horde. Even in death, Havoc was Horde.

Nolan had to be Horde. There was nothing else for him in this life but Havoc's club. This club. This family. He had to be Horde.

So he stared at the closed door and twisted his new ring and waited.

~oOo~

Finally, the door opened, and Badger, the club VP since January, and the man who'd brought Nolan's name to the table, stood in the doorway. His face was stoic. Nolan didn't know what that meant.

"Nolan. Get in here." His voice was as emotionless as his face. A hard knot of anxiety grew in Nolan's belly, but he came off the barstool and walked to the doors. Badger stepped back to let him into the Keep.

The Horde wasn't a very big club—at least, it had never been in Nolan's experience—and they were down two members, while Isaac and Len were in prison. Show now sat in the President's chair. Tommy sat as SAA. Badger, who'd left Nolan standing just inside the closed door, returned to his VP chair. Zeke, Double A, and Dom took three more chairs. Six members at the table. Two more away.

Zeke was glowering at him. Nolan didn't know if that was a good sign or not. But then Show began to speak.

"Nolan, you know Havoc loved you like his own son. You are his son in all the ways that matter. We love you, too. But you're young. Very young to make a decision for this life."

Disappointment coated with acid the knot of anxiety in his belly. They were going to tell him no.

Show went on. "We've found some quiet in this life now, and we hope it lasts, but we don't know if it will. Even if it's quiet, we're the protectors of this town, and that means that every day, we do a man's work. There is no place in this world for boys."

He was not going to fucking cry. No way. He swallowed and fought for calm until he won.

And then Show smiled. Not a happy smile—sad, but also proud. "But this world has already made you a man." He stood up, already holding a kutte, which must have been lying across his lap or something. "Hav wanted you to wear the Night Horde patch someday. Today you take the first step."

He handed the kutte to Badger, who came back around the table and held it up for Nolan. Nolan turned and slid his arms through. The thick leather was heavy on him, and for a moment, it was like Havoc's hands were on his shoulders.

With effort, he swallowed back the emotion that image had exploded inside him, and he grinned at Show.

But Show shook his head. “We don’t usually make a ceremony of the Prospect kutte. You face a long road. For at least the next year, we are going to work you hard. We’re going to make you clean up our shit, and I mean that literally. You’re going to take the blame for every little thing that goes wrong, and you’re going to have to make it right. Being a Prospect is about endurance and will. It’s also about learning what it is to wear the Flaming Mane. In this time, you show us you’re worthy. You are a legacy, boy. That doesn’t lighten your responsibility. It doubles it. Understand?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you. Thank you, Show. All of you, thank you.”

Now Show’s smile was happy and real. “Badger’s your sponsor. What you do reflects on him. If you fuck up, he’s gonna come for you. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.” Nolan was so overwhelmed with emotion he was afraid he might pass out.

He thought he’d be happy—and he was. He thought he’d be proud—and he was. He thought he’d be relieved—and he was. But he was suddenly missing Havoc so intensely that he felt like his heart and maybe even his soul had been punched.

Badger was still standing behind him. He turned and smiled, holding out his hand. “Thanks, Badge. Really.” He thought his voice had stayed pretty steady.

But Badger knocked his hand away and hugged him instead, and he was going to make an ass out of himself. He felt the tears leaking out of his eyes, but at least he was able to hold back actual sobbing.

When Badger pulled back, his eyes were wet, too.

~oOo~

Needing an escape from the attention and chaos, Nolan grabbed a cold beer and went back to the bays, where it was dark and quiet.

He came back here a lot. Havoc’s bike was stored here, with all the other bikes of the lost Horde. Isaac and Len’s were lined up, too, waiting for their return.

Havoc would never return.

Nolan pulled the cover off Havoc’s Softail and then off the bike next to it—his own vintage Ironhead Sportster. Havoc had given it to him for his sixteenth birthday, two years ago. Just a rusty skeleton, a promise of a bike. He’d died before they could make much progress on it, but Badger had helped Nolan finish it, and here it was now, ready for him to ride.

He brushed his hand over the new, gleaming black tank, with the bright red script he'd airbrushed across the top: *Wreaking Havoc*.

Havoc had been in his life for a few months more than a year. But he had changed everything in that brief time. Though he'd never set out to teach Nolan anything—other than how to build a bike—he'd managed in the short time they'd had together to teach him everything. Just a word here, a sarcastic comment there, a sideways remark, a rant, a contemplative moment. Just being with Havoc had taught him—watching him be who he was, watching him do right, watching him do wrong, watching him make up for the wrong.

Havoc's presence, his personality, his heart, his love had been so big that he'd filled Nolan up.

Maybe it was because his biological father was so worthless, but Nolan didn't feel like he'd taken anything away from Matt Hawes but anger. He knew that everything good in him—the way he saw the world, the way he felt about family, the way he knew how to love, how to be a son, a brother, a friend, maybe someday a lover, how to be a man—all of that was Havoc. Him and his brothers. The Night Horde.

Havoc, his true father, was gone. But of the things he could have, the club was all he wanted. All he needed. Here, Havoc would never be gone.

“What's up, bud?”

Nolan looked over his shoulder and saw Badger crossing the concrete floor.

He shrugged. “I don't really like parties when they're for me. Too much attention. It's cool—I don't mean to be a dick. Just got kinda freaked.”

“I get that. I don't think anybody noticed.” Badger huffed a laugh. “No offense.”

“S'okay. I'm glad. I needed a minute.”

“I'll get out of here, then.”

Nolan decided that he didn't want to be alone. Badger wasn't Havoc, but he was the next best thing. A friend. A real friend, who had his back. “No. You can stay.”

“Okay.”

Nolan stared at his father's bike. Those ape-hangers, man. So old-school. So Havoc. Smiling at the image in his head, he cast his eyes to the bitch seat. Havoc had added that just for Nolan's mom. She'd told him that that was when she knew he loved her.

Fuck, his heart hurt. He wondered if that would ever stop. He wondered if he wanted it to.

“I don’t think I want to ride Hav’s bike. Not even after I get patched.”

“No?” Badger sounded surprised.

“No. Feels wrong. This bike shouldn’t be anybody’s but Hav’s. Ever. He built the perfect bike for him. I never want anybody to think of it as mine.” He brushed his hand over the new leather of the seat on his own Sportster. “He bought this for me. This is the only bike I want to ride.”

They stood there quietly for a minute, and Nolan let memories have their way with him. There weren’t enough of them. He wanted a lifetime, but he’d only gotten months before that lifetime was up.

“I think it’s right, Nolan. You know nobody would hold you up, once you’re patched, if you want to take on Hav’s bike. But you’re right. I look at that machine and can still see him on it, riding down 44, so fast his exhaust is practically on fire, grinning like a psycho.”

That perfect image sliced Nolan up inside, and he fought with himself for a moment, trying not to lose it right there in the bays. When he had himself under control again, he said, “I miss him every day. Still. It’s been a year and a half, longer than I even knew him, but it still fuckin’ hurts.”

“I know, man. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t think I want it to stop. It’s kinda like he’s still around, he’s in my head so much.”

Badger didn’t say more. They stood silently for a few minutes longer, then Nolan sighed. He’d been hiding too long. People—his mom—were going to start looking for him.

“Okay. I guess I should go back out there before my mom starts to think I’m back in the dorm gettin’ laid.”

“Are you? Not right now, I mean, but...you gettin’ laid?”

Nolan grinned. “Dude. I hang out here a lot. I’m not a monk.” He felt himself blush. He really was a lot smoother in his head than in real life.

“Good for you. And wrap. Every. Fucking. Time.”

Nolan always wrapped. One of the first pieces of advice Havoc had ever given him. “I do. I will. I’m not a moron, either.”

He finished his beer, and Badger put his arm over his shoulders. They walked out of the bays together, back to his party.

He wanted to find Candy. She’d make him feel better.

Havoc would be proud of that, too.

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