





It's late afternoon. Since morning, the trail's been following a line of light towers. That is, the iron remains of what used to be light towers, way back in Wrecker days, time out of mind. It winds through faded, folded hills, burnt grass and prickly bush.

The flat heat of high summer beats on his head. His hat's damp with sweat. The dust of long days coats his skin, his clothes, his boots. He tastes it when he licks his dry lips. It's been a parched, mean road all the way. He crests a ridge, the trail dips down into a little valley and it's suddenly, freshly green. The air is soft. Sharply sweet with the scent of the scrub pine that scatters the slopes.

Jack pulls up his horse. He breathes in. A long, deep, grateful breath. He drinks in the view. On the cleared valley floor, a small lake glints in the sun. Beside it stands a junkshack with a bark and sod roof, the rest of it cobbled together from Wrecker trash, stones, dried mud and the odd tree trunk. A man, a woman and a girl are working in the well-tended patches of cultivated land.

People. At last. Apart from the white mustang, Atlas, he hasn't spoken to a soul for days. His aloneness was starting to weigh him down.

An there was I, he says aloud, thinkin I was th'only person on the planet.

He whistles a tune as he rides on. He calls a hello as they leave their work and come to meet him. They aren't particularly friendly. They've got weary faces. Wary eyes. They're little used to company, take little interest in the wider world and have little to say. Never mind. Just seeing them and having this awkward, mainly one-sided conversation cheers him no end.

The man's worn out. The woman's sick. Dying, if he's any judge of such things. With yellowish skin, her mouth set tight against pain. The girl's sturdy enough, fourteen or so. She stares at her boots. Silent, even when he speaks to her direct. But her plain, flat face lights with love when her brother comes running from the shack, calling her name, Nessa! Nessa!

He's a cheerful berry of a child. A barefoot, round-eyed four-year-old called Robbie. His family gazes at him with such fond wonderment that it's clear they can't quite believe their good fortune. He leans against his sister's legs, sucks his thumb energetically and sizes up Jack.

The battered, wide-brimmed hat. The silver eyes. The lean, tanned face that hasn't seen a razor for weeks. The long, dusty coat and worn boots. The crossbow on his back, his well-stocked weapons belt – bolt shooters, longknife, bolas, slingshot.

Boo, says Jack. Robbie's mouth drops open. His thumb falls out.

Jack growls. The boy shrieks with delight and tears off

towards the lake. Nessa gives chase. The valley sings with their shouts and laughter.

They aren't sociable people but they aren't mean. They see to it that he and his horse are watered, washed and fed. They offer him a roof for the night, but he's anxious to keep moving. Dusk is falling as he sets off again. They're hard workers, early risers. They'll be in bed as soon as he's gone.

By his reckoning, the storm belt should be no more than three days' travel from here. And that's where he's headed. The storm belt, a tavern called the Lost Cause and an old friend named Molly. He's the bearer of bad news. The worst. The sooner he delivers it, the sooner he can turn around, retrace his steps and keep on heading west.

West. To the Big Water. Because that's where she is. It's where he promised to meet her.

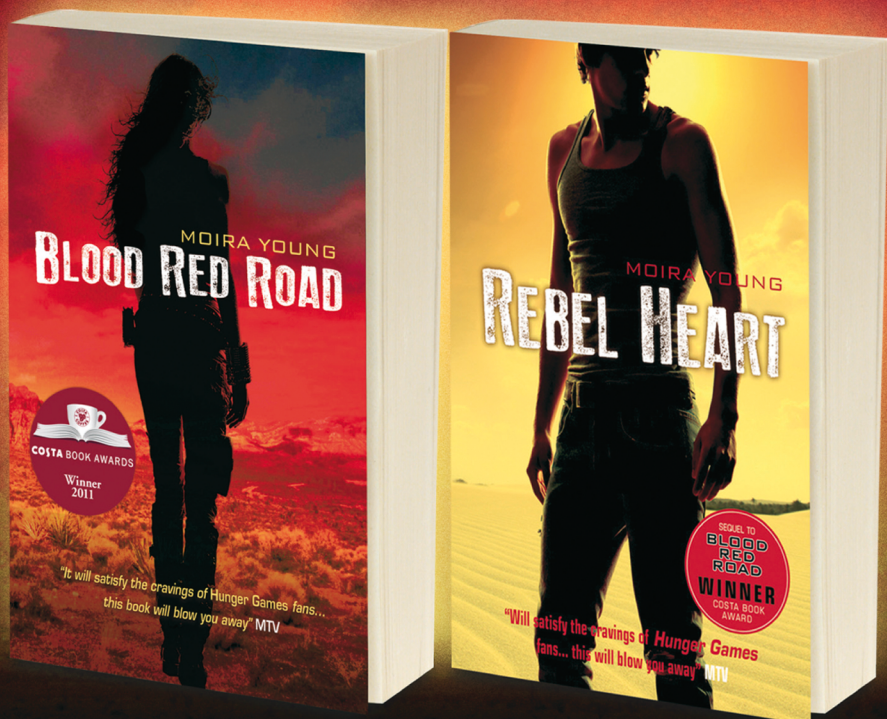
He pulls out the stone that he wears around his neck, threaded on a leather string. It's smooth and cool to the touch. Pale rosy pink. Shaped like a bird's egg, a thumb's length in size.

It's a heartstone. It'll lead you to your heart's desire, so they say.

She gave it to him. He'll head west and he'll find her.
Saba.

'It will satisfy the cravings of *Hunger Games* fans' MTV

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